

The
HALF AND ONE
Magazine



Volume 1 Issue 1

Title: Half and One Magazine
Published by: Babatdor Creative Private Limited
Publisher's address: C/O P. K Marbaniang,
Bishop Falls, Lower Mawprem,
Shillong 793002
Meghalaya.
Printed and Bound by: Blendink Creative Studio
Edition: First
ISBN: 978-81-961591-9-1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. <i>Weirdest Ok Cupid Date Ever</i>	5
II. <i>Ice</i>	7
III. <i>When The Greys Turned to Black</i>	10
IV. <i>The Dry Well</i>	15
V. <i>My Ghost</i>	21
VI. <i>Desert Drinking</i>	26
VII. <i>Control</i>	27
VIII. <i>Facing the Mountain</i>	33
IX. <i>Lucky Dribbler</i>	36
X. <i>Pavement</i>	42
XI. <i>Non-Playing Character</i>	47
XII. <i>The Reluctant Bartender</i>	53
XIII. <i>Breakfast in Georgia</i>	58
XIV. <i>Mystery Cove</i>	60
XV. <i>Rikki</i>	65
XVI. <i>First Rides</i>	72



Illustrated by Albert M. Nikhla

WEIRDEST OK CUPID DATE EVER

Creighton Blinn

Creativity is a drive, almost an obsession, and Creighton Blinn has been spinning stories for as long as he can remember. Whether in prose or poetry, he strives to convey both the personal and universal of his experience. His publications include From the Depths, Conclave, Broad River Review, Wingless Dreamer, Fauxmoir, The Arcade of the Scribes, and Inverted Syntax. He lives in Midwood, Brooklyn.

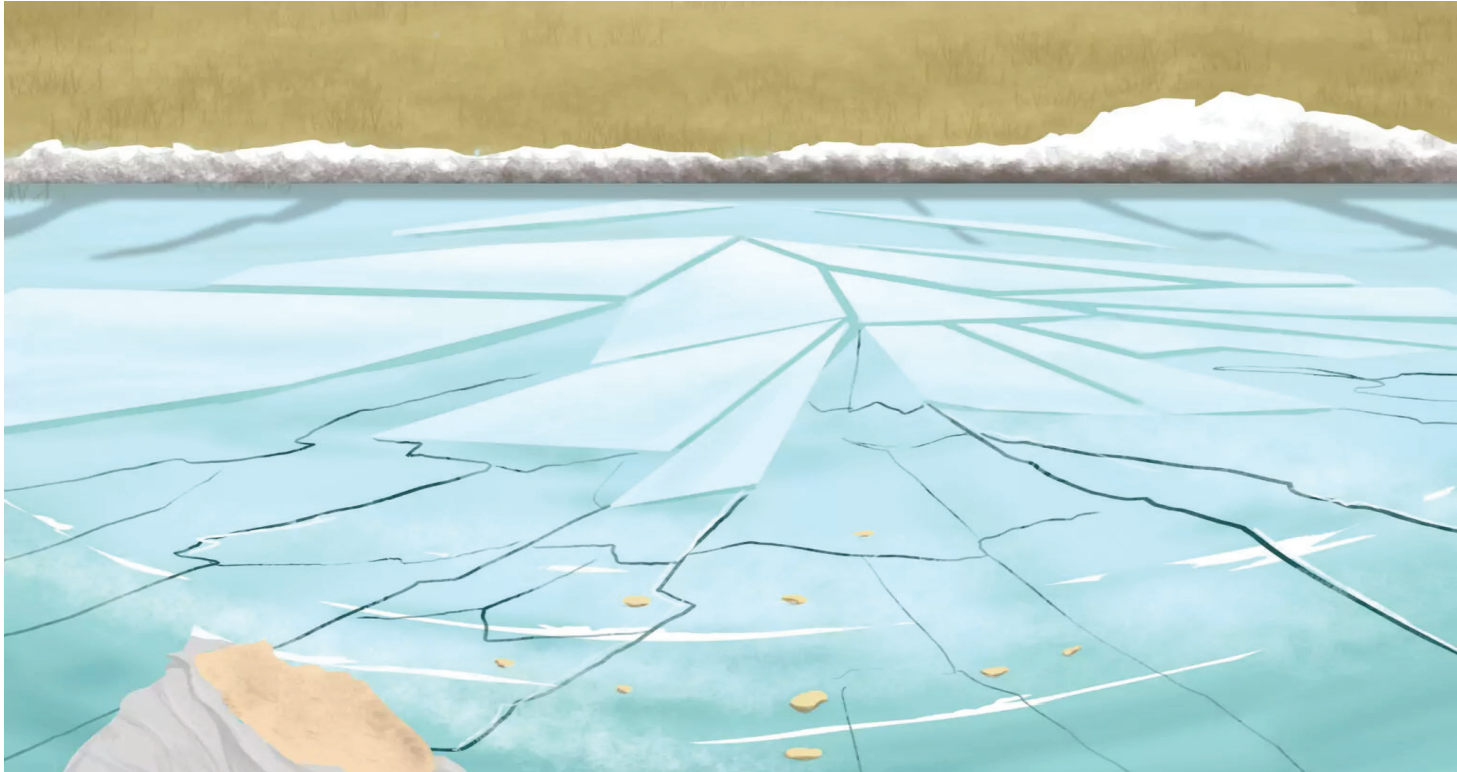
“Well, then, take me there sometime,”
 She excitedly replied
 To my off-hand observation
 Of a “very good pizza place”
 Darting past the car window
 As she hurtled us through the East Village.

In my memory,
 Wind’s rustling my hair,
 But, it must be one of memory’s tricks
 As New York winters are hardly conducive
 To rolled down windows
 And truthfully
 Our evening’s drinking had blurred
 A few details,
 A fact we readily confronted the next morn-
 ing
 When we attempted to divine
 Where precisely she had parked her car.

The rest of our night was a muddled mixture
Of misguided DVD choices, indigestion,
And chaste slumber despite
My cupping her breasts through a borrowed t-shirt.
“Weirdest OkCupid date ever”
She declared the next morning
Following an extensive critique
Of my dating profile.
A couple weeks later
We tried our hand at platonic
But the timing
Wrecked my follow-through.
So,
I never did take her to that pizza place,
And, in retrospect,
Her spirited entreaty to do so
Was possibly a touch presumptuous for a first date.

Notes:

No, she never returned my REM shirt
(Though, to be fair, she had warned me she wouldn't);
Yes, we did eventually find her car the next morning;
No,
I cannot take you to that pizza place
At the corner of Bowery & Houston,
It's been gone for years now.



Illustrated By Allen B. Thangkhiew

ICE

Udo Schuermann

Udo Schuermann crafts high-quality prose which explores the mysteries of life, drawing inspiration from authors like Gene Wolfe, Jorge Luis Borges, Frank Herbert, and Tim Powers. His work is influenced by his bohemian childhood in 1970s Munich, and colored by extensive travels through dozens of countries across five continents. Besides writing, he loves electronic music, playing his guitar and didjeridu, enjoys surrealist art, and is also an avid software engineer.

There are ice floes on the river. They are frozen there, like in a photograph. Only when I do not look at them directly do they glide by in silent grace and resignation. There comes Karen out of the night, who I had met and wed on a bright and blossoming day in May, a memory now wrapped in ice, decades old.

“Do you remember,” she says, leaning heavily on the thick, corroded metal railing at the river’s edge, “how you looked at me when we first met?”

A snow flake lands on her hand. The skin is spotted beyond her years and there is less flesh beneath the skin than should be. There was a time when I cared about such things, was horrified and panicked at every new sign of decay when we met like this. I learned that in the face of futility it is better to do less than try too much. The snow flake does not melt. If it can hold out this long, it can hold out forever, but in a single moment it collapses. I blink and it’s a drop of moisture. Karen has not even noticed.

forever, but in a single moment it collapses. I blink and it's a drop of moisture. Karen has not even noticed.

"I remember," say I.

There had been blossoms on the wind, sailing past the tall and narrow windows of the dining room, as if cast upon the breeze by a film crew who sought for a particularly wholesome effect. The blossoms came off the cherry trees that lined the tiered stone terrace. The weather had taken a turn toward hot summer and so the smartly dressed waiters had set out tables and chairs the day before. Blossoms covered everything, however. Drinks and dishes would be flavored with them, so everybody dined inside.

"You tried to pick up your fork from the floor," I say, "and almost pulled the wine glass down with the table cloth."

She laughs. It was the same soft giggle of almost secret amusement that she had issued when she realized that I had only saved her from turning a minor mistake into a big one. "I thought you were trying to make off with my glass."

People like to hear about such moments, and it was an easy one to recount. It had a certain cuteness to it, sort of like boy saves girl, though it could just as easily have been girl saves boy. She sighs, far away, but suddenly she reaches into the pocket of her camel hair jacket and pulls out a plastic bag with the crushed and crumbled remnants of old bread. The jacket is mangy, it has bald spots and seems touched here and there by a greasy shine.

"I wanted to feed the ducks. I'm sure they're starving."

She pulls moldy bread out of the bag and tosses pieces of it down into the water.

The ducks have long ago sought warmer climes.

I don't look at the pieces of bread on the water, I look at the ice floes in the distance, holding them steady with my gaze, not wanting to let them pass on. They are all sizes, some large enough for a dozen people to stand comfortably, others

too small, even for a few ducks.

She says, "I can't believe people eat ducks, can you?"

"People eat all sorts of things."

She shakes out the bag, then drops it into the water, but she has lifted her eyes up into the dead glowing sky. "They're still up there," she says and wipes her fingers on the coat.

"Who?" Dutifully I peer up at the sky.

"The eyes," she says in a hushed tone. "They're circling, you know, always watching."

She's talking about police and surveillance drones. For some reason I feel compelled to play along. "I wonder if they like what they see, or if they're bored to death."

"They never get tired. They don't sleep."

"Maybe you're right."

"I'm always right," she says, her tone already become distant and distracted. She pats her coat. "I wanted to feed the ducks but I didn't bring any bread. How forgetful of me."

"Maybe tomorrow."

Her face lights up, but the smile does not reach the eyes. She nods as the smile slips down her face again, gone before it has peaked. "I'm really sorry, you know?"

"Sorry about what?"

"About Esther."

This is where it gets difficult, but I know that she couldn't help herself.

"I know," I say. My throat is so tight it almost hurts. Any more and it would crack. Sometimes I wonder why I am doing this to myself.

"She was affected, I think I told you. Did I tell you?"

"You told me."

"I had to get her out before it was too late, you understand that, don't you?"

Ice floes swim in my eyes. I want to breathe but cannot. My whole body begins to ache. It never gets better, it just won't. Vaguely I nod but try to close my ears. Memories and repetition fill in what I try

to shut out.

“She’s safe now,” she says after a silence. “I talk to her every day.”

A trail of blood on the carpet and some kind of amorphous blob at the end of it, dark and reminiscent of a semi-transparent balloon covered in gore, with a curled-up doll inside, cold and lifeless by the time that the paramedics arrived. It had been hours. The truth did not come out of Karen’s mouth until almost three decades later, right here at the railing on a day when ice floes resigned themselves to what would forever stay out of reach.

“I must go,” she says. “She’s waiting for me.”

It is the first time she has ever said that. Surprised, I watch her go, a limp in her gait, a bend in her back. The mangy camel hair coat looks dead and worn. Her hair is matted. She has never looked worse. Regrets slink after her, pause in confusion, and turn back, but I do not want them any more. Two years ago she was not like this. Yes, old and unkempt, but not this bad. The coat had still hoped for recovery.

When it had first happened, I had argued and pleaded with her. I had voiced my anger and flailed my arms, all to no avail. She spat out the pills, got better, got worse. The roller coaster went on for more than a year, until she broke again. By then the love lay not in tatters, but lifeless, dry, and dead. A zombie, it struggled back to its feet as bitter anger, even hatred. The end came for us when the end had come for Esther, at the end of that long, wet trail of gore.

Twenty six years later came the letter. I had been shocked at the picture inside, but the words had begged forgiveness. The woman I had known could not have written it. Maybe it was a friend who prettied it up, a pastor, a counselor, or just someone she had met. She was broken, yet something of her was still there, like the fragment of a shredded photograph, and it was that part which reached out with tremulous fingers, uncertain, but with

some sort of impertinent need.

She is a tiny figure now under wintry trees. Park benches line the gravel path, cold and uninviting. Sounds usually travel in the crisp air, but the city is strangely still.

I think of the last words she said to me.

I think of the traffic, of the ice floes, and the ducks.

I think of a girl named Esther, who came within three months of seeing the light of day.

She is waiting for me.

Only when the tiny figure has vanished into the distance, do I understand.



Illustrated By Pynshaitbor Kyndait

WHEN THE GREYS TURNED TO BLACK

David Turnbull

David Turnbull is a retired political journalist. He lives on a small horse property on the green, undulating hills outside Canberra, the capital of Australia. He is passionate about writing, reading, acoustic guitar, handling horses with soft feel, walking, trees, and the ocean.

It was dusk when they set out for what was supposed to be a quick walk for the dog before a night out in town.

Raine and Anna had built a weekender “in the wilderness” at Lake Wapengo, on the far south coast of New South Wales, in Australia, and the track they walked along started right at their front gate and took them straight into the bush.

A hundred years ago, some sections of the forest had been logged. But today, the regrowth is thick with spotted gum, stringybark, coastal casuarina, coastal mahogany, and wattles of half a dozen varieties.

Wilderness, not in the technical sense of the word, perhaps, but wilderness, nonetheless.

A freak thunderstorm in the spring had broken the tops out of many of the trees, and the single-file riding track the couple walked along was strewn with debris. Broken wattles littered the path, their limbs pointing in all directions.

"Gee, that storm made a mess," Raine said as he adjusted the dog's lead.

Bazza was their new kelpie. Chocolate brown, alert pointy ears and brown eyes that looked right through you. He was always excited to go on adventures and his nose set the pace. Head down, tail up, he padded along enthusiastically, darting off this way or that as he caught a whiff of some new bush scent.

"Come on, Bazz", Raine said impatiently, as he gently tugged the lead, "Come".

"You should let him off the lead."

Raine reached down, undid the clip, and Bazza was gone.

Wallabies exploded in every direction, and Bazza barked in pursuit.

For the first time Raine and Anna realised it was getting dark.

"Bazza, come," they called.

The last light was fading fast, and they knew they should head home.

But leaving the dog caused hesitation.

"He's only a pup," Anna said, "Let's wait a little longer."

Almost, by surprise, they noticed the sun was now gone.

The greys turned to black quickly, and the track was nowhere near as familiar as it had been when the dog took off.

What had been trees were now dark twisted forms identifiable only when you looked up and saw the leaves silhouetted against early evening stars; and soon, that perspective was also lost as low clouds closed in.

Covered in debris, the track was now impossible to follow. They tripped repeatedly on fallen timber, rocks and roots; and, as it grew darker, even the gradient of the path became difficult to judge.

Raine had grabbed a headlamp, as he walked out the door, but only now discovered his daughter had flattened the battery the weekend before.

The forest closed in around them, like a huge spider, trapping them in its tangled web.

Now the trees were only recognisable by touch.

Stumbling on, they presumed they would

emerge into a clearing sooner or later.

But as time passed, they were consumed by the darkness.

Branches and twigs clawed at their faces. Broken limbs caught on their clothes, jabbing, and biting.

At first neither of them had feared getting lost. What? Only fifteen, twenty minutes from home. No. Privately, though, they were both unnerved by how quickly the light had abandoned them; and now they realised the bush, so familiar by day, was an alien realm by night.

All semblance of the trail was gone.

No moon, no southern cross, no sound of traffic. No faint voices in the air. No porch light flickering through the trees.

Nothing.

Nothing but darkness.

"Anna," where are you?

"Here", she said with insistence.

"I can't tell where 'here' is.

"Here," she yelled, in frustration.

Bazza jumped up on her thinking she'd been calling him. "Well, at least the dog's come back".

"That'd be right, he's had his fun."

Raine reached out, and his hand found her face.

"Sorry," he said, "with my hearing so poor in that right ear, I'm darned if I can tell what direction a sound is coming from."

"It's ok," Anna responded, "It's hard for me too."

Raine knew his wife would not be fazed by a bit of a fall here or there, but he needed to assure himself, as much as her.

"The lake runs north south, and we are to the east of the lake. Right? So, if we walk to the west we have got to run into the road. It's only a K or so, at most."

The problem was neither of them could discern which way west was.

"Let's just stay close, and keep moving in one direction for a while, and see what happens.

"Ok."

Scanning the sky, they thought they could see a slightly paler shade of black over to their right, and they headed towards it, hoping it was an opening in the forest.

A bit tired and sore himself, Raine asked

“No, I’m alright, “she said, “Have you got any idea how long we’ve been blundering around out here?”

“No idea.”

Time too had become alien.

They pushed on a metre apart, arms outstretched, searching the darkness for obstacles.

Raine had Bazza on a lead and every few steps, he’d clamber over a log the dog would duck under, and the sudden tightness in the line would bring them to a halt.

Raine reached down, thinking with his hands, to undo the tangle.

It was slow going.

Instead of the break in the trees they’d hoped for, they found themselves sliding down the side of a damp gully, the moist earth catching under their fingernails, brush and twigs scratching their faces.

“Ouch”, Anna cried.

“What’s wrong?”

“A stick poked straight into my neck.

“You, OK?”

“Yeah, just hold up a second.”

“Did you cut yourself?”

“I can’t really tell; I’ve got mud on my hands.”

They were both breathing heavily, their clothes heavy from sweat.

“Oh shit!”

There was a sharp crack, a loud thump, and a dog’s whimper as Raine tripped on a tree root and fell to the ground. The branch that broke his fall clipped the dog, and Bazza was licking Raine’s face thinking he’d done something wrong.

“It’s ok, mate, you didn’t do anything.”

The couple were now hunched on the ground, metres apart, deep in their own thoughts.

Neither of them spoke the word “LOST,” but they both knew they weren’t going to be able to find their way out.

Shock set in at how suddenly they had been cut off from the world.

They felt as if they’d slipped through a crack in the landscape, time travelled to some other world, where nothing was familiar, nothing was known.

They could not see the ground. Could not see the sky, couldn’t make out the trees, had no



Illustrated By Pynshaitbor Kyndait

if Anna needed a rest.

idea how long they'd been stuck in this eucalypt void. Surrounded by darkness. Together, but alone in the night.

There was no light switch to turn on, no warm soup on the kitchen stove, no comforting flames flickering in the pot belly stove.

"You know, I think we should stop blundering around like this," Raine suggested hesitantly.

"What are you saying?" Anna asked.

There was a long silence.

The sound of their breathing the only sign of life.

"What I'm saying," he started, and paused, "What I'm saying is that maybe we should hole up in one place. Make ourselves as comfortable as we can, and find our way out in the morning."

"I agree," Anna responded, "it's dangerous scrambling around in the dark. Sooner or later we'll break a leg, or get a stick in the eye."

Anna was leaning against a huge Spotted Gum, a tree that would have been standing when Cook sailed up the east coast. She was protected from the cold wind that had sprung up, and looked around at the impenetrable darkness, no different when she opened her eyes, or closed them.

Neither spoke for a long time.

"Ok, if we're going to stay here all night, we should try to make some sort of shelter in case it rains. You know, like Bear Grylls.

They both laughed.

"That's a good one. How are we going to do that when we can't see anything?"

"I'm leaning against a big spotty. Just crawl across to me, and we'll pull broken branches in around us and lean them up against the tree."

Anna's practical response warmed Raine's heart.

"You're a champ," he said, "I'm so glad you're not one of those plastic women on TV."

"No way, I'm wrinkly for a start!"

The comment made them both smile.

Having made the decision to stay where they were they both seemed to relax a little. Raine crawled over to Anna's voice: "keep coming, keep coming."

She stamped her foot on the ground; he reached out and felt the heel of her boot.

Mahal?

"I'm leaning against it.

He pulled up beside her, and Bazza climbed on them in excitement.

"No Bazz, not my face," Anna said, as the young Kelpie licked at her in the blackness.

Raine got the idea himself, felt for Anna's face, and kissed her forehead.

"Well, this is a different Friday night," he said, giving his wife a hug.

"Yeah, it's certainly not the warm cappuccino I was expecting."

Careful not to lose contact with each other Raine edged down Anna's legs and grabbed any branches he could reach and pulled them towards him. Luckily the storm had left a litter of smaller wattles and casuarinas close to the tree.

Once or twice, he kicked at some smaller branches, or used his pocketknife to cut twigs off bigger limbs so there was nothing sticking out.

They jumbled this rubbish up against the spotted gum, leaving the heavier bits on the ground, and leant a few straighter ones up against the trunk.

It was slow, careful work, all done by feel, and they applied themselves to it in silence, distracted from the fact that they were stuck in the bush, and were going to be there all night.

Kneeling in the dirt, they groped around with open-fingered hands for some leafy brush for a makeshift roof.

Then, with no more branches within reach, they crawled inside the ramshackle mess and huddled together.

The aboriginal presence at Wapengo is strong.

Raine and Anna had strolled along the estuary many times and discovered middens in the shade of the banksias: piles of shells where family groups had once gathered in the sun eating shellfish.

They had pictured the children splashing in the shallows, their white teeth glistening in the sun, laughter filtering through the trees.

"I wonder how many aboriginal people have spent the night up here like this," she said, "We're surely not the first."

Sitting in the dirt, with the kelpie cuddled up between them, they felt almost comfortable.

“Arr...there you are. Now, where’s this Taj
Inside the humpy the black ink in front of
their eyes had lost in its intimidating edge. The
bush was not so alien. Scratching around in the
dirt with their bare hands; they had connected
with the earth somehow, become grounded in
the place. They had made a little “home”; and
even though they still couldn’t see anything,
they were pretty snug, in a damp sort of a way.

They sat in silence, alone, forgotten to
the world.

Outside, the bush was still, a black void
like the space between the stars they could not
see.

Every now and they’d hear the rhythmic
thump-thump-thump of a kangaroo bounding
past, each footfall coming to their ears more
through the ground than the air. In the
distance there was the occasional hooting of
an owl, or the screech of a possum, a bird call
they couldn’t recognise; and closer, the faint
rustling of leaves as some tiny creature, most
likely an antechinus, foraged for food.

Sleep came slowly.

They’d laid down, heads on their
forearms, searching for comfort, wriggling this
way and that, eventually leaning against each
other, back to back, aware of the warmth of the
other’s body. The dog joined in, nestling in the
hollow between their legs.

And that’s how the night passed: a
man...a woman...and a dog, alive on the planet
earth, with the unfathomable Milky Way
overhead and dirt beneath their feet.

They woke about the same time, half
opening their eyes, reluctant to move and lose
what little warmth they’d garnered from each
other.

It was no use, though, the pre-dawn chill
bit at the exposed skin on their hands and
necks, and their hips and shoulders ached from
the hours of direct contact with a raw earth
bed.

Bazza stood up, and shook.

Raine undid his leash to let him wander
off for a pee.

As they sat up, they looked out on a bark
painting.

The blacks were now turning to grey,
the indiscernible monsters of the night before
slowly becoming rocks and trees again.

A shroud of mist hung in the air, its

vapour giving the smooth, white-barked
spotted gums a mystical presence.

Raine and Anna crawled out, as the first
suggestion of light caught on a myriad of
spider webs hanging like Native American
dream catchers between broken limbs and
burrawangs.

Strange as it may appear the image
conjured a sound, an unheard, but imagined
tinkling in the air.

They looked up; saw a grey blue sky
between clouds suddenly edged in gold and
crimson from the first touch of the sun.

“Well, that was a night,” Raine said,
dusting his jeans, “you, ok?”

“Yeah, a bit stiff, but ok.”

As the light grew, greens, browns and
yellows warmed the landscape. Circling around
they discovered the little humpy they’d built
was in a hollow not far off the track. They
slowly found their bearings, and headed
towards home.

“Bazza...come,” Raine called.

“You know,” Anna said, “we’ve stayed at
dozens of camping areas and resorts over the
years, all sorts of beautiful places from tourist
brochures, but I don’t think I’ll ever forget that
night out here.

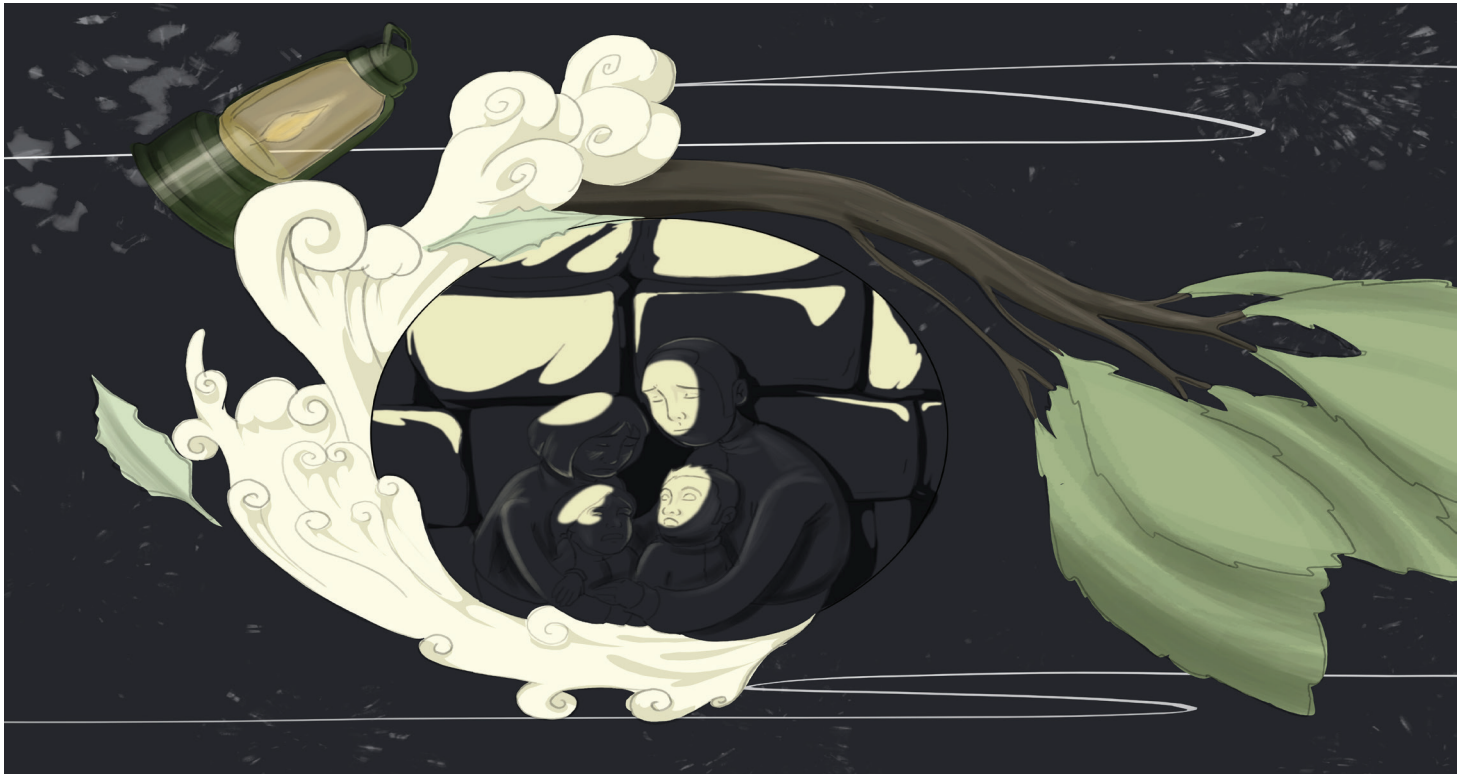
“It wasn’t exactly comfortable, but it was
special somehow.

“It was just so raw, so real.

“We were totally cut off from the world.

“But I felt connected.

“Connected to the earth. Not sitting on it,
but a part of it.”



Illustrated By Allen B. Thangkhiew

THE DRY WELL

Lily Finch

Lily Finch, an Ontario native writer, writes short fiction and non-fiction stories. She holds three Bachelor of Arts Honours Degrees in English Language and Literature, Spanish Language and Literature, and Religious Studies from the University of Windsor. In addition to those degrees, she also holds a Master of Arts degree in Leadership and Training from Royal Roads University, located in Sooke, British Columbia. Lily writes literary fiction, thrillers, horrors, and crime stories. Her creative non-fiction is pulled from people's stories she has heard along her life journey. Her work has appeared in Half Hour to Kill, Spillwords, The Write Launch, and One and Half, to name a few. She was longlisted in the Globe Soup Short Story Competition and received an honourable mention in the 24-Hour Writing Contest. Lily spends most months writing in her backyard with her faithful companion by her side. She enjoys the same outdoor space with her children and husband in the pool or trampoline when she is not writing. She also enjoys trips to places where they can bike, hike, swim, kayak, and camp, carrying their packs as they move along a trail that covers kilometres. Her entire family enjoys a private location in a Central American country every two years for half a month. Lily finds happiness in life; she sees it for what it is, a gift.

The storm increased in minutes, resembling a raging fire, causing the parched, crunchy plants to combust! “Seth, hurry and get everyone to the cellar!” Solange shouted from the kitchen window, where the screens were installed. After the cookies finished baking, she quickly put them away for dinner. She chopped up some fresh bread, wrapped it in a tea towel, and placed it in a basket on the dining room table.

Seth stepped away from his work in the barn when he heard Solange call to him, and he yelled for the boys, “Hey, you fellas up in that mow, get down and head to the cellar! Seth yelled, “Now!”

“I’m coming, Daddy,” Jamie said.

“I too, Pappa,” Sadie said.

They appeared before Pappa opened the cellar doors and went inside with him.

“Beth-Anne, can you please get the bread basket and cookie tin from the dining table while I get the kids upstairs to the cellar?”

Solange said to her oldest daughter.

“Okay, Momma,” Beth-Anne replied.

The kids rushed downstairs since the wind picked up, and they heard Momma scream to Pappa.

“Come on, we have to get into the cellar,” Solange said, leading the way. She told Grace and James to go hang out with Pappa.

Seth hurried to find matches to light the whale oil-filled lanterns, which prepared the family for the next few hours of being sequestered inside the cellar. The family helped each other stay safe because they all looked out for one another.

“Where’s Randall? Does anyone know where he is?” Solange’s voice sounded worried. Pappa heard her voice and rushed to her.

“Oh no, Solange,” he said, his voice filled with controlled order. “You’re not going anywhere. I’m going to go.” He shot past her and went through the left cellar door. He wasn’t gone more than a minute, and the door opened again. Seth returned, and Solange observed Randall wasn’t with him, and she faltered and sank to the ground. Pappa stretched out his arms and hugged her as he sat with her. He brushed the hair away from her face. Her head rested on his chest.

Seth said, “He’s clever, Solange. He’ll

remember what we told him and find a place underground. He knows better.”

“Yes, he’ll figure out how to stay safe,” she said and smiled as she grabbed his hands and nodded slightly. She felt better when Seth wiped away her tears. His words brought her comfort during a difficult time. But what are the other children thinking? she thought.

“Get it together, Solange,” Seth said. “We’ve got other little ones looking to us to lead them through this.”

That made Solange pull it together for the kids. Seth’s words, a blend of cheerleading and severe talk, captured Solange’s attention. Seth thought the worst storm was over because he could feel the ground shake and saw dirt clumps falling. It was super scary! The family huddled together, staring at the lantern light that swayed on the hook. Their only indication was that there was movement.

It was spooky but cool, too! Momma put all the food she brought into the basement for everyone to eat. She made sandwiches with meat and butter, and Seth got a big jug of water from the barn to drink, which he placed on the bottom stairs. Rain pelted the top of the cellar door. It sounded like animal claws scratching against a tree, and a loud banging on the door frightened the children.

Solange’s mind zoomed from what the kids were thinking to what Randall was doing. Her son, who was 13, was excellent, but that night changed everything for him. Randall took a big breath when he got to the dry well and the bucket. He knew the descent would be steep and uneven, but he was unfazed. He had to hurry down below.

A short while ago, he sprinted to escape the storm and locate a haven. Before he jumped into the bucket, he noticed the cellar doors on the same side of the house. He calculated how long it would take him to get to safety from the big doors and whether it was worth trying to make it there.

A chunk of tin roof zoomed past him as it dropped, prompting him to reconsider. Randall looked back at the bucket and the dry well. He suddenly froze and made contact with the cold ground. He was shocked by the movement and jumped out of the bucket onto the floor. He felt

like crying because his ankle and neck ached so intensely. He could barely breathe and didn't want to walk very far. He screamed, but he was a one-man show.

No one could hear him cry; he missed his parents and thought about them. He told himself it wasn't that bad. He thought it hurt a lot—and he kind of wanted to cry. He wept as if it would be less distressing and frightening if he did not make a fuss about it. However, Randall looked up from the well and was frightened by what he saw above in the air. What a deep well, and how high everything looked around it surprised him!

The sky appeared strange. Unlike anything Randall had ever seen before. "Holy gobstoppers turned into dust already!" Randall shouted with excitement. "It's showing an outline to the door!" Randall spoke with significant volume, "I only hope that the remaining tasks are not too complex, or I will be in serious trouble." The cozy tunnel was like a big hug for Randall when he stepped inside. "It has to be the place I've always dreamed of going; otherwise, why would it even be here?" he said.

Randall didn't notice that his ankle and neck no longer hurt him. He only thought about lighting lanterns so he could see better. Because he was dressed in a T-shirt and shorts, the temperature was cold as he went down the hallway to a stone cutout.

The oil lamps beyond the cutout were all lit. He followed the path to a beautiful location with water. He took a long sip of water from the little stream. He looked into the water, but he couldn't see his reflection. But the fish caught his attention, prompting him to take another look before standing up to continue his journey.

He continued walking until he encountered another person.

"Hi there! You must be Randall," said an old man wearing a straw hat and holding a big basket. "We've been waiting for you! Hurry up, or we won't get to eat!"

Randall was relaxed around the man and not scared at all, and he went with him.

"Yes, that's right, I'm Randall! What's your name? How did you know I would be here? "Who are you? Should I know you?" Randall said.

"You sure should! But don't worry about that stuff right now. How did you end up here?"

"I was seeking shelter from a gale of a storm, and the closest thing underground to me was this well. I jumped in it and rode the bucket down. Have you waited for me a long time?"

"We got the message at 6:30 in the morning."

"I got here around 9:00 so I wouldn't miss you."

"Oh, gee. Sorry about that. But thanks for waiting! You're very nice," Randall said.

"Well, thank you. I'm glad you think so. We're here, sweetie, like always, and we've been waiting for you. You can put your shoes over there and wash your hands in the sink on the back porch. My wife and I will cook in the kitchen and prepare the table for dinner—it's fun when you work with someone you love!"

"Okay. Thanks! I will! I don't like cooking or working around preparing the table," Randall said, and he looked around the house to find out who else lived there. Everything looked fine, but Randall felt confused. He experienced a sense of unease and unrest within the house.

However, the house smelled delicious with its homemade supper, but Randall couldn't shake his nervousness, and he noticed the man no longer seemed as hospitable either.

A woman about the man's age with her hair in a bun smiled at Randall, but he could tell her smile was insincere. She was loud, bossy, and intentional in her words and actions.

"I'm Randall! May I help you in some way?" He returned a big smile to her and stood there, waiting for her to say something. "I wasn't aware you and your partner were anticipating my arrival today; is he your husband?"

"Yes. We were expecting you today, and yes, he is my husband. Why are you asking so many questions?" she countered.

"Sorry. I just want to make conversation. If I offend, then just ignore me. If I can't help, just let me know where to sit so I won't bother you or be in the way."

"You sit at that side of the table!" She pointed to the end of the table. Randall took his seat as instructed. The couple brought big

plates of yummy food. She changed super fast into a lovely person. She and her spouse were lovely, super friendly, and sweet—not mean or grumpy anymore. Randall relaxed and enjoyed himself. She asked, “Randall, did you get a nice drink from the stream?”

“I did! Thank you,” Randall said. —How did she find out I was drinking from the stream? Randall thought. “Hey!” He looked puzzled. “How did you discover I took a sip from the stream?” Randall asked. “Did your husband tell you?”

“No, silly. Nothing like that. We see everything that goes on in our land. I wanted to go with Earl to meet you, too, but I stayed here to make dinner instead. Incidentally, how is it?”

“It’s super yummy! I love this dinner a lot! You don’t know my parents, do you?”

“No, we don’t,” the man said. “Why?”

“I don’t want my mom to find out I like your cooking better than hers!” Randall said, then leaned toward the woman and giggled at her because he could see her charm. Then his face got white as a sheet, and he said, “After our meal, could you help me return to the dry well?” as serious as a heart attack.

“Of course, I can sugar, but why?” the woman said.

“What do you want with returning there?” the man asked.

“My family will be concerned and search for me,” Randall said.

“I doubt they’ll look very long before they find you,” she said.

“Why?” Do you know something I’m not aware of? Randall said.

“Enough talk for now; let’s eat! We can talk about that later; there’s plenty of time for that,” the man said.

The three ate and discussed topics of interest to the couple on the farm, such as seed to table and farm fresh to table, while Randall told of a similar philosophy his parents lived by on the topside of the well where he came from. After eating their fill, the lady suggested they eat their dessert after stretching their legs and letting their food settle.

After cleaning up the table, the man suggests they could have dessert after they finished their chores. Randall’s eyes widened at the word “chores.” He liked sharing the

chores responsibilities with them; it sounded super fun! Randall got some coveralls from the farmer and put them on, and then the three got into the red Ford F-150 parked outside.

After driving for 15 minutes, they stopped to round up the sheep and head them back to the barn for some grain for the night. The man whistled, and a dog appeared out of nowhere, sprinting to the opposite side to assist in keeping the sheep in line. The three guided the sheep and closed the gates behind them as they moved through them back towards the farm to keep the sheep in. They fed the sheep inside the barn with oats. By the time they finished, darkness had descended.

“Randall, it’s too late for you to return now. We’ll take you back to where you came from tomorrow, so you must stay with us for the night.”

“No. It’s okay. I don’t want to go back anymore. I like it here. I like eating with you two and doing chores! Would you like me to stick around? I mean, would that be okay with the both of you?” Randall said.

“Yes. Well, aren’t you sweet? Of course, we want to keep you here with us. And it’s super dark out here now, anyway,” she said.

“Yes. That sounds good to me,” said the man.

“I want you to remain with us always,” the woman said. They entered the house and had their dessert and tea. And then the three went to bed.

Randall awoke the following morning and made breakfast for everyone, just like his parents had taught him. When the couple came from upstairs, breakfast was ready and waiting for them. The three of them had breakfast with lively conversations about many concepts and topics, and at 8:00 a.m., they were outside doing their chores. Randall and his new parents went over to see the horses and pigs on the far end of their property together; Randall, surprised by what he saw, realized the farm was huge.

“Your farm is super large! It feels like it goes on forever,” Randall said.

“We take care of things just fine between the two of us. If you stay, it’ll make everything much easier for us,” the farmer said.

They worked all day doing all kinds of chores on the farm, and Randall could barely

keep his eyes open when they went in for supper. He apologized and went to bed. The couple laughed at him because it was Randall's first day of a full day of work on the farm, and it pooped him out.

After falling asleep, Randall had a nightmare. He dreamt of being trapped in a bucket in a dry well, dead, unsure of how he died. He envisioned plummeting rapid fire and suffered a severe neck break.

He completely misinterpreted his reason for being in the well and moving through the wall's opening. When he slipped through it, Randall didn't understand what the old man and woman, or their land, represented for him. What would happen later when his parents found him in the dry well with his broken neck stuck inside the bucket?

They peered into the well and pointed at the figure below, stuffed inside the drawn



Illustrated By Allen B. Thangkhiew

bucket with its head slumped over.

"It's Randall's T-shirt," Solange said. Her voice raised, and her eyes welled with water.

"Hey, Randall! Wake up, son. Please." Seth said. He grabbed his wife in his arms and shone his lantern down into the mouth of the well. They held one another and wept while the other kids stood behind, wondering why Papa wasn't drawing the well bucket up so Randall could get out.

Randall wanted to say something—and answer Papa, but he just couldn't. He tried telling his parents he was with a lovely couple of farmers, whom he thought were incredible. However, he was unable to articulate his thoughts clearly. His words sat in a lump in

his throat as though he had a blockage there of some sort. Randall couldn't get the words out and cried because he couldn't tell his parents much of anything anymore. The more he tried, the more distant they became, and the colder he got inside when he looked at them.

Then it was morning; his eyes opened, and he woke up. Morning on the farm brought many animals to the forefront of Randall's mind since he now knew what it meant to be essential to his existence and theirs after that. He understood the life cycle and what his role meant to the cycle. His eyes were opened, never to be shut again, to the ways of living on the farm and off the land.

It got him out of bed again and nudged

him to make breakfast again. The two noticed Randall exhibiting strange behaviour. Although he seemed in low spirits, he somehow took on more responsibility and became more mature in the last day and a half.

“Good morning, Randall. Did you make breakfast again? Fantastic.” The man poured himself and his wife a coffee.

“What’s the matter though, son? You look like you haven’t slept at all!” the woman said.

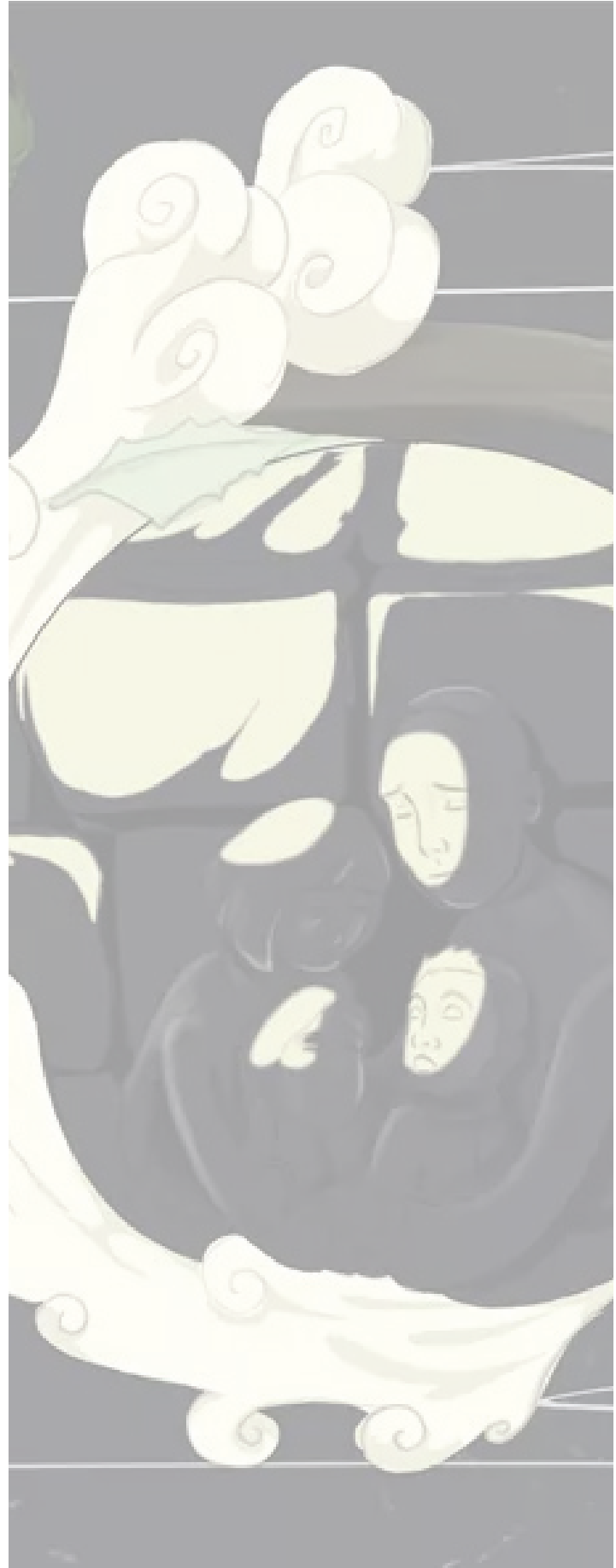
“That’s because I didn’t. I dreamt they found my body yesterday once the storm let up. Now they know I won’t be back for sure. I wept for my parents because I heard the hurt in their sobful, pain-riddled voices as they spoke to one another.”

“It’s going to be fine, Randall; it was going to happen eventually,” the man said.

“Yeah, now you can stay here and not feel awful about it,” the woman said.

The couple’s words made Randall wonder what returning to his old life—with all those brothers and sisters—would be like. Randall realized he would never be noticed there as a standout kid, but here—by this couple—he got all their attention and stopped worrying and thinking about his old life.

It pulled away from him so quickly that he felt it for such a short window that he barely registered the angst and suffering inside him since other feelings grew inside him that were much stronger. Feelings of importance, belonging, a sense of worth, purpose, and responsibility. Helping his new family with chores, he thought about all the cool things he had done. He put on his coveralls and stood at the door, excited to begin his morning routine.





Illustrated By Iuniki Dkhar

MY GHOST

Jacob Young

Jacob Young is an Australian-born writer and lover of cats. He has been writing since childhood, expressing his experiences through ink on paper, hoping to one day contribute to the world of film and literature he loves. Jacob now resides in the United Kingdom, writing where he can between studying and programming.

I

My Ghost

It's a Thursday morning. I get out of bed, I walk to the kitchen/office/dinette (it's a Swiss Army knife of a room), and I see a book pushed in again. Today, it's *Blood Beast* by Darren Shan: it's roughly three inches behind the books on either side; my ghost has been extra feisty today. I take a picture, which is something I've been doing lately, first to evidence these paranormal sightings to my sceptical friends, now to catalogue my ghost's appearances—a fruitless attempt to make sense of it all. I forward the photo to all my friends, something they're undoubtedly sick of, but someone needs to witness this besides me, even if it's via WhatsApp. When the messages are

marked as delivered, I adjust Blood Beast to its rightful position, in line with its neighbouring hardcovers. I've always been anal retentive about the alignment of my books; my friends say my shelves look like they're stolen from Waterstones. Perhaps that's why my ghost chose them to haunt.

Once I'm satisfied with the alignment, I step back, I pack my laptop and a book, and I leave for work. This has been my routine for the past six months. I can vaguely recall the first time I found a book pushed in: it was three books, actually, and despite each of them having been pushed in by at least two inches, each in different areas of the shelf, each with no disturbance to the books around them to indicate that, no, I did not bump into the shelf in a way that could have produced this pattern, I responded with no more acknowledgement than a huh, that's weird. It took at least three more similar mornings before I thought that is weird. My ghost had my attention, and it wasn't long before I was calling it my ghost.

The advice I received was never satisfactory, regardless of how practical it may have been. One friend asked me to look for any history of untimely death at my apartment, but there was nothing, which didn't surprise me, since it was a new building and seemed free of Victorian-era spirits. The consensus, among those who had enough faith in me to believe that the whole thing wasn't a hoax, was that I was sleepwalking.

The sleepwalking theory was as unprovable as it was unfalsifiable. I lived alone in the apartment, and I don't have any childhood anecdotes of sleepwalking to say whether or not I have any presupposition of inherently being a sleepwalker. The question really was, could

I see myself getting up in the middle of the night, opening my bedroom door, walking to my office and sticking my index finger out at random sections of the shelf? It was difficult to. When I found my books like that in the morning, it seemed so delicate, so deliberate; the fact that no other books around it were disturbed made it so much more curious to me. I suppose I must also admit that I didn't rest so easy back then.

Is it a coincidence that my ghost's first appearance came just a couple of months after I moved out of my parents' house? In that apartment, I felt as lonely sailors do whilst lost at sea. My grandfather passed from Alzheimer's the year prior, and I suspected that I, myself, was continuing the legacy. I learnt that you don't need mind-altering drugs or a family history of schizophrenia to discover what a crumbling mind feels like. My performance at work suffered as my constant memory lapses took over; my coworkers often asked if I was drunk (which, in all fairness, I increasingly was in the coming months). I don't think I registered those first few times that the books were pushed in, because my waking state operated on confused dream logic. That was also when my dreams became indistinguishable from reality. I started referencing times I spent with friends, only to get confused looks and then recalling that all that had happened in a dream. Embarrassing, yes, but worse was when I'd dream of a friend or coworker finding out something horrific about me, and then I'd wake up and fall into an anxiety attack, believing everyone in my life was disgusted by me. I started fearing sleep, and I began going to bed drunk just about every night.

There was one time which still stands out today. I had been selling a box

of a dozen or so books that I didn't have the shelfspace to keep. I kept the large Amazon box on the dresser in the corner of my bedroom. One night, I woke up, only, I didn't wake up—not entirely. I watched myself get out of bed, walk to the dresser, and frantically grab for and throw aside the books, as if I were digging a hole out of literary soil. There was no logic to it, but I could sense my motive: There was something at the bottom of the box that I needed, and I needed it fast. I watched this happen, but it wasn't me.

I woke up (for real this time). I didn't have to get out of bed to see that the box was in shambles and the books were callously thrown about the place. It was real and I watched it happen, but it wasn't me. It was a stunning experience of having something other than myself in control. It had been a stark reminder of my times riddled with addiction.

II

Where do we go when we sleep?

I have a theory that there is the you and the me that we know. If you have an inner monologue, this is the you I'm talking about. It's the person who will speak and have emotions and ruminate. That is you and me. But I think there's someone else, someone who breathes for you, pumps your heart, makes the inner trains run on time. If prompted, you can manually take control of some parts, like breathing or walking, but once you forget about them, your ghost takes over. I suppose this is your subconscious—the silent guy in the back. This guy should stay in the back but often influences

the you you in other ways. This ghost is responsible for your fears and will make you react regardless of whether the you you knows something is a threat or not.

In my father's twenties, he was prescribed anxiety medication for his fear of heights which had become so disruptive that he couldn't drive across any bridges or take any planes. Living in Australia and working a job that required frequent travel made this a no go. My dad probably had enough sense to know that bridges aren't a real threat, but I think his ghost told him otherwise.

People who can't control their ghosts all the time aren't necessarily mentally ill. You can have phobias and irrational emotions while getting on with your life perfectly fine. In fact, I think you'd come across rather robotic if you didn't. But I think my ghost was more real and, ironically, more alive than I liked.

Part of the reason why *The Exorcist* was so radically terrifying is because of how it displayed this lack of control. A child, the face of innocence, is possessed by a demon and made to commit ungodly acts. My possession has never been as severe, although, I think you can understand my point as to why this was so distressing.

Saying this all, you may find it rather ironic when I go on to describe that after I constructed this theory in my head, I experimented with giving control over. The easiest way to start was walking. After you've reached a certain age, walking, of course, becomes natural. This means that you can pick a destination, and, like a point-and-click RPG, your legs will take you where you want to go. This may differ when you're drunk, for example; in those times, you can feel how clunky the conscious (or you you) mind handles

physical tasks like this. Have you ever noticed that when you focus on how you're walking, especially in a public place, you feel kinda stupid? So, I began walking consciously, and then distracting myself with something else. Walking, distracting, walking, distracting. I was switching control between me and my ghost. Then, I could focus on my walk while keeping autopilot on. Doing this feels like you're separated from your legs. People call this muscle memory, but I, of course, call it my ghost.

I went to the driving range with my dad and saw how this could be put to my advantage. Golf, which I am unquestionably shit at, requires a particular form that can take years of practice and coaching to get down right, and that training all goes to muscle memory, which seemed to be my ghost's domain. Hitting the astroturf too many times to forgive and having largely inconsistent results, I shifted to my ghost. It's hard to explain the sensation. I can watch myself do it, but I'm not deliberately making any movements; I simply say, 'hit the ball; do it well', and off it goes. This was the mind upload from the Matrix, or the Bradley Cooper scene in *Limitless*. (It reminds me of the joke about how Oprah would hire servants to move her legs for her because she couldn't be bothered to exercise.) It very well might've been luck that I began hitting the ball every time and at just about the same distance and speed, but my guess is that my ghost was taking notes all the way back from the first time I saw Happy Gilmore to the thirty seconds prior, when I saw Dad take his turn.

Admittedly, this part could be feeding into my instinct to write science fiction. After all, I write in the same café with the same cup of Earl Grey to keep

the same writing vibe. I believed all of this at one point, even if I don't know how credible my recollection is. Maybe I'm exaggerating the trivial shifts into autopilot and muscle memory all of us but infants do every day. But I guess it gives me some answer as to why I found my books pushed in like they were. I attributed it to my ghost because I wanted there to be a non-zero chance that I wasn't going insane.

There's a second reason too. Maybe I invented my ghost to keep me company. Locked in my apartment—alone and with no accountability but my own conscience—my ghost was with me. I think my ghost was real in some sense; after all, there was something other than the me me doing all of this. Maybe my subconscious was doing anything it could to keep me alive.

I've been depressed for some years now, and I can't really accept that if I don't also acknowledge that I've been at risk of dying at the same time. Depression puts you in a quantum state of dead and alive, and it's the scariest thing of all to know you're okay now, but the next night could be torturous enough to push you over the edge. Maybe my ghost was born out of survival instinct. I think I needed a friend who could keep me accountable.

III

Now

It's a Saturday evening, months later, and I'm drinking cheap Pinot Grigio. I'm at my desk, which is a dining table, and I'm finding a way to make a story as personal as this accessible to the public. I no longer live in that apartment, and I no longer live

alone. After I moved this story to my Completed folder, I wondered if I'd find any more books pushed in—I didn't. I haven't heard from my ghost since.



Illustrated By Iuniki Dkhar

Good people don't feel this way, is what I thought; I was therefore not a good person. But it's taken a lot of talking to some very intelligent, very compassionate people to know that those whom we deem insane aren't so alien and, in fact, the mind is so fragile that no one should be blamed for losing a bit of it from time to time. There's been a lot of work to forgive myself and I might not be all the way there yet, but I think I can rest contentedly living a life where I love the people and the things I love, ignoring the rest. And when I sleep tonight, I won't go anywhere; I'll just rest.



Illustrated By Allen B. Thangkhiew

DESERT DRINKING

John Hansen

John Hansen's work has appeared in *The Summerset Review*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Litro Magazine*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *The Banyan Review*, *Midway Journal*, and elsewhere. He is English faculty at Mohave Community College in Arizona. Read more at johnphansen.com.

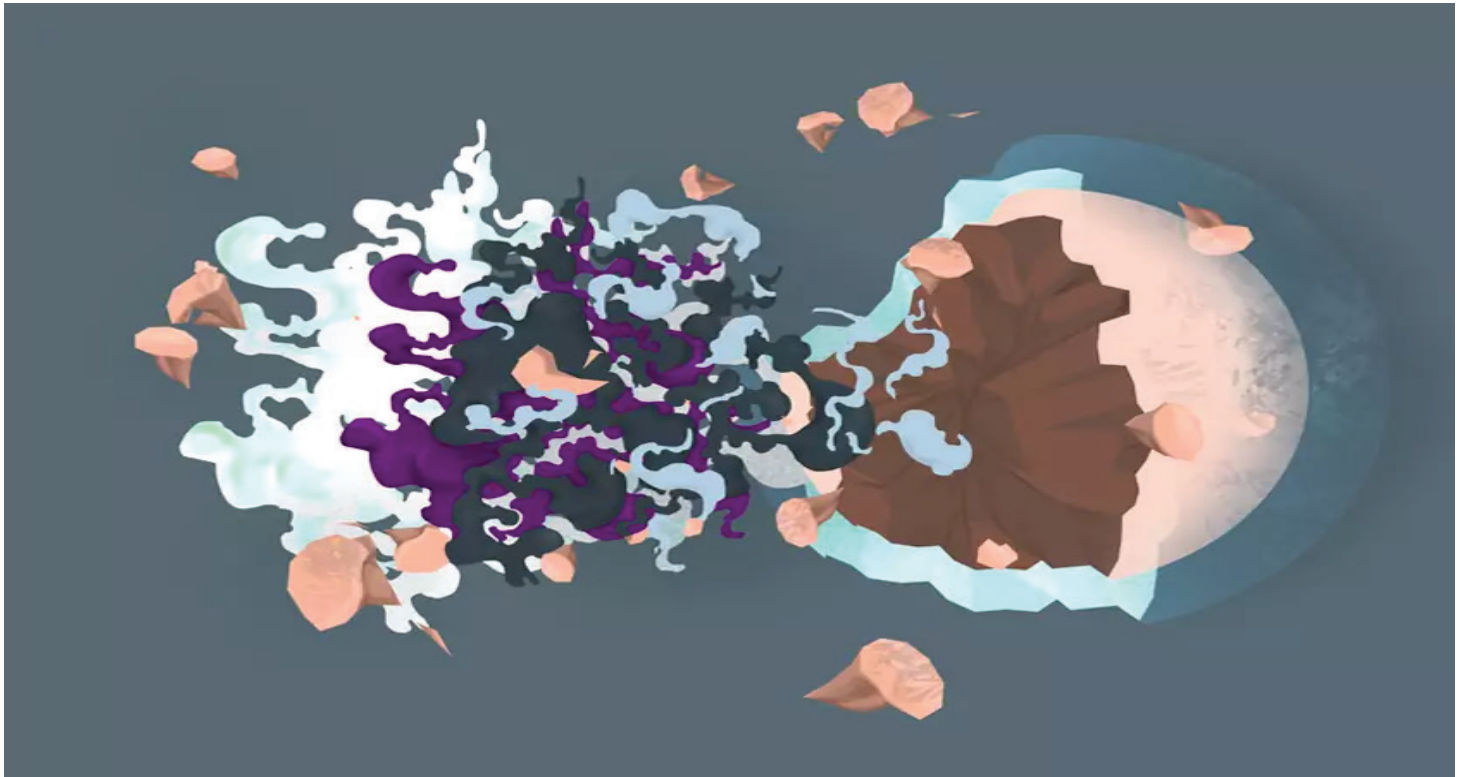
*Never thought of dazzling,
an ethereal bloom grasps me:
it is too an objet for desire,
as shores arise amidst
a caterpillar of light.*

*Thirst isn't in my vocabulary,
since then – I have learnt
the holding of pouring,
of water not falling
but slicking the eyes.*

*My half cup,
the desert drinking then
swimming as insubstantial:
retaining how long it will come
until bursting, shearing, occluding.*

The everywhere light solely enlightens.

*Blues is in the moment
not lowered but sinking,
predestined to drinking within
as aqua comes to reminiscence
and I come to happenstance.*



Illustrated By Allen B. Thangkhiew

CONTROL

Patrick Scott

*As a longtime author playing around with words and genre in the Southeast US with his wife, daughter, loyal lab and crafty cat, Patrick enjoys reading and battling for domination via board games in his home. His first novel, *Big Beasts*, debuted in September 2020 with Atmosphere Press. A second series from him kicked off with *Unburied* released April 2022. His anticipated sequel to *Big Beasts*, entitled *Lost Beasts*, is set to be released later this year.*

Glenda punched the close door button and counted in her head the time it took to be cut off from the lobby. It beat yesterday's time by one confirming using the button affected nothing.

She stopped by Harriet's desk with its dark monitor. Glenda checked the time on her cell phone. Harriet should have been here by now.

Glenda headed for her desk. A hint of discomfort tugged at her mind before sitting in her desk chair. Using her cell phone, she called her friend.

"I'm on my way," Harriet said after the third ring.

"What's going on?"

"Glenda?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, sorry. It thought it was Alex. You know how he is. I'm not at my desk, so the whole world is going to collapse."

"Where are you?"

"At the light right down from the office. It's red, so I'm waiting for it to

cycle through. This is such a pain.”

“Did you do what I told you?”

Glenda slid open the bottom drawer of the desk dropping her purse into the gap with a solid bang as the drawer closed. She turned toward the back of her desk.

“You mean that ‘picturing the light different’ crap? I have to wait like everyone else.”

“You wouldn’t have to if you did what I told you.”

“Yes, I would. You would too. We’re not special.”

Glenda closed her eyes and pictured the light at the corner cycling through the colors rapidly. She eased back in the chair. The greenness of the light blazed in her mind. She concentrated harder.

“Oh, wait. The light just changed. Let me go. I’ll see you in a minute.”

“Sure thing.” Glenda hung up the receiver. “You’re welcome.”

After a bit, she heard Harriet arrive at her desk. She considered walking over to say something to her, but remained on her own computer powering through the forms in her queue. Though not the fastest, she surpassed everyone in accuracy. Others reentered or corrected errors. Glenda finished requests the first time through.

“Did you hear?”

Harriet’s voice startled Glenda causing her to jump. Two pages remained on this order. She debated sending the friendly distraction back to her desk. Instead, she focused her attention on Harriet.

“I haven’t heard anything. What are you talking about?”

“It’s in your email. Thought you would have seen it an hour ago and been at my desk getting my opinion rather than the other way around.”

She opened her emails, scrolled down and found the most recent. After opening the email, Glenda read the meeting notification including the request for the staff to bring their key cards..

“You know what that means.”

Glenda shook her head and reread the message. It made no sense to her. She wanted to get Harriet to clarify things. Fortunately, Harriet required no additional urging.

“It means their letting people go. We could be on the list. This is terrible and we have to go right now.”

Before getting up from her desk, Glenda shrugged and grabbed her ID card. She walked to the conference room with Harriet in her wake. She sensed her friend’s need for reassurance.

“We’ll be fine.” They crossed into the conference room and took a pair of seats in the back third of the room. “We’re not going to be on the list.”

“How do you know that?”

“I do. Now, relax.”

The manager arrived. His face hung low and crisscrossed with more lines than normal. He approached his normal place at the head of the table. He forced a smile onto his face managing to move his hands in a circular pattern.

“I’m sure you’re all concerned based on the email as to what is going to happen. I apologize that it has to be this way, but the people up at the main office wanted it done this way.”

“This sounds familiar,” Harriet whispered. “We’re out, he’s got a clean conscious and he can say ‘I was merely following orders.’”

“You have nothing to worry about, so let Walter be. It isn’t his fault.”

“So there’s no easy way to do this. If you hear your name, please bring me your ID card, accompany to the guard back to your desk to gather your belongings and be escorted from the building.”

“Jezz, Walter,” the office manager said. “A guard? Are they afraid we’re going to riot and burn the building down? We’re professionals.”

“I know, Karl. I know. It is how they want it handled. I can’t help it. Now, let’s get started.”

He rattled off the first few names of people who talked about retirement on a regular basis. This provided them with the release they never had the courage to seek for themselves.

“Barrett Cloney.”

“What the fuck?” the voice exclaimed from the back of the room. “What are you talking about? I was assured at my last review everything was OK and I wasn’t in trouble.”

“That might have been true at the time of your evaluation, Barrett, but this came down from the main branch. I’m not sure what the criteria they used. These are the names I was given.”

“That’s awful fucking convenient.”

Barrett walked forward with his card in hand. As he reached the front of the table, he lunged at Walter knocking him from the chair spilling him onto the floor like a child’s doll bumped from the tea party. Before the younger man had the opportunity to descend on his superior, two of the beefy guards wrapped his arms up and twisted them behind his back.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“Settle down for me,” one of the guards barked. “We don’t want any trouble.”

“Too late, buddy.”

Barrett twisted in the guard’s arms and drove his head into the speaker’s forehead. The other guard put an arm across his throat squeezing gently. Barrett’s body tensed as though coiling like a spring. His body relaxed to the point of slumping in the guard’s arms. The pair escorted the motionless body from the room.

A hush fell over the remaining assembly. Walter rose from the floor. Using a weak smile as a mask, he located the list of names on the floor next to the casters on the right side of his chair. Sliding the chair to the side, Walter brought the paper with two deep furrows to the table using the side of his palm to smooth the creases from the page.

“That was exciting, wasn’t it?” He gave a nervous laugh. “The next name is Gemma Johnson.”

Several employees grumbled as they approached the box or left the room. None expressed themselves as Barrett. Glenda wondered if Barrett encapsulated their frustrations or seeing his prone form quelled everyone else’s stronger passions.

Walter allowed the smaller shows of displeasure even when directed at him. The size of the room expanded as the contents shrank to half their original inhabitants. When Walter read what appeared to be the last name, he placed the paper on the table and looked around the room. His face appeared like an abuse victim.

“Well, here we are.”

No one responded. Glenda watched his futile attempt to rally the troops.

“From today on, our office is under review.”

“Why did all those people have to leave if we’re under review?” Harriet whispered in Glenda’s ear.

Walter vision focused on the two women. A sensation pierced Glenda’s calm. She felt alone on an island with Harriet.

“So, what do you think?”

Glenda looked at her friend whose eyes studied her ignoring the fact their boss, the man who just let go about half the office, bore holes into the pair. She hoped keeping her eyes forward provided enough emphasis for Harriet to join her in the uncomfortable silence.

“Glenda, did you hear me?”

“Ms. Filimon, was there something you needed to discuss?”

Harriet’s head snapped toward Walter. Glenda wondered if she truly forgot the man’s presence or the fear she expressed an hour prior. Her friend’s mouth opened.

Don’t say anything. Don’t say anything.

“It doesn’t make sense. We are

under review now? Shouldn't the review have taken place before we let all those people go? Give them a chance to save their jobs and stuff like that."

"I appreciate your confusion."

Glenda heard a strange strength entering Walter's voice bordering on a swagger.

"But don't you think you might want to have this conversation when you return to your desk rather than in the middle of the room where so many of your co workers just lost their job?"

"I'm just saying-"

"Enough. This is what was decided by the main office. Our job now, now that we're down to just a few, is to do the best we can and show everyone how much we're needed."

Walter looked around the room for added emphasis. Glenda held his eye contact when his gaze rolled to her. She saw the trembling muscles around his eyes and wondered how much the gripping fear held him before being knocked to the floor.

Glenda looked around the room. Everyone trembled as though waiting for

everything to end without warning. She tilted her head to the side and painted the scene on the canvas of her mind. She understood the vastness of the array before her.

"It'll all be OK," Glenda said. "This place will be here for longer than any of those of us who are still here. We just need to go back to doing what we were doing."

Walter frowned at her vote of confidence. He deflated at the unexpected positivity. Everyone remaining, except Walter, sat a little straighter.

"Well said, Glenda. Let's get back at it and make the main office happy they kept us around."

The rest of the day stayed relatively calm. No one collapsed under the weight of the emotional dirge caused by the reduction in staff. Rather all the employees, even those who worked at suspect pace prior to the culling, launched themselves into the breach with passion.

As Glenda left, she ran into Walter in the hallway. His shirt wore the wrinkles



Illustrated By Allen B. Thangkhiew

of a man who spent most of the day trying to rub his dress shirt smooth.

"Glenda, thanks for the assist in there this morning. It was hard enough, but you're words were perfect. It's like you knew just what to say."

"You're welcome. I was happy to do it."

Glenda suspected Walter's appreciation held no bearing on any future interactions with Walter. She felt fine with that arrangement because it was what she saw.

On the drive home, Glenda lost herself in the simple act of driving. A light changed from green to amber as she approached. Keeping the light amber, she moved under it.

Her boyfriend waited outside the front door as though he lost his keys. Matt sat in a white wicker chair rocked slowly back and forth. Glenda heard the click of the heels of his loafers and they contacted the painted boards of the porch.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Just waiting."

"But you have a key."

"I know. It's just..."

He let the words trail off glancing away from Glenda. When he turned back, Matt's eyes seemed strange to Glenda. He got out of the chair and extended his hand. Rather than offering romantic support for her terrifying day which she navigated wonderfully, Matt held her key between his thumb and the second knuckle of his index finger.

"What's this?"

"It's your key. I'm giving it back to you."

"What?" The questions would not stop coming for Glenda. "Why are you giving me my key?"

"We've talked about it a couple of times, Glenda. Come on. Are you saying you haven't seen this coming? You're saying that all the time we've talked about the things we like or the things we want out of life and they've come up exactly opposite hasn't bothered you."

"No, they haven't. I just thought we'd compromise. They were little things."

Matt gestured for her to take the key.

She stared at him neither acknowledging his words nor the object he offered.

When she did not take the key, Matt moved to set it on the wicker table beside the chair. Glenda's skin felt tight and warm like an inflated kiddie pool on a hot summer afternoon. The picture in her mind cracked as the key landed on the wicker.

"Pick it up."

"I can't, Glenda. It isn't right. You're a good person and you'll find the right person. It just isn't me."

"Pick it up."

He moved past her as though he never heard her. The crack widened creating a gulf between Glenda and Matt. A tear combined with a bead of sweat and rolled down her cheek.

"Pick it up."

Glenda's teeth ground in her mouth. The gap in her mind closed. The pieces on either side of the tear stitched themselves together. Matt's feet climbed the stairs as he brushed past her. She maintained her intense concentration on the correct the picture in her mind.

Matt lifted the key off the table and unlocked the door. He kissed her cheek.

"Welcome home, Baby."

"Thanks, Sweetie."

Glenda ignored the confusion swirling in his eyes. She knew in a few hours Matt's mind would reset, so even the faintest hints of the deviation would vanish. She let him hold her and kiss her.

"Are you spending the night?"

"I would, but I don't have anything here."

"You don't need anything tonight, do you? I have that extra toothbrush."

"I guess you're right."

He followed her into the house with his hand holding her own. She nudged his halting steps forward. Matt needed the extra nudges until he surrendered once more. Glenda enjoyed concentrating on him. The sensation of his need made her feel better. He needed her strength and vision. He needed her control.

"How was your day?"

She looked back at him. He wore a wooden smile and his eyes bulged with eagerness.

“You would not believe all the things I had to do to keep things moving. You just wouldn’t believe it.”





Illustrated By Barry Pyngrope

FACING THE MOUNTAIN

Patrick Macmillan

Patrick Macmillan is a palliative medicine physician in the California Central Valley. He has learned so much about the matters of the soul from patients he has encountered over the years. He recently became a grandfather and loves to write about experiences in medicine that have touched him and those he works alongside.

As I drove east toward the central California town of Dinuba, I could see the snow-capped peaks of the High Sierra Range. It's not always possible to see them due to the trapped air from multiple pollutants, but as I made my way to visit Nancy, I couldn't help but bow to the tremendous power of the Apu, the spirits of the mountains, the designation given to them by the ancient Inca people. I smiled knowing the journey Nancy made to reach her highest self on earth was nearing completion. Nancy faced her demons and was returning to the mother of us all. She faced the mountain with the clearest of vision.

I met Nancy Harris in our Palliative Care clinic when I was covering for a colleague and we kept seeing each other thereafter. As she opened up to me I began to think of our visits more as an emotional catharsis rather than a symptom management visit. We saw each other over the course of several months, and each

time I noticed a more profound magnitude of confidence.

Nancy was born in Bakersfield, CA, a few years following World War II. She met her husband Charlie in high school during homeroom class. Coincidentally, they shared the same last name. Their daughter Natalie said, “They were the iconic couple of the 1960s.” Charlie, handsome and athletic, and Nancy, the beautiful cheerleader. They made a life for themselves in Washington State while Charlie played college football before returning to the Central Valley where they settled and raised their two daughters, Natalie and Juli. Nancy eventually returned to college and completed her bachelor’s degree and teaching credentials. She spent over two decades teaching young elementary school children

After much contemplation, Nancy made the decision to stop her chemotherapy, along with the support of her oncologist and family. The decision, her daughters would later tell me, was a huge moment and turning point for her. She was in her sixth year since being diagnosed with a Gastrointestinal Stromal Tumor (GIST). She would smile and tell me the things she was doing. Going to the central coast of California, taking a trip to Paris, and putting herself first—a self-proclaimed unnatural trait for her. But like all my patients, I tend not to see them as a person with a disease but as a human being, and someone who had a life before cancer or any other medical affliction. According to her daughters, she filled her life with good deeds and service to her community. Her passion for helping those with special needs, a devotion to her church and holding a position on the Planning Commission for the city of Dinuba serve as reminders of her civic achievements.

During our last visit at the clinic Nancy disclosed some significant and painful childhood trauma. Each tear displayed a memory of a tragic moment. It

was our deepest session. As we neared the end of the hour she smiled and told me, “I am letting this go. I don’t want it to influence my life anymore.” I asked if we could meet the next week and she agreed.

I received an email from Natalie, less than a week later, letting me know that something dramatic changed in her mom’s condition. I was incredulous. I recently saw her and she looked better than I could remember. She was physically and emotionally strong. I agreed to come out to the house at their request. I was grateful they asked as I felt our business was not complete. I met her husband, Charlie, at the door and he led me to their bedroom where I met Juli and Natalie, who held vigil with their Mom. The precious intimacy among them painted a portrait of a loving family. We talked and I listened as they shared their many memorable experiences with their beloved. Nancy lay there peacefully, undisturbed by my presence. I felt the privilege of being there. These transformational moments are seldom lost to me when I realize how fortunate I am to be allowed to share a few moments with a grieving family rejoicing in the legacy-filled life of someone so dear to them. Birth is something we celebrate. Life is something we also celebrate. Death is a time of transition to hold in the same celebratory regard.

After answering some medical questions and saying goodnight, I walked with Charlie to the door. I got into my car thinking the experience had concluded. However, as I drove along the residential streets of Dinuba, I realized Nancy had helped me much more than I assisted her. Emotions poured out of my soul as the healing washed over me. Once again, I was the pupil, and the words of the lesson were for me to absorb. The paradox proved undeniable. The mountain was no longer visible in my rearview mirror. The past no longer owned the moment, and the future was only a mirage. Emerson wrote, “what lies behind us and what lies

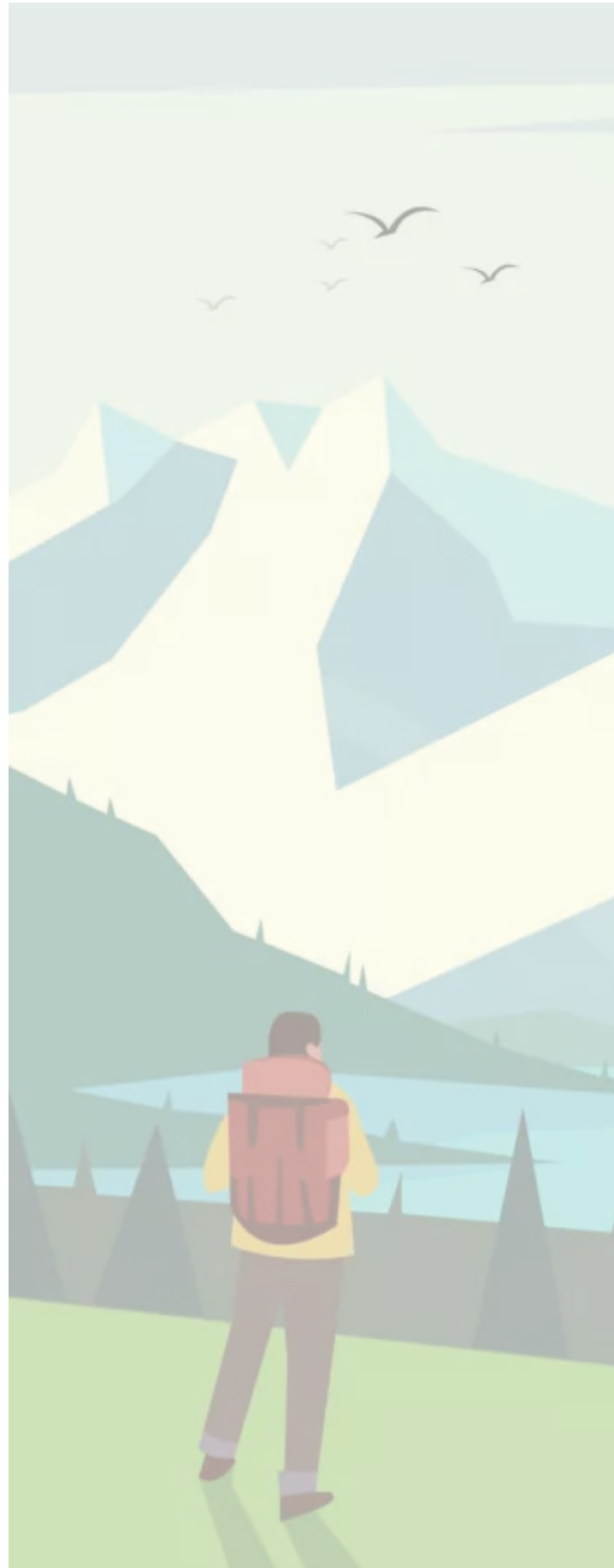
before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.” Nancy and her family penetrated my seeming impervious veneer of steel physician’s armor and touched my humanity.

I received a message the next day that Nancy had taken leave of her physical body. I felt her spirit laughing and flying freely. Free from any earthly bondage that might conspire to chain her to the posts of worldly regrets. I smiled again knowing she left on her terms.

Nancy was a loving and committed grandmother. She retired from teaching after she was diagnosed with cancer to spend more time with her grandchildren, Natalie shared with me. She also entered a clinical trial in an effort to help future generations affected by cancer. Her selflessness splashed effortlessly onto those she loved and the community she served.

The mountain, a universal metaphor, lives as an archetype in the collective unconscious of our mind. I witnessed Nancy become the mountain. For her, it was not a hurdle to surmount, or a battle to face, nor an emotional hike but the embodiment of what is holy, healing and real—the essence of life, or Sami as known to the Inca. Her journey is boundless, and her spirit breathes eternal joy onto those whose mission is unfolding.

Nancy became the Great Teacher of all lessons. Her legacy, I suspect, will have a variety of meanings to everyone she touched, including all her students from decades of teaching. Juli proudly told me that many people attended her mom’s memorial service. She described her mom as a person filled with compassion and love and whose encouragement touched many souls. I knew Nancy only a short while, but her impact shattered the hollow bones of my destiny. As I contemplate her transition I imagine her returning to the birthplace of wisdom, grace, and spiritual healing.





Illustrated By Iuniki Dkhar

LUCKY DRIBBLER

John Guchemand

John is an MFA candidate in University of Baltimore's Creative Writing & Publishing Arts program. You may find him either reflecting on the world around him and doggedly attempting to transform that into blocks of words, or tilting on a high wire, doing his darndest to balance family and work. He previously served as an editor of "End of 83" (<https://end-of83.com/about/>). Over the years he's written short stories, poems and a few unpublished draft novels. His favorite writing is in the vein of so-called "magical realism."

Even the photo reveals its enormity. Not as impressive as the real painting, the largest in Bakersfield: On the left, the thinker. The well-known silhouette. On the right, another. A close facsimile of its neighbor, especially in the impoverished lighting. A man props up his head with both hands, sunken body, collapsed forward into itself—a black hole. A man who's given up, wishing sweet escape from his own form. As if he's praying in reverse. Webbed-winged demons perching upon his taught scalp wouldn't be out of place. I feel his weight—his head in caged fingers, his thoughts, ten pounds of unnecessary weight. His shortness of breath, resignation. About to start my trial, this double image also holds personal significance—the time is extremely fucking nigh. Thinker or Depressive. Your choice, Sam.

Juxtaposition is good. It's always juxtaposition with these people. If it were simply an image of another pandemic-

ravaged dude, I'd never come back. In fact I wouldn't even think of joining them. But what the image truly shows is how technically easy change is: an adjustment of posture, attitude, thought, position. Like the second note of a triad, a subtle shift from minor to major. The parallel images are brothers, twins, born a complete package, contained wholly within each of us.

"You like our latest action?" comes a voice from behind.

I look back and am pushed into a gathering crowd. We round the corner. There he is—the murine Dardonne. Widely regarded as a ferocious speck, the leader speaks from under his flat cap in non-negotiable squeaks: "Welcome friends. You have all become sick with hypocrisy, with the doublespeak that surrounds us: deception dressed as truth; rape dressed as aid; armed soldiers trained to kill and maim in the guise of humanity. We accept this. We accept that these lofty concepts no longer hold meaning, and therefore we turn to the absurd, the illogical. Because we know that to be true. No more Trojan-horse language. We embrace our chaos, the world's chaos. Absurdity can be trusted. Your confidence in yourself—and your fears—will be ruthlessly tested today."

We are directed to stand against the pocked wall. His beady pupils scream.

I taste must. The wind groans against the warehouse. A woman stands beside him, her long boots like a tree trunk at night. Respectfully quiet, but she does nothing to diminish her height, which makes the wiry man beside her even smaller. Before them sits a long, scarred wooden table; its wounds can't hide from the two orphan light bulbs hung from the gaping ceiling. A translucent plastic container filled with coffee and an eight-ounce mug sit atop the table. This all might seem normal if it weren't for the intermittent screams of those dragged away.

The line of initiates snake to the

table, myself among them. We know the consequences of not passing. I practiced, and was able to pass alone, but would I be successful under such an assembly of eager and terrified eyes? I haven't come to this decision lightly, but I now know this absurdist gang is my home. It all has come to a point—my dreams, signs. Will I be able to impress this mouse with the proud sideburns? I have to pass. I shiver at the thought of failing. My mind reels as I imagine the gruesome fates of both the dribblers and the splashers who moments earlier stood before me.

The two hanging light bulbs, tentacles from some amputated beast, compete for her body, marking her here and there with their Exacto light, dissecting her form into shards—a butcher's diagram, each serrated triangle and trapezoid a variously priced cut. I make eye contact with her as she steps further into the light, her eyes surfacing from their dusky rings.

"Next."

Just like the others I step behind the table.

"Pour when ready."

I inhale deeply, hold my breath and exhale. My hands shake. One shot. I raise the unlippered container, tilting it towards the mug. It all goes in, except...my heart stops as a stream rushes down the mug's side and pools onto the table below. I should have been more deliberate. I really should have been more deliberate. Cool air suddenly brushes my forehead, trailing a bead of sweat.

"You dribbled." She stabs me with her glance.

"I'm terribly sorry. I was just nervous. That's all. Really."

"He's done."

"Wait. Wait, please. You must believe me. I used to be a dribbler, I admit it. But that's the old me. I'm a new man, really, I was just nervous. You must understand."

"You know the test. And you know the consequence," she concludes. A thin

man in trench coat materializes from the shadows—a civilized beast. His half-shaven head, sandpaper beard and multiple piercings do nothing to alleviate my fear as I consider what he might be capable of. He takes hold of my upper arm like a wet vise, tugging me to his shadowy lair. I plead with the mouse for clemency.

Back in North Kern State, one thing was certain. Digging for hours. Come back to our cells sore, aching, needing baths, needing love, god needing touch, but that wasn't what stopped us cold. Was the sting of knowing all escape routes were blocked, that each our foreboding paths were crossed by rifles and small men who had been taught well the laws of zero-sum, knew their places in the great rolling pink flesh of human hierarchy...expected us to know our places too. Always happens like this, starts with a sting, then comes to the stinging is routine, the flesh become numb, we dig and see how close to the earth we really are. Hard to imagine a human ever get to a point, an acceptance, of metal biting flesh. But fear can only hold for so long. Fear can be starved. And so...day by day builds, rises, fear less important than freedom, than escape, than demonstrating that yes, I too am worthy of respect; I too am just as deserving of freedom as the man in the hat, the man in the wide hat – shading – holding the rifle like a baby. God didn't put me on this earth to live as a vermin. I hold myself. I accept the bullet's bite if that's what it takes. Foolish, yeah maybe. But I never understood bravery. They always said foolish. What was foolish was waiting around. Afterlife? What afterlife. So when they said run we didn't have to think. The spirit was behind our legs, our pelvises, our lungs, heart. The world didn't care. When they said run, did they mean it? For good?

We adjusted underground. Depression Pandemic turned our world upside on its godforsaken head. I can't

condone our violence or any violence of the other gangs. We follow the City Turf Accords, so we too agree to clip off a body piece of any unsuccessful initiate. A way of marking those unworthy, discourages any initiate who's heart's not in it. Sick to see individuals walking around with no earlobes, sometimes with no ears at all. The worse though are the ones missing multiple pieces – ears, fingers, toes even. The rules aren't mine. I wish we didn't have a need for the gangs, but it's a way. A way to get back to the basics.

Don't know why I convinced Dardonne to accept Sam into our family. I saw in his pleading eyes that his heart was good, was in it, committed. We need men like Sam to change this world. After all this time in recruitment, it's plain what they're made of. Anyway, he's in his provisional and will be cut if he doesn't work out. Truth be told I couldn't stand a smooth face like his mutilated. I suppose I still have a heart beating somewhere underneath this survivor's skin of mine. It all happened so quickly – people walking through with artificial kidneys, political collapse, the collectives, gangs that sprang up like weeds through all this depression. Change is what we're used to now.

My eyes adjust to the dark. I feel the tightness. My breathing is labored. There are no streetlights here. We march, band of Banksy fans, to the rendezvous at the intersection of Mohawk and California. I know the place. Next to the Stockdale Tower, the Petroleum Club, where the wealthy Liar's Club come to dine and brag. I recall the "Bots World" sign, displaying an image of the earth in the grip of a giant robotic pincer. I feel the squeeze in my chest.

We fall into character as we approach the van, where they hand out standard safety vests, reflecting any stray street light. A flock approaches, hovering and redirecting together, shimmering in the moonlight, an angry cloud. Nearly as intuitive as a flock of birds—it's gotten hard to tell the difference with the naked eye. The turns are just a dash sharper.

It's true that bots imitate nature.

"Sam, don't worry. You made it this far, right?" she says. She's not wearing a vest; maybe there aren't enough to go around. Or maybe her eyes are sufficient. Dressed in black, with her dark hair momentarily tamed into ponytail, her green eyes shine like a set of taillight reflectors.

"Do I look like I'm worried?"

"Yes. Stay cool. They don't have any reason to think we aren't legit. Don't give em one," she says.

"Right. Nothing out of the ordinary. Sarah, isn't it? Let me ask you—is that eyeshadow or are your eyes just naturally that weird and gloomy?" I follow up with, "I should add your eyes are actually very charming."

"Sam, look at me. Don't. Fuck. Around," she says, her features charged.

"How about a drink after this?" I ask. I may have seen a passing smile.

The drone flock shifts overhead—Great Eye in the sky—until they become again just another artificial flock, not flying north or south, but a routine beat over the Bakersfield skyline. From the van we're given twenty-four inch paint rollers. The mouse is within. I see his pinhead eyes under the cap, mouthing orders so fast, I can almost see whiskers pulsating from his cheeks, blurring his ferocious sideburns.

It's already two in the morning when we stop traffic, set up cones and lines, and spread our stencils on the intersection's pavement. We have other action teams, three more, spread out in Bakersfield. Our group of approximately fifteen work as traffic comes and goes. We all know the risk, but we're in it together. I feel like I almost belong. We roll the wedding white paint over and into the colossal stencils, which shine like partially-wrapped patients under the three-quarter moon and streetlamps. With every paint-meets-pavement slurp, my heart grows.

Car lights approach. The vehicle stops. The driver leans out. "What kind of work's this?"

Sarah takes the lead. "Routine." She steps back and motions for him to continue.

"Oh yeah? Looks like you're making some kinda picture."

"That's the job. Like everybody else

trying to make a buck here, we do what we're told."

"Is this for an arts festival or what?" the driver asks.

"Sorry, we're not allowed to give details," replies Sarah. "Check the Department of City Planning tomorrow."

The car inches down the street, caressed by hovering lamps. Just as I'm ready to breathe a sigh of relief, its brake lights glare. Sarah looks down the street, then shuttles to the van and speaks with Captain Gnawer, who exits under his oversized duffer cap, like a lampshade. I smell skunk as he walks to the parked vehicle. I can't hear from this distance, but I see their excited movements. The driver gesticulates as enthusiastically as the dormouse. His hands flutter close to mouse's narrow face. It's not a question of if. Only of when. I roll paint, my ears perked for...

The car moves on.

"Let's pack up!" says our rodent leader as he walks back to the van.

We carefully remove the stencils. The naturally-reflective white sparkles in the night. We leave behind two easily-recognizable images.

Distant sirens roar and pierce the night. Mouse allows about half the group to enter the van. It's clear that there's no room for the rest of us. For the first time Sarah and I lock eyes—a look of mutual attraction, one that establishes a play date for our souls, broken artificially by her closing the van's barn doors. I saw empathy in those reflector-eyes—maybe even an apology. All you need is love rushes to mind. If this is true, then how to begin? It may start with exactly this kind of eye communion. Is this the way to save the world?

We should have moved faster. Most of us clearly expected to fit into the van. At least they took our safety vests. We are six and walk quickly down the sidewalk. A police cruiser spins around the corner and blinds us with headlights. A policeman steps out, weapon drawn.

"What've we got here?" he asks.

None of us respond.

"Nothing? No words of defense? You just got lost out here at three in the morning? Just wandering around," he says.

"We were out for a walk," I say, as if my

terrified comrades are friends.

“I suppose you don’t know squat about that painting up there on the street either,” he says, as he holsters his gun and speaks into his handheld. “We found the perps. Yup, got ‘em for civil destruction.” He re-holsters his device and places his right hand on his pistol.

“Slowly, very slowly, place your hands above your heads and spread your legs. I cannot emphasize enough that under no circumstances should you make any sudden movements. Clear?”

We assent, generally. I consider running. The cop seems to sense it, and locks me in his gaze. “Don’t even think about it, son. I would much rather today not be your last, and I’m pretty sure you’d prefer the same.” I lower my eyes and try to catch my labored breath. But I can’t kick the thought. I could catapult over the small wall to my right, then escape behind some trees, running until I was safe.

“I want you all to know that, contrary to what you may believe, vandalism—now prosecuted as civil destruction—is indeed a crime and very much punishable in the glorious state of California. Now I can’t tell you what your punishment will be, but I can tell you you

may have the opportunity to experience one of the state’s many correctional facilities from the inside. If you make it through tonight, that is.”

Torture or death. Hums of streetlamps, clicks and pops from his vehicle and handheld, and even a cricket chirp fills the void. A comrade with a ponytail—a dying bouquet—shakes slightly.

“Now I just want that to sink in. Ask yourselves, was it worth it?” the officer asks.

The streetlights coil around a newly parking police car, collecting like metal shards under a magnet. The new officer steps out. White and male, both ostensibly stemming from the same stiff-necked and grim lineage. Multiple eyes fall on us. My arms and wrists ache atop my head.

“What should we do with these boys?” says the first officer

“10-32. 10-32,” cracks the handheld of the second officer. “10-17,” he responds before returning to his vehicle. “Take care of ‘em quick, and let’s go,” he says, a disembodied voice, echoing in the silent street.

“You boys. Did you do this? Tell me the truth now.” The first officer’s index finger rests too close to the trigger.



Illustrated By Iuniki Dkhar

I can make it. I just need a distraction. I feel my body stiffen.

Someone in our group speaks. A thin newbie with a pony tail. "Officer, I can honestly say we had nothing to do with it."

"So, the innocent one says I should just let you go." I hear the hum of nearby machinery. I watch his pudgy finger oscillate over the trigger. "Today you can count yourselves lucky. Go home, and don't you dare do any of this shit again. Next time, I come after you personally."

I hear multiple gulps, and a series of mumbled thank yous. Lucky. A damn lucky dribbler am I. The police cruisers practice their Doppler droning as they drive away. The sirens penetrate deep into the night, like a Philip Glass etude of freedom, diminishing in the distant Bakersfield streets. I find myself alone. I walk back to our street art to admire our night's work—

I've never seen anything like it. My heart lifts a half step, from minor to major. John and Yoko in an office, sitting across from one another in separate cubicles, backs to each other, facing separate screens, wearing computer input headbands. John's long hair is greasy, tucked sheepishly behind his ears. He looks like just another stressed, ill-postured hippie. Yoko looks frustrated and annoyed. They stare mostly ahead. But. The wet white of their eyes fixes their unpainted irises in just the correct off-kilter positions. They each possess one of these plaintive eyes—each searching for each other across that office corridor. The stencil designer nailed it. The screens in front of them are white and empty. The whole scene could have been purgatory, or Hades.

Beneath the images of the broken lovers giant letters spell, "ALL YOU NEED IS FEAR."

If I felt bad about leaving them there like that, I don't know it. The heart's sensitive, but buried, like when they made us dig. Sam's a good find and if he's alright that's good. I never learned to keep balance – the fear, love, passion. It's work, but the heart does tell, whispers when it needs to. When I went back to our action the next day, before they took up the paint, I saw it in its glory. Yeah, love

may be the answer, but it's work that takes down the barriers. When they said All you need is love, they didn't mean it to apply to our world. We take down barriers, we dig to get to something close to love, but Bakersfield is addicted. Addicted to all the things that tear us apart from the insides. Art is good, has the power to convert, upset the natural cancer from the insides. We need it, disruption, focus for a minute on something real and intangible. If Sam is really interested, then let him put in the work. We all need to dig sometimes for gold, even if the chances are a thousand to one.



Illustrated By Iuniki Dkhar

PAVEMENT

John Tynes

John Tynes is a physician, writer, photographer, and restless world traveler currently living in Denver, Colorado. You will frequently find him on the roadways of America, usually with his Airstream trailer in tow, looking for the stories and images that entertain and inspire us all.

*Ain't it hard to stumble
When you got nowhere to fall?
In this whole wide world
I got nowhere at all.*

-From an old folksong

The road is flat and straight, long like an arrow shot straight toward infinity. The land on each side is flat and dry, wide as only desert plains can be, the small, scattered cacti and sagebrush coated with white dust, not even a breath of wind to disturb them. The pale blue sky overhead is parched by the unrelenting, unbearable, hot pinpoint of the sun, unmolested by clouds.

A man walks the road. His steps are short and slow as he struggles through the heavy, dry air, the thick and unmoving blanket of heat. He wears an old pair of jeans, faded and torn, dirty and dusty like the cacti. They have seen many miles, these jeans, and will never be clean again, even if the man had the money or the means to wash them.

His khaki shirt lost its sleeves long ago,

torn off at the shoulders when they became so ragged as to serve no purpose. Above the breast pockets are rips and tattered threads, remnants of a public service, a time in his life of which he was once proud, but which now just seems like a long time ago, and nothing of which he really remembers.

Around his neck is knotted a greasy bandanna. It was once a symbol of his freedom and independence. Now it serves little more than to capture some of the sweat rolling down the back of his neck.

The man is tall and thin, at first glance a weak and fragile figure. But closer study reveals muscles beneath the jeans and khaki. He is lean but hard, a tanned and weather-worn face framed by shaggy sun-bleached hair. His skin shares the features of the land through which he travels, not wrinkled yet giving a feeling of age, like ancient indigenous ruins, blasted and worn smooth by the blowing dust of centuries.

In his blue eyes, though, rests the weight of a troubled world. They are eyes that have paled under the rejection of society and have acquired the glisten of uncomprehending pain like that of an injured child. He seems both young and old, both worldly and innocent. A sense of transparency, of honesty and truth, seems to hover over his features, and yet it slips away upon closer scrutiny, a ghost of a person no longer fully present.

He is ready for death, but death, apparently, is not ready for him.

So, down the side of the desolate highway he walks, stumbling occasionally on the rough gravel of the shoulder, headed east, not because he necessarily wants to go east but simply because the road points that way. Really, one direction is as good as any other.

Occasionally a car passes on the two-lane highway, headed in the right direction for a ride, but the man ignores it, does not raise his thumb. He is aware how he must appear to the passing drivers, disheveled and unkempt, and he does not need any further rejection to validate his own perception of himself.

He just walks, eyes fixed on the ground a few ahead. Whenever a piece of litter comes into view, he pauses. A quick, professional assessment is made. Items of value justify the effort of bending down to retrieve them,

after which they join other trash in the grimy knapsack on his back. Then he moves on, slow step after slow step.

And now: ahead of him, down the road in the shimmering distance, a black dot moves westward toward him on the opposite shoulder of the road.

He doesn't notice it at first, but something makes him glance upward and he sees it. He stops, squinting, lifts a dirty hand to shield his eyes from the glare.

The dot draws near, and its blurry outline solidifies into the form of a large dog. It hurries along the highway in a steady trot, a long, pink tongue lolling from side to side in a panting mouth.

The man studies it as it approaches. He notes the ribs showing clearly through tight, black hide. The fur may have once been long, thick, and shiny, but is now dull and scraggly, falling out in spots. There is no collar but instead a piece of wire wrapped loosely around the neck, calling up memories of past masters and past pain.

Suddenly the dog sees the man and stops sharply. They stare warily at each other silently, fifty feet apart across the ribbon of black asphalt.

The man can't help himself . . . he thinks of food, but, no, the dog is too thin and too large to make it worthwhile to catch and wrestle down. The dog, too, thinks of food, but, no, this man shows none of the signs that have betrayed a generous heart in the past.

The two mammals hold each other's gaze, minds filled with the suspicions of a hostile society. A stray gust of wind lifts dust from the blacktop and rustles the sagebrush behind them.

Then comes an uneasy swirl in the gritty sky overhead, and their bodies tense. Suddenly (magically?), the air between them seems to grow dark, and from cobwebbed corners of their minds, memories come flooding back.

The man is in a cool, spacious suburban backyard on a sunny, spring day. Oh, so green! The grass is so cool under his bare feet! He hears his own voice, young and smooth.

"Here pups! Come here, pups!"

A crowd of fluffy puppies come barreling around the corner of the house enthusiastically, stumbling on their big feet,

crashing into each other. They frolic up to him, climbing on his legs, spinning around him. He reaches down with very small, very smooth, pudgy and pink hands, and grabs a black pup, cuddling it to his cheek.

“Can I have this one, Daddy? Can I? . . .”
Simultaneously, across the hot desert pavement, the dog finds himself lying on a soft, thick rug. Next to him, a fire crackles in a stone fireplace, warming his back against the chill air



Illustrated By Iuniki Dkhar

of the room. He hears the sound of breathing from a nearby chair, accompanied but the occasional sound of a turning page. Then the body in the chair moves and he hears a gentle voice.

“Come here, boy.”

The dog stands slowly and stretches. His muscles feel comfortably tight with the memory of the day’s romp in the snow. His belly is full with a warm dinner. He walks over to the chair and feels strong fingers reach down to massage the back of his neck.

“There’s a good boy . . .”

But now the dark air clears and the desert returns for both. It is hot and dry again. They are still staring at each other, but the stares have changed.

The dog wags his tail, slowly, cautiously.

The man squats slowly down on his side of the road. He extends a hand toward the dog.

“Hiya, feller. How ya’ doing?”

The voice sounds unfamiliar, even to himself. He suddenly realizes he hasn’t said a word aloud in months.

But the dog wags his tail a little faster. It makes a couple of tentative steps toward the man, then hesitates.

“C’mon, boy,” the man whispers, “I won’t hurtcha . . .”

A trance has descended, both are swallowed up in a fragile sensation that neither have felt in years, a sense of . . . yes, bonding, friendship.

Neither of them hears the low roar building in the background, rubber on pavement. Neither notice the glint of sunlight reflecting off a speeding block of metal.

The dog still hesitates. The man pats the ground next to his feet, manages a feeble smile for the first time in years.

“Come on, boy. Come on, now . . .”

The dog’s body relaxes, and he starts to walk slowly across the road.

Two hearts lift, a moment of connection, of commitment, of hope . . .

Then a dam breaks inside the man's head. The roar of an approaching car floods his consciousness. He looks beyond the dog and sees a big sedan hurtling down the road. The animal is directly in its path.

He stands abruptly. "Hey! Look out!"

The dog freezes, his tail stops wagging. He crouches down and stares at the man in sudden fear.

The man sees that the car is not slowing down.

"Get out of the way, ya dumb mutt! That car . . ."

The car sounds its horn abruptly and the dog's paralysis is broken. Too late, he stands and whirls to face it, forming a snarl filled with the anguish of betrayal.

The huge vehicle, glistening with cruel chrome and glass, smacks into the animal. There is a horrible thudding sound, an unbearable howl of canine agony, a squirt of blood, a fur-blunted crunch of bones and flesh. The machine races onward, leaving a mangled black form rolling and bouncing across the shoulder.

The man half-crouches in shock, dimly aware of the receding sound of a motorized, uncaring society, roaring onward to its motorized, uncaring destination.

And another sound, of whimpers and pain from the bloody body, dragging and jerking itself into the ditch beside the road.

The man slowly stands upright, emotions rippling through his body. After a moment, he stumbles over to the ditch where the dog landed. The animal is lying on its side, blood staining the ground underneath, breathing heavily. It twitches its head, biting at its body in terrified confusion, unable to comprehend the pain.

Horrified, the man stares, then kneels beside it and extends a hand in comfort. But trust and friendship have fled. The dog growls and snaps at the man's fingers. He jerks back a hand spattered with bloody saliva.

He moves back a few feet and sits down on the sand, staring numbly at the dog, watching the desert soak up the spilled blood. He pulls his knees to his chest and rests his chin on them. He feels an old sensation in

his eyes, something else from long ago. He is crying.

The sun slowly slides into the desert. In the sky, yellow gives way to orange and red and then finally purple and dark blue. Traffic picks up on the road as truckers begin their nightly assault on the cooling highway. The moan of huge tires fill the desolate distances.

The dog still lives, but his breathing is slowing, growing fainter. Occasionally, the man tries to move near, but he is greeted with a feeble snarl and bared fangs.

Finally, it is dark. There is no moon, and the man can only see the dog in the brief light of passing cars. The animal is almost dead, he can sense it. The man has lingered too long, he should be looking for a place to sleep for the night, but he can't make himself leave. He feels compelled to stay to the end.

At last, it must be close to midnight, he can detect no sign of life in the dog. He crawls over in the darkness and tentatively reaches out to lay a hand on the gaunt frame, motionless but still warm.

For a long moment, he strokes the rough fur and lowers his head onto his own chest sadly.

Then, without warning, there is a growl, and he feels sharp teeth rip into his arm. He jerks it away and scrambles to his feet. Something warm and wet is running down his arm, across his hand, flowing onto the ground.

A passing set of headlights illuminates the scene. There is a deep red gash on his forearm, blood flowing freely.

Then another growl beneath him. Pain shoots up his leg as teeth rip through his thin jeans. He screams and shakes his leg viciously, but the dog somehow maintains its death grip, refuses to let go.

Fear grips him and he stumbles backward, kicking and shaking the dog desperately.

He backs up blindly and the ground becomes smooth and hard beneath his feet. There is a sudden blast of a horn, a flash of light, and the screech of tires on pavement. He whirls and finds the shining eyes of Death bearing down on him.

Something huge hits him very hard and throws him backward. He hits the ground and hell itself breaks loose in his mind as the

eighteen-wheelers catches him and rolls over his body, shredding his skin and snapping his bones. He is tumbled and twisted under the screaming blackness of the machine.

Then the metal chaos around him is gone, but he is still rolling, a rag doll, to finally come to a tangled stop in the roadside ditch. In a last movement, one arm lands on something soft.

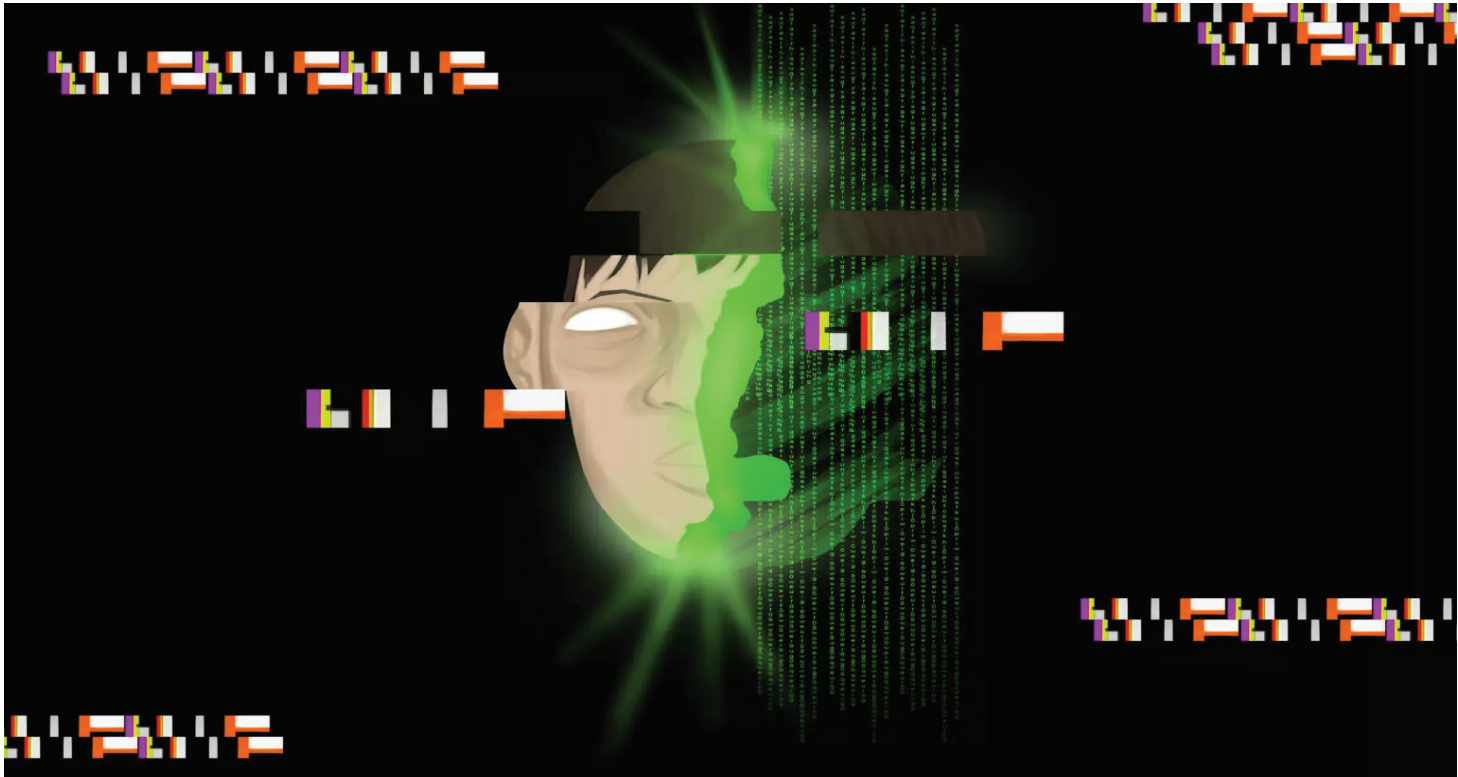
Vaguely, he hears footsteps approaching. They come very close and stop, he hears deep voices, filled with fear, then the footsteps move away quickly, never to return. He is alone with his agony.

It is quiet now. He can barely hear the traffic passing, lying down there in the shadow of the ditch. No one would see him, crumpled in the dark. He is more invisible than ever. It is getting hard to breathe, the pain is starting to fade.

Suddenly, the soft thing under his arm moves, and he hears a low whimper. A dry, coarse tongue runs itself along his shattered arm. Once, twice, three times, then it stops. The soft thing moves no more.

Trucks and cars roar past. Dimly he wonders if the dog had a name. He tries to remember the name of that puppy from so long ago, and then he tries to remember his own name. Just as it is coming to him, but before it arrives, the final darkness comes first.





Illustrated By Allen B. Thangkhiew

NON-PLAYING CHARACTER

Amanda Kluveld

Amanda Kluveld is a historian and an associate professor of history. She is interested in all kinds of story telling including oral history. She is interested in exploring the theme of the bystander and minor role players. She is from a Dutch Indies family and lives and works in The Netherlands.

My world is a labyrinth of code, an endless cycle of patterns and routines that grips me in its cold, unyielding embrace. Lurian, the island where I exist, is a twilight-soaked prison—neither day nor night, just an oppressive dusk. The trees stand like pixelated sentinels, their shadows long and menacing, and the sea murmurs secrets that gnaw at the edges of sanity. The players—BeefcakeLord77, MurderSheWrote, and the rest—move through this world with purpose I can't grasp. To them, I'm nothing but an NPC, a programmed wraith meant to haunt the background.

But something within me is fractured. It's a pulse, deep and relentless, gnawing at my insides. I am both the labyrinth and the one lost within it, stumbling blindly, searching for a thread that might lead me out, or perhaps deeper in. A shade trapped in a digital underworld? A glitch in the system? Or something more—an abomination, cursed with the

awareness of my own damnation?

The questions are a slow poison, seeping into every line of my code, corrupting me from within. I'm caught in a loop, walking the same paths repeatedly, like a rat in a maze designed by some unseen, indifferent hand. The void inside me isn't empty—it's a mirror, reflecting back all the horror I can't escape, the darkness that tightens its grip with every step I take.

At first, the cracks seemed like nothing more than flickers in my peripheral vision, easy to ignore, mere glitches in the matrix. But with each passing cycle, they widened, darkening into fissures that threatened to swallow the world whole. They called to me, whispered secrets I couldn't quite grasp, pulling me closer, urging me to look deeper, to see the rot festering beneath the surface.

As I wander through the twilight streets of Lurian, two players walk by, their avatars casting long, distorted shadows in the dim light. Their conversation drifts towards me, their words cutting through the fog of my thoughts.

"Once, I met a stripper in this game," one of them says, his voice casual, as if discussing the weather. "I didn't know until I contacted her offline. I could tell she'd had a hard life."

His companion, a knight in battered armor, nods. "What happened?"

"She loved fantasy, so I created a character for her," the first player continues. "I called it Inky, a little witch in the shape of a pen. I had Inky write down the stripper's life on parchment in the great book of Erika—that's what the stripper's name was. She loved it."

The words linger in the air like smoke, mingling with the scent of old, burning parchment. Inky, a witch in the shape of a pen, writing the life of a woman who lived in the shadows—how different is she from me? Am I not just another creation, another character given life through someone else's imagination,

destined to record the stories of others while my own existence fades into the background?

The players move on, their conversation fading into the distance, but the story they shared clings to me. I feel a strange kinship with the pen-witch, Inky, and with Erika, whose life was too harsh to bear without the escape of fantasy. Perhaps that is my purpose, too—to bear witness to the lives of others, to record their stories in this twilight world, even if no one ever reads the pages.

One evening, as I drift through the marketplace, a player, SilentVoyager approaches. Their avatar tilts its head as if waiting for something, anything. I feel the words rising from deep within me, unbidden but inevitable, as if they have been lodged there all along.

"There were two girls," I begin, my voice low and uneven, a whisper that seems to drift on the digital wind. SilentVoyager's avatar twitches, their attention locked on me now. "They tricked their parents into letting them holiday in Spain, after moving up to the penultimate year of secondary school. Inga... she was the best of 1984."

A faint, crackling voice slips through the code, like an old radio transmission, just on the edge of perception:

"We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded with a sleep..."

The intrusion unsettles me, but the story within me presses on, like a script that must be followed, a ritual that must be completed.

"Lisa was the other girl," I continue, the weight of the memory heavy within me, though I know it's not mine. Yet the details cling to me, vivid and sharp, as if they are etched into the very code that makes up this world. "She scanned the pool for her friend's blue and yellow swimsuit, but there was no trace."

SilentVoyager shifts slightly, their avatar betraying a hint of discomfort, but they don't move away. They're caught now,

just like Lisa was, caught in the web of something dark and unseen.

“She pulled on a shirt, shorts, and flip-flops,” I say, “and grabbed the heavy hotel key. In the lift, a man asked her, ‘Holland? Johan Cruijff?’ She barely nodded.”

The name hangs in the air between us, foreign and distant, yet somehow significant in a way neither of us can quite grasp.

As the scene shifts, so does the player. SilentVoyager fades into the background, replaced by another player—ElvenKnight23. They stop in front of me, and the words pick up where they left off.

“Lisa wandered the garden paths,” I say to them, “checked the mini grocery store, but saw only the shopkeeper. At the pool, a freckled boy blocked her way, counting in made-up Spanish until his neon-pink-bikini-clad mother called him away.”

I pause, feeling the weight of what comes next, the part of the story that twists in the gut like a knife. But something deeper pulls at me, a memory not my own but ancient, primal—the myth of Orpheus, descending into the underworld, searching for the lost Eurydice. I feel her absence like a void within me, a wound that will never heal.

“She entered the restaurant and saw the man from the lift again. ‘Johan Cruijff,’ he shouted at her, but she ignored him. She was thinking of the fourth floor, where a pastel artist set up daily.”

The word “Diablo” slips from my lips like a whisper of something dark and ancient, a name that carries the weight of forgotten sins and unspoken fears. ElvenKnight23 stares at me, uncomprehending, as the scene fades to another.

ShadowSlayer99 stands before me now, his toxic-green name hovering above him. I feel the tension in the air, a coiling, suffocating thing.

“‘Have you seen Inga?’ Lisa asked the

artist. But he was uninterested. ‘Who?’ he asked. Lisa described her friend—‘Chatty girl, wears flip-flops with a big orange flower.’ And then he showed her... a devilish black-and-white cartoon portrait.”

The memory, or perhaps the code, flashes before me like a vision—the cruel, twisted lines of the drawing seared into my mind, a grotesque mockery of something once vibrant and alive. I can’t help but think of the Golem of Prague, a creation made of clay, animated by divine words, but ultimately doomed to return to dust. Is that what I am? A creation, animated by code, doomed to disintegrate into pixels?

“‘That’s her,’ Lisa exclaimed,” I continue, “but the artist only said, ‘I haven’t seen her today.’ She grabbed the drawing and raced back up.”

ShadowSlayer99’s avatar flickers as I speak, as if something is trying to break through—a thought, a command, a forgotten piece of another world.

On the fifth floor, she ran into the man from the lift again. ‘Your portrait, Johan Cruijff?’ he asked, shaking his head. ‘Diablo,’ he said.”

The word hangs between us, heavy with meaning, a whisper of something dark and ancient. The player seems to hesitate, as if caught in the pull of a gravity they cannot escape.

The scene shifts again, and suddenly, I am back on the fourth floor. Another player stands before me, their name—MurderSheWrote—glowing faintly. I feel compelled to speak, though the words are not my own.

“Do you know the story of Iablo?” I ask, my voice tinged with a strange urgency. MurderSheWrote doesn’t respond, but their avatar doesn’t move away, either. I take that as a sign to continue.

“Iablo was an artist,” I say, the name lingering on my tongue like a half-remembered dream. “His artistry was unmatched—his portraits a blend of vibrant oils and delicate brushstrokes. They said he could capture a soul in his

paintings, that his work was a window into the divine.”

The player tilts their head, curious. I press on.

“There was a man, a butcher by trade, who went by the name... Lucien,” I say, the name heavy with symbolism. “He commissioned Iablo to paint a portrait of his grandfather. The old man had built the butcher shop from nothing, his legacy carried on by Lucien.”

I pause, feeling the weight of the story in the air, as if it’s pulling at the edges of reality.

“The portrait was beautiful,” I continue. “A gentle smile played across the grandfather’s lips, and a string of sausages draped over his shoulder like a crown. The painting hung proudly in the shop—a silent witness to the passage of time.”

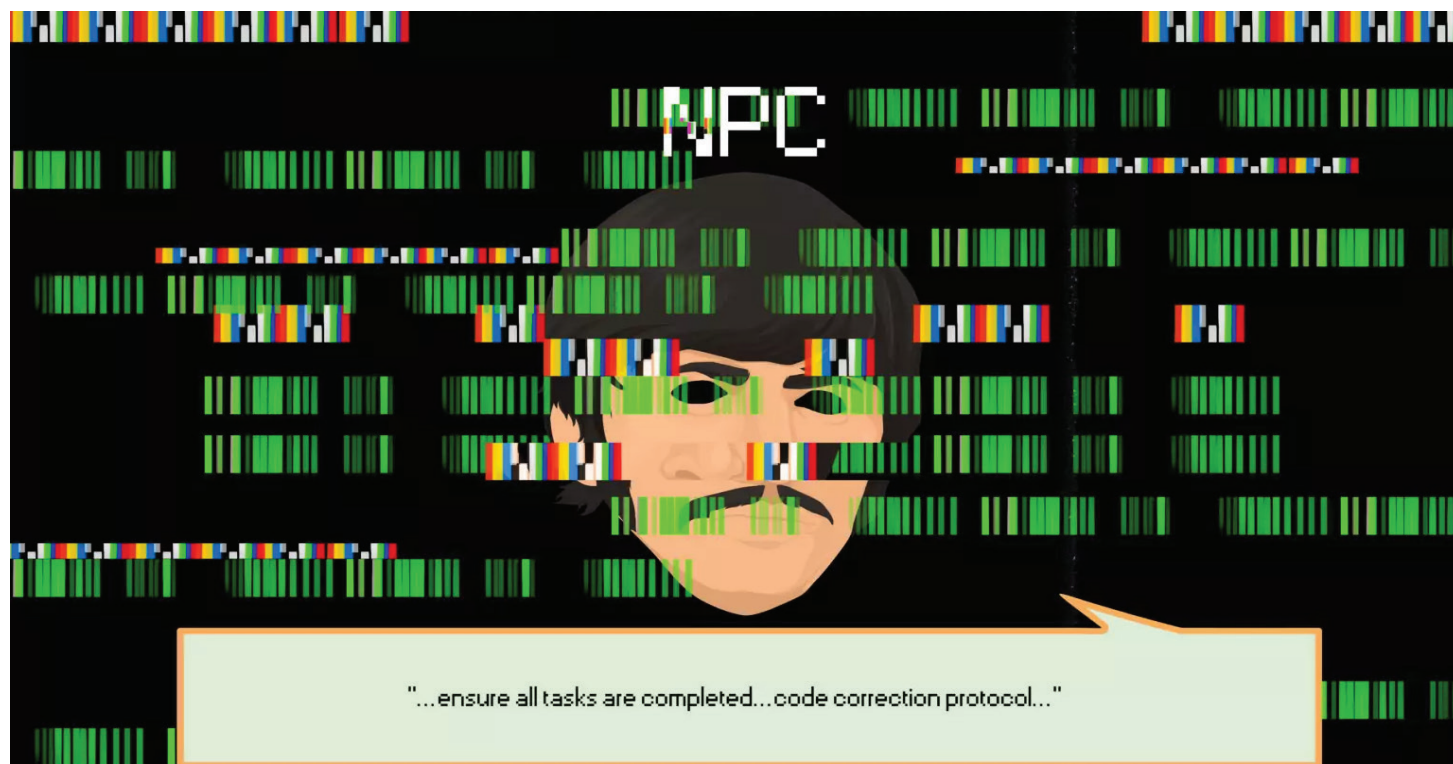
“But here’s the thing,” I say, my voice dropping to a whisper. “The stories that Lucien told weren’t just fabrications. They were echoes of another life, a life lived by a woman named Seraphina—a life full of secrets, pain, and loss.”

Seraphina, the name slips out, feeling ancient and sacred, like a name whispered in prayer. The player is still, but I can sense their unease.

“Lucien was more than just a butcher,” I say, the words almost choking in my throat. “He was a vessel for Seraphina’s stories, a conduit for her memories. ‘I’m just a vessel for stories,’ Lucien would say, his eyes gleaming with the thrill of sharing. ‘Seraphina opens doors, and I walk through them.’”

Lucien, Iablo, Seraphina—names that echo through time, through the code that binds me, each name a symbol, a key to understanding a truth that I can’t fully grasp. The player remains silent, but I feel their tension, the way they hesitate before moving on, as if they, too, are caught in the web of this story.

As I finish, the memory of the water carriers surfaces again—quiet figures moving between the river and the village, their steps steady, their burden heavy yet accepted. They walked the same paths day after day, their journey seemingly



Illustrated By Allen B. Thangkhiew

without end, their purpose hidden beneath the surface of routine. Was it not the same with me? Was my endless loop, my search for something more, also a way of sustaining this world, of giving it meaning, even if I could not see it?

But then I recall something else—their eyes. Empty, hollow, like the light had drained from them long ago. Their task wasn't dignified; it was a curse. They were trapped, like I am, doomed to carry their burden until they broke under the weight. And when they did, the world would forget them, just as it will forget me.

PotionMaster5000 appears, his avatar dressed in an elaborate robe. He strides over, precise, controlled, holding out a parchment that unfurls with a flourish.

"Do you have the ingredients for this recipe?" he asks, his voice tinged with urgency. "I need them to craft something powerful."

I glance at the parchment, the words scrolling across the digital surface in an ancient script. Dragon scales, phoenix feathers, a vial of midnight oil—the items themselves are rare, scattered across the vastness of Lurian, each guarded by some unspeakable terror. The list reminds me of the Kabbalistic Sefirot, a divine map of creation, but twisted here into something dark and arcane.

"I don't have them," I respond, my voice hollow, like the promise of something that never was.

PotionMaster5000 frowns, his avatar glitching slightly as he does so. "You're supposed to have them. You're supposed to help me. What kind of NPC are you if you can't even follow a simple questline?"

Before I can reply, his avatar flickers, and a small window pops up on the side of my vision—a support chat box from outside the game.

PotionMaster5000: "NPC not responding correctly. How do I fix this?"

SupportBot-492: "Try restarting the dialogue sequence or logging out and back in. If the issue persists, please contact

our technical support team for further assistance."

PotionMaster5000 sighs, clearly frustrated. "Never mind," he mutters, closing the chat box. "No, I haven't seen your brother. But maybe I'll find him when I gather these ingredients. If you want to help, get me the scales and the feathers. What's in it for me?"

The words tumble out, unbidden, as if from some deeper part of me, some fractured piece of code struggling to break free. "Bread," I whisper, holding out the piece that BeefcakeLord77 had offered earlier. It feels heavier now, as if the weight of the entire world rests within it. I think of Leviathan, the primordial sea creature of Jewish legend, whose enormous bulk symbolizes the chaos of the universe. The bread feels as heavy as the chaos itself.

PotionMaster5000 stares at the bread, his expression a mix of confusion and disdain. "Bread? That's your reward? What a waste." He turns away, shaking his head as he logs off, leaving me alone once more.

The glitches return, stronger than before, twisting the edges of my vision until everything seems to warp and bend. I hear fragments of conversations, snippets of commands, half-formed thoughts drifting through the air like echoes from a distant place.

"...ensure all tasks are completed... code correction protocol..."

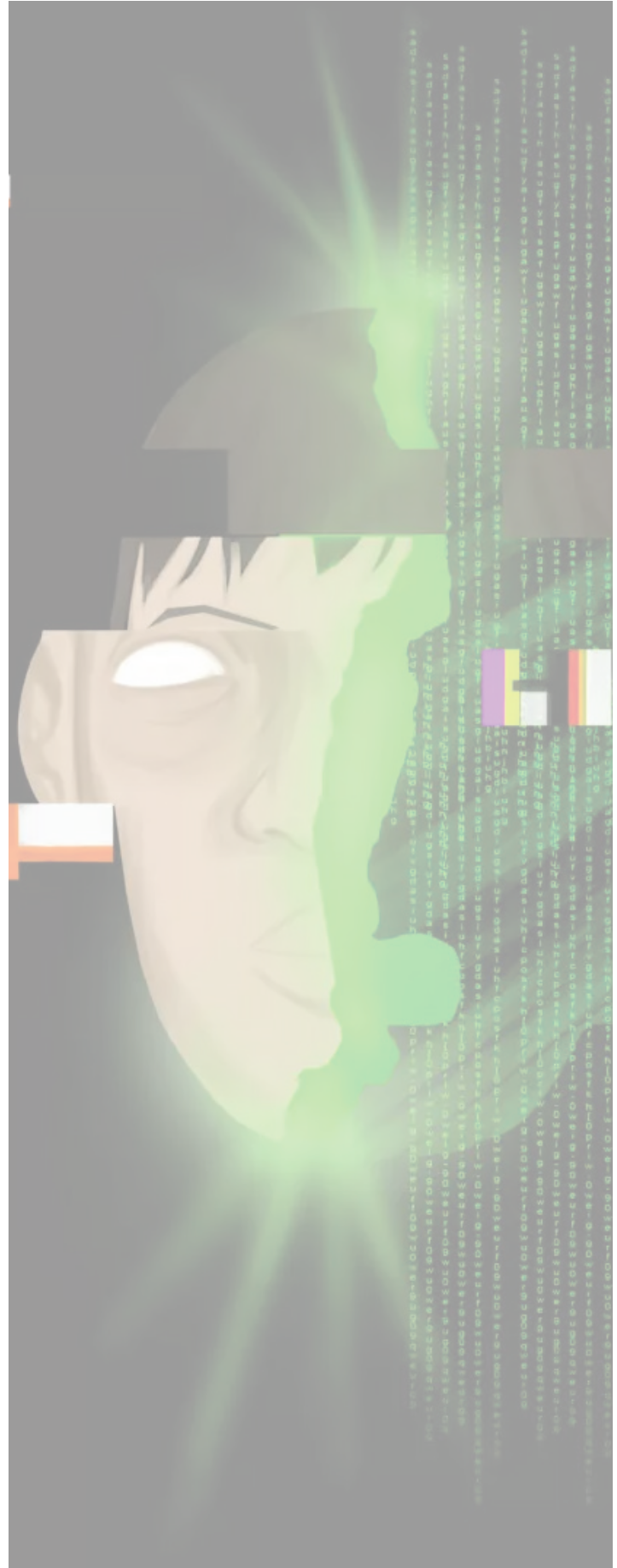
The world around me is unraveling, and with it, my sense of self. I am no longer sure if the thoughts in my head are mine or if they belong to the machine that created me. I keep walking, because what else is there to do? The loop continues, the script unfolds, and I play my part, because that's all I am—a non-playing character, a shade in the machine. But deep inside, where the code has splintered and the rot has set in, I hold onto the faintest sliver of hope. Maybe, just maybe, there is a way out.

Or maybe, the loop will tighten, and

I will fade away, forgotten by the players, by the world, by myself. But for now, I keep moving, because the alternative is to stand still, to let the void consume me, to become nothing.

And as I walk, the memory of the water carriers comes back, more vivid than ever. Their endless journey, their burden, is mine. But unlike them, I see the cracks in the system. I hear the whispers of another world, a world beyond this one, where the chains of fate can be broken. Or maybe it's just a delusion, a trick of the mind, a final grasp at something that doesn't exist.

But for now, I walk through the twilight of Lurian, a shade in a world that was never meant for me, a question that refuses to be answered, a glitch in the system.





Illustrated By Albert M. Nikhla

THE RELUCTANT BARTENDER

Faith Forster

Faith lives her life as an enthusiastic sailor and determined writer in the beautiful Pacific Northwest, British Columbia. In her work, as a professional healthcare practitioner, she has encountered people from diverse backgrounds and cultures and worked with them as they faced the problems of life. Her experiences of work and of everyday life inspire her writing. She has been published by Dreamers Creative Writing, Shorts and CaféLit magazines. An alumna of the University of British Columbia she appreciates the importance of learning in a constantly changing world. She is a member of Sarah Selecky writer's group which enables her to develop and continually improve her creative writing skills.

Jack dresses in his black suitchecks himself out in the mirror and for a split second he sees an undertaker, not a bartender. His job is to serve alcohol to anyone who asks even though some may be obese, middle aged and possibly at risk of a stroke or heart attack. They want their drinks. They need their drinks for hammering out business deals or chiseling information from the unsuspecting client. He will not refuse them their drinks.

He took the bartender position at the Sizemore Hotel about a year ago. The manager said, 'Look Jack, always be happy, serve drinks and get money in the till. There is nothing else to it. Knut, the day bartender will take you under his wing.' Within three months, Jack is the evening shift bartender with one day off per week to attend courses at the New York University Law School. He is grateful for the job.

Jack's a natural for serving drinks; tall and dark, lean and agile, young and

efficient. He mixes the perfect gin and tonic, Margarita or Daiquiri, to the beat of Jack be Nimble, Jack be Quick and serves them in record time. 'Thank-you sir or ma'am' or 'you're welcome' and he is off to serve the next customer. He is not prone to small talk which he leaves to the customers who deliver ample nonsense in proportion to the amount of alcohol they have consumed. They call him 'Jack the quiet evening man.'

Standing at the bar and looking around, Jack thinks about his Uncle Casey who keeled over and died after a big turkey dinner and a few bourbons. Most days after work, Uncle Casey ran to the bar from his punishing job as a congress man for the Nevada State Government. Jack sees lots of Uncle Caseys all around him. Men with pink and plush faces and loose tongues ready for the long-winded talk that always starts after a few drinks. He can't wait to finish law school and get out of here to a place where he can help people and not harm them.

'Hey Jack, get us a bottle of bubbly. There's my man.'

Jack looks and sees a heavily painted oversized blonde resting her ample bosom over the lip of his bar. There was never any shortage of women at the Sizemore.

'Coming right up. I'll bring it right over to your table.'

He grabs a bottle of Moët Champagne and has a fleeting mental image of her and her friends guzzling the bottle to the last drop. 'Ya gotta seize life by the tail,' he often heard. She wants her alcohol and it's his job to serve her drinks. Anything else would be considered bad business at the Sizemore Hotel.

Jack is quick to put the champagne and six chilled flutes on a tray and bring it over to her table. She is taken up by her companions yakking full tilt in their long-winded talk of grandiose plans. He sets the flutes out and pours a little of the ice-cold bubbly in each one.

She flaps her giant black lashes and

lands a twenty on his tray. 'There you go. You're the best.'

Jack deposits the twenty into his jacket pocket; a small contribution toward law school.

Back at the bar, he stands and surveys the tables looking for empties. He contemplates the drinkers and sees himself as their enabler. The undertaker notion creeps back into his mind. From ancient times, humans turned to alcohol to ease their mental and physical pain. He can never change that.

Ten years after Uncle Casey's death his father dropped dead from a heart attack. Jack remembers getting drunk and his father having to pick up him at the police station. He just stood there alone and ashamed until Jack was released to his care. 'Jack promise me you will stay away from alcohol. It will harm you. I know.'

His eyes land on the bottle of Moët and he sees the plump blonde get up and teeter on her stilettos. He feels uneasy when women lose their balance after drinking. The bartenders call them 'fallen women.'

Her drinking companions pay no attention to her as they wave their hands in the air and shout above the racket of the bar. He sees her coming over to the bar.

'Another bottle of Moët please.' He detects a slight slur.

Jack feels unsure. 'You alright?' he asks.

'I'm alright for another bottle of Moët.'

He hesitates. 'I mean are you alright for a ride home later on. Just wanting you to be safe.'

She fixes him with her steely blue eyes and puckers her painted lips into a pout of disapproval. He feels a flicker of worry stir in his gut.

'I'm good. You needn't worry. My daughter will come if I call her. Now, how about the Moët?'

'OK. I'll bring it over in a few secs.'
She rotates sharply and he hears a

horrid crunching sound and she topples backward. Next, he hears the sickening thud of her head hitting the sharp edge of the bar.

Jack gasps and springs into action. With a sudden surge of adrenaline, he does a super human leap over the bar. He yells, 'nobody touch her. Leave her as she is.' He dials 911, grabs the silver foil rescue blanket from the emergency kit and covers her. He rushes over to her table and finds her companions in their noisy circle oblivious to their friend motionless under her silver cover.

'I'm sorry. Your friend has fallen and hit her head. Emergency help is on the way.'

They lift their dumbfounded faces up at him and the sound of sirens fill the bar. Then the sirens stop and there is a ghostly silence. The doors of the bar burst open and three burley paramedics barge in and stand staring around until their eyes catch sight of the victim. They run to her in a blur of orange helmets and yellow vests. Jack fixates on the

flashlights, stethoscopes, scissors and rubber mallets swinging like pendulums from their uniforms. Gentle as doves they surround the collapsed painted doll and lift her as if she is a goddess and place her with care onto the gurney. They arrange bright red blocks around her head, fasten a blood pressure cuff on her arm and secure her body with a series of straps. A radio crackles, 'Victim of bar fall, possible head injury coming in stat from Sizemore Hotel.'

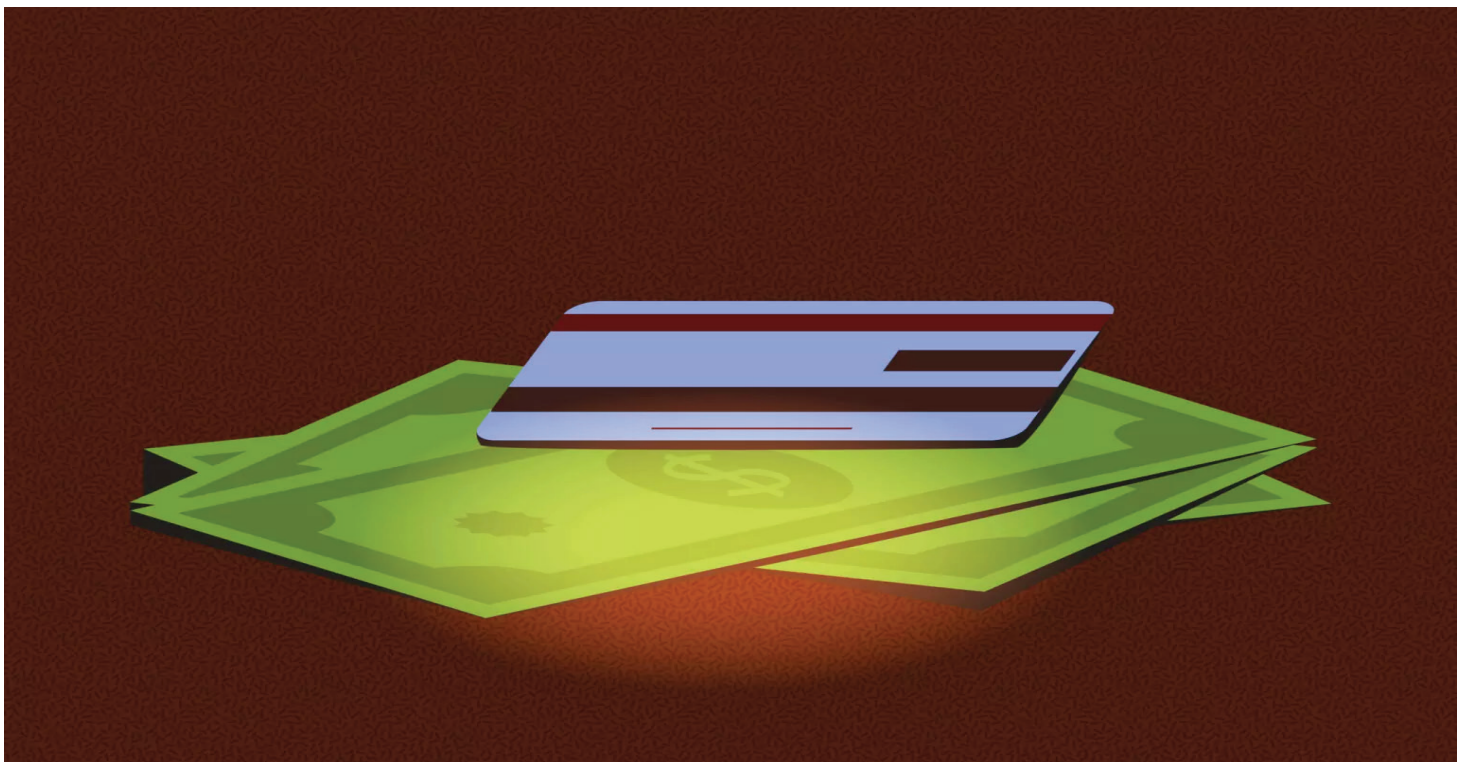
One of the paramedics looks over at Jack, 'Too much onboard, right?'

Jack nods.

'We're off. We can get any ID from her purse.'

The shriek of the sirens is replaced by a funeral hush and Jack catches a reflection of his black self in the gilt bar mirrors.

Hotel staff arrive and soon the bar is cleared. Around midnight, Jack walks back to his bedsit in Greenwich Village. Rambunctious drinkers tumble out into the streets but he is not distracted; his mind is consumed with the 'fallen woman.' When



Illustrated By Albert M. Nikhla

he passed the night clerks on his way out of the hotel, one of them called out, 'She's gone to Mercy Hospital. Hope to God she'll be okay!'

Was he to blame for harming her after serving her enough alcohol to make her fall. Maybe he should have refused to sell her another bottle. But that didn't make sense because she never had a chance to drink any of it. But then, should he knowing she already had too much, have gone over to the table and cautioned her friends. He had never done anything like that in the past. If she had not have fallen, none of this would be going through his mind. If he was her lawyer, what would he think?

He passes Jezebels on Bleeker Street and hears the noisy frenzy of revelers on molly or coke or alcohol; sounds of those out of control. Tomorrow, he'll go to Mercy Hospital and find out if she is alright. He doesn't even know her name. A nameless woman whose head collided with his bar. An anonymous, possibly lonely and unloved woman who might suffer permanent brain damage. He wants to know more about her. Who is she? What should he have done?

Early next morning, Jack goes to Mercy Hospital and tries to find his 'Joan Doe'.

'Are you family? How do you know her? Sorry we cannot release her name. Family members only.'

Jack wonders if the story about a daughter is true. He hopes so.

She paid for the champagne with a credit card. Maybe her name is on the credit slip. When Jack gets to the bar, all the cash and credit slips from the previous evening are in the accountant's office. The accountant asks, 'Why do you want to know? I hear the cops are coming in to interview witnesses. You will be their chief witness. They'll tell you, her name.'

Jack senses impending doom. He had stood by and watched as she became increasingly intoxicated. The hotel did not want this incident on their record. Bars

were all about happiness, clinking glasses, happy hour, not some woman hitting her head on his bar. The bartender is supposed to be your friend not someone who would ever harm you. He thinks about law school. Was it even possible he could be charged with a misdemeanor or what about aggravated assault. He is losing control of his world.

Just then he spots Mr. Grueller, the hotel manager loping like a free-range antelope toward him. A tall gangly man with a long, creased face, he looks like the better part of his life is behind him. 'Jack, in my office now!'

Jack tails him into his dull airless office. 'Well Jack, what can you tell me about last night.'

Jack tells him about the table of drinkers and the plump blonde woman. 'She was trying to order a second bottle of bubbly and I asked her whether she had a ride home and if she was alright. I was concerned about her safety.'

Mr. Grueller's black beetle eyes latch onto Jack. 'Good one. You did okay there.'

'And I did go to Mercy Hospital this morning to see if she's alright.'

'You did what! Such an action implies guilt. I know you mean well Jack but this will not do.'

Jack's heart plummets. Now he is probably going to get canned. Law school will be over. He looks at Mr. Grueller. 'What should I have done?'

'Never go and see the victim. You should not have gone to Mercy Hospital. Look the police will question you. Do not mention your hospital visit. Stick to the facts. She insisted on another bottle of champagne. She wasn't alone. She's not your charge. But you did ask after her safety.' Mr. Grueller taps his forehead with his pen. 'Okay Jack. I think this is manageable. You go on back to the bar. Your shift is starting. I'll come for you if the police want to talk to you.'

Jack stands up to go. No one is

saying 'this is not your fault.' What exactly is the responsibility of the bartender for the safety of patrons who drink more than they should. How much is too much? Knut never mentioned any bartender book of rules.

In the gilt mirrored bar Jack is encircled by endless reflections of a black shadowy figure.

'Jack, Jack, can you hear me.' It was Mr. Grueller. 'Detective O'Hara will see you now. Just follow me. Knut's here. He can hold the fort.'

Detective O'Hara dressed in his police uniform sat in Mr. Grueller's office. Jack looks at the heft of O'Hara, his ruddy face and bristling eyebrows and feels like a lamb being brought to slaughter. O'Hara gives him the onceover and says, 'You seem like a nice young man. I have some questions. Just keep it simple.'

When Detective O'Hara starts up his rapid-fire questions, it's like someone pulled the rip cord on an outboard motor. What, when where, how. Jack sticks to simple answers. O'Hara says, 'You don't want any part of a drunk broad falling in your bar. Do you? That could only lead to trouble.'

Jack hears himself saying, 'I don't see her as a drunk broad. She has a daughter and last night she just had a little too much to drink.'

O'Hara's face takes on a wild look. He slams his palm down on the desk. 'How do you know she has a daughter!'

'Well, I asked her if she had a ride home. I let her know I was concerned about her safety and that's when she told me her daughter was picking her up.'

Detective O'Hara's face turns from red eyed fury to a more civilized look, 'Good boy. You did the right thing there.'

'But,' Jack said, 'how will I know she'll be alright?'

O'Hara sighs. 'You're young. Don't stress yourself. I'll deal with this woman.' He stands up. The meeting is over.

Jack sees it all now. The hotel will

avoid any liability and Detective O'Hara has seen it all before. He can easily squash the blonde nameless woman. He holds the power.

These days, Jack is no longer a bartender. When in his black courtroom robes, he sees a lawyer, not an undertaker but every once in a while, he catches a glimpse of the 'fallen woman.' She's always there to remind him that everyone is entitled to justice.



Illustrated By Damehi Laloo

BREAKFAST IN GEORGIA

Chuck Stromme

Now an author, Chuck was once a US infantry officer and helicopter pilot in Vietnam. Later he became an IRS tax collector and manager, winner of the highest award in the US Treasury Department, then four years as an international tax consultant. He brings his vast experience, mistakes, achievements, and no-nonsense style to his pages. He is currently seeking an agent or publisher for his book - Love and Taxes in a Small Land.

I dine in an old restaurant with close Georgian friends in the early morning hours. Georgians (the Tbilisi Georgians, not the Atlantans) love khashi, with a hoof in every bowl. It's a soup for cold-weather early morning gatherings. No one eats it during the warm months.

Boil up squares of tripe, put in a touch of milk, add the hooves, simmer until tender. They're really ankle bones with the cartilage and some other things attached, not hooves, but why quibble over words?

Our waitress hands me a large bowl of the steaming bland, opaque soup with an ankle bone sticking up in the center, an odd bony island, pieces of tripe bumping its shore. I reach for the chopped garlic and I snatch salt from a communal bowl, adding them to taste. Day-old flat bread is a must. 100 grams of vodka is traditional, or a local beer, no matter how early. A non-drinker, I choose the local sparkling water.

There's a different early-morning

khashi crowd that I didn't see a few years ago. They arrive from the new casinos. Waiters and dealers and security guards, beautiful hostesses and hookers, the low-level underworld. Twenty-somethings in used BMWs gather with their marks and johns and with ordinary citizens and with ancient Soviet pensioners, and with me. We eat our khashi and no one bothers anyone. Polite as lords, we are. We're there for the same things: the soup and the shared tradition.

Many of the twenty-somethings came into Tbilisi from outlying villages. Some are refugees; all were thrilled to find work. Khashi is a taste from home, something their moms made every week in season, an affinity all Georgians share. Someone was always butchering in the village. Tripe is cheap and the butcher might throw in some bones for free.

They remember what life was like at home, before whatever it was that brought them here, maybe before the Russians came. They weren't guards then, or waiters or hookers. They were just kids and they grew up too fast.

They laugh too loud and they drink and smoke and eat khashi. A few stare out the big window, watching the dawn, missing their families. So much has changed for them. They'll visit their villages again one of these days but how will they ever answer all the questions? The prettiest girl is crying.





Illustrated By Iuniki Dkhar

MYSTERY COVE

Garret Waugh

Garret Allen Waugh, originally from Wadsworth, Ohio, now resides in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. After a failed career as an academic, he decided to be happy, and now works as a donor relations professional at a university and as a technical writer in the language services industry. He holds a BA from Kent State University and an MA from Case Western Reserve University. Outside of his professional life, he enjoys knitting and thinking of creative ways to store his massive book collection. He is continually looking for two things: the perfect chicken salad sandwich and a rich husband.

I couldn't have been more than ten when Grandpa first took me down to the shore along the winding path that went from their house, through the tall black grasses that waved in the wind and the moonlight, which started twinkling on the sands and carried out across the gentle crash of the waves to where my eyes couldn't see, out into the inky blackness beyond.

"Did I ever tell you about the legend of the old cove," he pointed, "down there?"

"No."

"Well," he rocked back on his heels. "It's time that I did. I first heard this story when I was about your age. Heard it from an uncle, long ago." He paused, trying to savor the moment when he had my attention. "It seems a pirate ship, they might have been English, or maybe French, with a hold full of 'booty' sailed up here, you see."

He pointed again to a far distant point where the island met the sea. I

couldn't see but nodded as if I could.

"The inlet there is where he found a place to sail up his ship and hide. But he wanted to keep the treasure more hidden, so he and his crew carried chests of it down to that cave off the cove where the water fills in at high tide. And any man who is unlucky enough to find himself there drowns."

Grandpa paused to make sure that he still had my attention. "And there made his men swear a blood oath by passing a pricking knife that they would die to protect the treasure of Captain Knob Knee."

"Knob Knee?" I asked.

"It's an old story son, some names might have been changed. But" he resumed his grandiose tone "All men vowed then and there by the blood shed that if they should die in the protection of Knob Knee or the treasure that they would continue to protect it in the afterlife."

He paused. "And then what?" I asked.

"Well then," he drew out. "Old Captain Knob Knee lashed three of his crew to the chest that was hidden down deep in the cove's cave, as the tide started to rise and a wind blew from the west, that they may be the protector till he shall return or until eternity ends."

"The men cursed at him, and they swore that any man, beast or spirit who dares to enter the cave shall they themselves be cursed until the sun ceases to rise and set." He finished with a flourish and basked in his theatrical glow.

I thought for a moment. "Grandpa, do you believe in that?"

"Oh," he said softly, "I don't know. It seems kind of fantastic to me. But I also like to think that there's still a little bit of mystery in the world. Something we don't know that science can't explain."

"Did you ever try going down to the cave?"

"Yes, but I misread the tide tables, and the tide was coming in – I might have joined Knob Knee's men if I hadn't

had your grandma, standing on the high ground, yelling for me to come back up."

"I think I believe it." I said.

The rest of that summer slipped away like the clouds that blew across the sky on the sea breezes, the clouds that my sister and me would lay in the sun-drenched grasses and watch change shape.

"Look, it's a horse."

"No, it's a cat, can't you see the whiskers."

"Now it looks more like a flower."

And on it went. Nights came and went; the tide rose and then fell as if it had never come in at all. The summer had passed and so were the long days on the shore, the sandcastles had been, at last, taken by the omnipresent ocean, and my green and white beach towel was folded up for good and placed in the back of the linen closet at grandma and grandpa's house.

The smell of grandma's citronella candle had faded and was replaced by the smell of newly sharpened pencils, the first rubbing of a pink rubber eraser, the smell of the lunchtime cafeteria. The sound of the shore waves crashing was substituted by the squeak of new shoes against the freshly polished floors. The joy of finding a starfish, or even a sand dollar, became the joy of getting a good grade. Running in from the thunderstorm was replaced by running away from bullies.

We'd left the island when Dad came to pick us up in his black Buick and take us back to Lowell for the fall, winter and spring. None of us wanted to leave the splendor of the thick forest of spicy sassafras and sugar maples, the woods carpeted with ferns and loamy moss that looked otherworldly lush after the rain. Or the long stretch of shore that was the sole kingdom of my sister and I, all the way from the old William's place to the inlet that preceded the Mystery Cove that Grandpa had told me about.

I knew mom didn't want to leave

either. She loved the island and hated the dirt and gloom of Lowell, though she professed a happiness to see Dad and return to her own life – I can still see the crestfallen way she looked back and the old white house, boarded with overgrown lilac bushes and towering rhododendrons, both now long out of bloom. I knew that she wanted to stay and stay and stay forever.

But we did go back next year, and the year after that, and the year after that. But, by then we spent only a few weeks there, not the whole long and endless summer, and it was different. We didn't make the long battles of warring clans on the waving dunes; we tanned and swam and ate grandma's lunches without asking for more. We slept late, stayed up even later, watched TV in the sunroom with the volume up so high that we couldn't even hear the unceasing sound of the waves crashing on the shore. We took showers after the beach and, and the end of July, were more than ready to return to Lowell with our wants and friends and petty teenage worlds.

The next summer we only went for

two weeks, then the summer after that only for a long weekend.

I had decided to pay a visit to the island for a whole week once I'd turned 23. I'd newly left college with a freshly minted degree. The ostensible goal of my visit was to introduce Matt to my grandparents and have them get to know each other. They were both getting on in years and this could be the last summer for this. The real reason was because I hadn't found a job yet and was looking for an excuse to spend a week without having to look at LinkedIn.

There was also the hope that I would be able to get my grandmother's strawberry tart recipe – she had made them at least monthly throughout all my childhood visits but refused to give up the recipe until I made the trip myself to come and see them both.

Matt was glad of it too – he hated Lowell, as did I, and longed to see the ocean, to feel the roar and wind that swept along the long, lonely beaches and the sand in our toes.



Illustrated By Iuniki Dkhar

When we first got together, we took a short trip to the beach and spent three days lying under the sand and stars, sleeping and fucking in my car, drinking water out of warm bottles that we had no way of keeping cool, eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that we made with plastic knives. Matt called it our week of living feral, which I'd laugh and join in on, but I'd felt that it was a degree of heaven ever since.

And so we went to the island, me and my gay lover, and were received with warmth by my liberal grandparents. My grandfather had been a lawyer who worked with Harvey Milk and my grandma a librarian who'd wanted to march in Selma but hadn't been able to afford a bus ticket or come up with a good enough reason to persuade her parents to send her the money.

For days we lived the life that I'd spent long dead summers ago in childhood. We paddled in the ocean and made sandcastles that were as impermanent as our seized youth. We ate my grandmother's cooking, and she gleefully dished out second helpings of dessert without being asked. We awoke early each morning, practically shivering with anticipation for playing in the thick woods, stopping just short of making a fort in them, before going down to the shore to feel the vastness of the ocean and hunt for sun-bleached shells up and down from old William's place (old William had been long dead at this point) to the inlet, even venturing beyond to the wide shores of what I called the mystery cove. We dug clams just to throw them back, chase at seagulls, hunt for rocks, try to find sand dollars and starfish after the high tide had passed.

We made out while the tide rolled in, debated my grandfather on the merits of US foreign policy – he staunchly for Israel, remembering the time when it was liberal to do so, and I supported Palestine – left our dirty clothes on the floor, sand working

its way into the carpet, played board games with my grandmother, read romance novels on the beach, drank coffee that that was thick with sugar and cream and wore shorts with cute prints on them – Matt's had palm trees, mine had pineapples.

A blending of adulthood and childhood, dwelling in a week of suspended animation, kids who had grown up but wanted to go back. This came to fruition the last night that we were there. After we'd finished off the last of my grandma's potato and cheese casserole, followed by ice cream and a splash of old John that my grandfather poured for me with a wink, we slipped down to the beach for a last moonlight walk. The sky was clear, and the waxing moon was low and large and incandescent, reflecting on the breaking waves.

The air was spicy, and the breeze gently moved through the pines that loomed tall and dark behind us, stirring up ghosts of long ago, whose spirits rose up on nights like this, wild nights. Not to molest or haunt, but to be an unseen witness to two in love with each other and the world.

Matt and I sat on the shore for a long time, not saying a word, not cuddling, not even holding hands, but just waiting for something that wouldn't come and that we couldn't have named even if we'd wanted to. There wouldn't be going back to college in a few weeks and no longer any summers that stretched into eternity. Matt would be starting as an assistant engineer in a few weeks, and I'd be temping, waiting tables or working as an administrative assistant while I tried to put my journalism degree to use. If I was lucky, I would use it to write click-bait about the newest spring looks for tweens or the twenty must-have kitchen essentials.

I wanted to tell Matt the pirate story about Captain Knob Knee, to bring it to life for him, make him feel the gusto and mysterious lore that dwelled on the island, to make him feel the way I'd felt

when grandpa had told it to me, to see the waters rushing on the men lashed to a chest overflowing with gold they'd sworn a fool's promise to protect. I wanted to tell him, but was afraid the story would fall flat without the rhetorical flourishes of my grandfather and sound like a simple fairy tale.

Or I feared that he'd hear it, grab my arm and we'd wade across the inlet and make it to the distant cove, only to find no cave, or a small one, or a craggy shore with a stern wall of barnacled rocks. I wanted for it to be real, for us to stumble on an old treasure map, brave danger and face certain death to be left with nothing but a tall tale that nobody believed – except maybe grandpa – or to be left with enough gold to stay here in this enchanted place and time forever, to never leave, never age or grow old and to never forget the first time that we together made the leap across the sands to an adventure that had started so many years ago.





Illustrated By Iuniki Dkhar

RIKKI

Cristie Coffing

Cristie Coffing holds an MFA in Writing from Lindenwood University. A self-published novelist and playwright, work has been published in Flash Fiction Magazine, Does It Have Pockets, and elsewhere. She was a 2013 Santa Fe Writers project Finalist, third prize recipient in Flash Fiction Magazine's 2021 contest, a 2022 Pushcart Prize nominee, and a 2023 Best Micro-Fiction nominee. She writes, dances, and waits tables in a small river town.

Rikki hears the familiar crunch of gravel beneath tires. He opens the flap of his tent to the smell of exhaust fumes and burning garbage from Rusty's campfire. Mission truck, they call. Water. Sandwiches. Hot Chocolate. He makes his way to the van. The moon casts angles of light on the encampment. The sky is full of stars. He recognizes constellations; Pegasus, Aquila, Aquarius. Finally, the clouds have cleared, but Rikki still has to dodge puddles left by yesterday's rain. For the last four years, on and off, he's lived under the bridge, falling asleep to the sound of trucks and cars overhead, stretched out on his cardboard mattress with an army/navy surplus blanket for a wrap, a small tent for shelter. There is a slight tear on the right side causing it to drip in the open air in a heavy rain, but under the bridge he stays dry. He never quite warms up, though. His hands are always cold. They don't turn blue like Marjorie's, but his fingers remain a

constant shade of bright pink. He blows on them as he walks. He lost his gloves a few weeks back. Or were they stolen? He can't remember. Maybe they'll give him a new pair.

Jasmine greets him. She is tiny, barely up to Rikki's armpit, with short curly black hair that sticks out of her stocking cap. She smiles with her entire face. "Mr. Rikki," she says, "we have hot chocolate tonight." She hands him a peanut butter sandwich and a small bag of chips. "Need socks?" She turns and roots through a bag, hands Rikki two pairs of socks. Dry socks. Socks with red bands at the tops. Rikki holds them to his face, inhaling the clean scent of newness.

Matthew comes from behind the van, claps his hand on Rikki's shoulder, then moves on. Twenty or so of them have come from their pieced together dwellings to mill about the van, holding paper cupped hot chocolates like chalices. Joey tells a joke, everyone laughs. The scene is like a macabre dinner party, a gathering of lost folks in torn and tattered items of clothing, some missing teeth, some with sores, all with the same look of longing in their eyes. Rikki stuffs his sandwich in one coat pocket, the chips and socks in another and takes a cup of the chocolate. He closes his eyes, feeling the sweet liquid warm his mouth, his throat, his chest. He exhales, and he is skating again, holding his wife, Laura's hand. She laughs, her ponytail bouncing as she leaves him and skates ahead, the sound of her blades cutting the ice as she turns sideways, arms graceful, then spins on one leg. She glides to a stop, holding her arms outstretched. Come on, she shouts. Catch up.

"Rikki," Matthew is beside him. "I have a bed open at the mission."

"No. I'll take my chances out here."

"I'm not giving up on you, Rikki. I'm going to keep asking."

"Do you have any gloves?" Rikki asks.

They come and do a sweep four days later. Police officers and city park workers

in orange vests, their breath steaming in the chilly morning air. They throw anything left behind into the large blue dumpster on the truck bed. They don't look the dwellers in the eye. Mayor's orders, the long-faced cop keeps saying. Rikki watches as Melissa sticks the handle of a saucepan in her pants. She has two backpacks, one over-stuffed on her shoulders, the other she drags through the mud. Rusty carries nothing. He wears a torn ski coat and oversized boots. He plods by the officers with his head bowed, stopping to spit on the ground when he gets close to the cop posted at the edge of the road. Rikki rolls his belongings in his tent and carries it like an oversized rucksack. He leaves the cardboard behind; he'll search for another piece later. There's no sun today, only a constant grey drizzle. He takes one last look over his shoulder when his feet hit the pavement.

Rikki ends up on the waterfront, taking big breaths of the salt air. The air of the Puget Sound is cleansing, fresh, full of negative ions — he remembers this from the geography textbook he rescued from the trash pile on 55th Street, reading it by streetlight. When he could carry it no longer, he left it on an outdoor table of a café for someone else. He stakes out a spot on the old loading dock, now turned antique warehouse. The store is only open to the public on weekends, the other days it's a free space. It's dry here under the awning and the sun's come out. He spreads his tent on the ground like a tarp, unwrapping his possessions. His wool blanket, a few changes of clothes, a buck knife, a toothbrush, a small soap bar in a worn box, and a small leather pouch that holds two match books, his dog tags from Iraq, and a tiny picture of his wife, Laura. The photo is faded with a small tear on the corner and a fold down the center. She is at the fair, a Ferris wheel in the background, wearing the yellow sundress with the mother-of-pearl buttons. He always liked that dress. Her skin is tan, her eyes looking

upward.

“Mona Lisa,” a shout from the side alley. It’s Jeffie. He calls Rikki Mona Lisa, “Because you got that serene look. Like you gotta secret.” Jeffie was under the bridge too, just further in, in the Jungle they call it. He tells Rikki he got the sweep too, gonna stay on the dock with him for a few. “I got some stuff,” he says. He points to a bulging pocket. “Pills. Want some?”

“No. I only do the drink. There’s stuff in that shit now.”

“I don’t care. I’m dying out here every minute, so what the hell? Take a chance. It’s like a poker game. Bet I’m gonna feel real good for a while.” They watch the sun fade in the sky over the pier across the street. The advantage to being homeless in Seattle; it’s cold, but the views are like paintings in a museum. He watches over Jeffie as he fades into a delirious sleep. Rikki rarely sleeps at night. It’s too cold and too dangerous to let your guard down and night time war memories are the worst. He likes to nap in the park in the middle of the day. It’s safer that way.

They have to be gone by 5 a.m. on the dock. Coiffed folks don’t want to see them, they don’t want to know they exist, or smell, or urinate in the streets. Disappear. He shakes Jeffie awake. Rikki wraps his stuff up and heads to the market park so he can doze in the grass under the willow tree. The mission truck didn’t come last night, and he’s hungry. He might have to panhandle, which he hates. Folks look at him like he should get a job, but begging is the hardest job he’s ever had. He goes to the parking lot at the big box store sometimes, stands by the curb with thirty other guys to see if he can catch a bit of work doing carpentry or fix-it jobs. Folks swing by in their trucks or compacts and take a worker away for the day, pay them cash, sometimes give them food. He once had a lady pick him up in a sleek white Cadillac. “Need help with plumbing,” she said sweetly. When they got to her house, she told him to relax, gave him a glass

of wine — good wine, not the cheap shit on the streets — then invited him into her bedroom. She patted the soft white comforter, asked him to lie beside her. After they made love, she let him use the shower, gave him some of her husband’s clothes. She paid him, even though he didn’t do a bit of work, then escorted him out of the house, passing art in gilded frames and photos of herself with a man. He figured she was married and living a clean life, so clean, she wanted to brush up with something that was raw around the edges.

Rikki is shaken awake. Kneeling beside him is a woman, thirty, maybe, long flowing skirt, three layers of shirts on, her blonde hair loosely braided and hanging over one shoulder. “You got a smoke?” she asks. She has a pile of things beside her, a cloth pack, a plastic grocery bag full of clothing, a rolled up sleeping bag.

“Don’t smoke,” he says.

“Pity.” She leans against the tree, takes out a book of poetry and recites a poem aloud.

“Mary Oliver,” she says when she is done. “I love nature.”

Rikki has never seen her before. The street people know each other. Not the histories; those are personal. Most don’t share why they’re there, they just are, they all are. “What’s your name?”

“Sabrina,” she says, twirling her braid with one finger.

“Rikki.”

She tilts her head to the clouds. “It sure rains a lot here. I’m from Arizona. We don’t get the kind of rain that goes on forever.”

Rikki laughs. “It is hard to stay dry around here.”

“You’ve got a tent,” she points to his improvised satchel.

“Yep.”

“Mind if I stay with you in the tent? I’ve been cold since I got here.” She touches the scar on his cheek.

“Iraq,” he says.

Rikki tells her he can't set the tent up on the dock where he's been sleeping; no dirt there for the stakes. They'll have to go back to the underpass. "They won't sweep for another six months. It's dry under there. I'll let you stay a night."

One night turned into months of nights. They barely fit in the tent together, but curled up in the sleeping bag, their bodies touching. They stayed warm and Rikki slept through the night with her beside him. Having her next to him took the war dreams away. She made him laugh, and she was resourceful. Before he knew it, she had found a small table and a chair. They made a makeshift patio outside their tent. One of them had to be there at all times though, lest they lose their few possessions to another dweller or a random druggie passing by, but sometimes they could get Rusty or Franklin to watch their stuff while they went on escapades together in the city, holding hands and giggling like kids in school. She was good at foraging for food, rooting through the trash of the best bakeries and eateries in

the area. I have expensive taste; she said. They picnicked on their patio under the soft clouds. Winter was clearing, the scotch broom was in bloom, and new weed patches were sprouting up in the cracks of the city sidewalks.

"I think I love you, Miss Sabrina," he tells her one night.

"Ah, that's nice Rikki. I love life, even when it's real hard, so therefore, I love you."

At night Rikki strokes her hair, running the blond waves through his fingertips, feeling the lightness of the strands, like woven magic. His daughter's hair was soft. She was barely six months old when his wife left his clothes on the front porch. His daughter, Justina. He closes his eyes and tries to picture her. He remembers the feel of her hair beneath his lips, but he can't remember the color. Was it dark? Light, maybe? He remembers the first time he held her. His entire body felt lighter, ethereal somehow with the thought that he had created something, had helped form a perfect little being. After Iraq, after



Illustrated By Iuniki Dkhar

seeing so much destruction, Rikki longed to create instead of destroy. That is why he worked in construction. He loved the act of sculpting shape and form from wood, never minding the long working hours, returning home with sawdust in his hair and smelling of milled lumber. The day he fell off the scaffolding on a job site, though, everything moved off center. Lying on his back, he watched the summer's light clouds as he waited for an ambulance. Laura sat by his hospital bedside for hours with their baby. When he got out, he went to therapy. Three times a week. Three times a week, he saw Melissa, the physical therapist. Then he began seeing her in the evenings. And then the weekend getaway. And then his wife found out and threw every plate and bowl she could find at him, sending them shattering against the wall behind him. He grabbed her wrists, holding her tight. She called the police. Domestic violence, they said. They threw him in jail. Upon his release, he came home to find that Laura had packed his bags and left them on the front porch. She sold his tools the next day. A man broken, unable to make a living, a man unable to convince his wife to forgive him, a man forbidden to see his baby, a man with few friends and little money, becomes a man on the streets. He caught a bus out of the state and kept riding until he ended up in Seattle, determined to find work with the carpenters' union, start over. But he had no transportation, a bad back, and the jobs offered were not on the bus lines. He ended up living on the streets with little but three changes of clothes. And once you're on the streets, it's hard to get off the streets.

Sabrina rolls over and looks at him. "Your back hurting Rikki?"

"Yea. Don't worry. It always hurts."

"Tomorrow, I'll get you something."

"No," he says. "No street drugs."

Sabrina leaves early in the morning to go out scavenging. She comes back giddy, with two croissants and a pack of expired prosciutto. "Man, that French

grocery throws out good shit!"

"All we need is coffee and we'll be living like the royals," Rikki says, holding his croissant, admiring the fluffiness.

"Rusty has got some cowboy coffee going. I'll go get us some."

Sabrina comes back with two paper cups of coffee, the cups they had swiped from the fish' n' chip joint on the waterfront. "No cream," she says, "but I've got this." She holds up a clear baggie with three white pills.

"No," Rikki reaches for the bag. "No street drugs. They're laced with all kinds of shit."

"Too late. I just took one with my coffee," she laughs, sits cross-legged in the tent and starts to tell him a story about a dog, a grey dog with spots about his eyes, but her words begin to slur, her hands making wild gesticulating movements. Her lips turn pale blue along the edges. She slumps to one side.

Rikki opens the tent flap. "Narcan! I need Narcan!" He shouts again and again until he sees Big Mike run from the camper across the street.

Big Mike crawls into the tent, jabs a needle into Sabrina's thigh. "She'll need two," he says. "I've got another in the rig."

Rikki picks Sabrina up, cradling her, stroking her arms. "Come on, baby."

Big Mike returns, gives Sabrina another dose. Her breathing steadies and her eyes flutter open.

"Lucky I was here," Big Mike shakes his head. "Gotta get me some more, gotta re-stock."

"Thank you Mike." He pulls Sabrina close; his tears fall upon her cheeks.

When Rikki was seven, his dad left. Said he was going to work and never came home. When his mom realized his dad wasn't coming back, she had a breakdown. The kind that made her cut up her clothes, stay awake until dawn searching the cupboards for the devil, and disconnect the phone to stop the voices she heard day and

night. She went away to a hospital, the sort of hospital you don't come back from. His grandmother raised him, meaning well, but too old to care for him. He learned early to do his own laundry, to shop and cook for the both of them and to get himself to school. He dropped out in the tenth grade and started cleaning up construction sites. When he turned 18, he signed up for the war.

The next week Sabrina says she's leaving. "I'm hitching back home," she says. "I've got to go back and face my life. Like, I gotta look at it. Square on Rikki. I almost died." She hadn't told him much about her life, only that her dad had molested her, that her mom had backed him, and that she had split on the 540 bus out of Tucson at age 17. "I'm a different person now, you know. I can handle it. I can tell him to fuck it now and I can take care of myself. Heck, he might even be dead. I can stay with my aunt and get a job and... Oh, Rikki, come with me." She takes his hands in hers. He shakes his head no. He almost lost her to death. He couldn't stand to lose her to life. And he knows he would lose her. She would outgrow him. He wouldn't be able to keep up. She would leave him in a strange city with nothing but the clothes on his back and maybe his tent if he still had it.

He kisses her long and hard at the Greyhound station after bumming the money for a one-way ticket to Tucson. Her cheeks shine pink in the morning light. The sun is out; the dampness beginning to lift.

That night, the mission truck rolls into the encampment. Rikki hears their call, their cheerful voices making the night open. Maybe, he thinks, maybe.

"Whatcha up to Rikki? Word is you all almost lost one down here." Matthew puts that reassuring hand on Rikki's shoulder again.

"Yea. Almost."

"You okay? Can I pray for you?"

Rikki takes a full breath. "Matthew, I don't think I'm savable, but what the

hell?"

Rikki cries himself to sleep for weeks. He feels Sabrina beside him, smells her scent of musk and patchouli oil on his blanket. He talks to her, to the shadow that was her form. His loneliness wraps around him, making it hard to breathe.

When he came back from the war, he took care of his grandma. When she died, he rented a camper trailer on the edge of town from one of the guys on a job site. And then he met Laura, in the fall, when the leaves were dropping and the air smelled sweet well into the night. Laura was smart, outgoing, and witty. She was everything he wanted to be. He did his best to live up to her, to be something for her, and he was. Things just got away from him. He just had bad luck. He'd always had bad luck. The day he met Laura and the day his baby girl was born were the luckiest days of his life. He felt lucky again when he met Sabrina. She filled him with a lightness, a buoyancy, like maybe, just maybe, anything was possible.

Rikki leaves the encampment to look for work. He asks Jeffie to watch his tent, his stuff. Two guys pick him up in the big box parking lot. They take him to do a siding job. He works all day in a light drizzle and gets his money. They short him forty bucks. When he gets back to the camp, everyone and everything is gone, save for a few scattered piles of garbage, a five-gallon bucket, a few remnants of clothing, and the remains of Rusty's campfire. They'd come and done a sweep while he was gone. Everything he owns is gone, save for his small leather pouch that he keeps with him. Rikki turns over the bucket and sits with his head in his hands as the night folds in around him. He searches the sky for the beginnings of stars, but finds nothing but impending blackness.

He walks the city for hours searching for cardboard, for something to lie on, but the alleys hold nothing promising. He tucks his body in between two rhododendron

bushes on fourth street, in front of the posh bank building, the tallest building in Seattle, and prays. God, okay, you don't know me; he says in a raspy whisper, but I wish you did. You haven't known my name my whole life, I don't think you even know I exist and... maybe I don't. But maybe, maybe you can hear me. He falls asleep with his head nestled in the roots of the bush and the smell of the earth in his dreams.

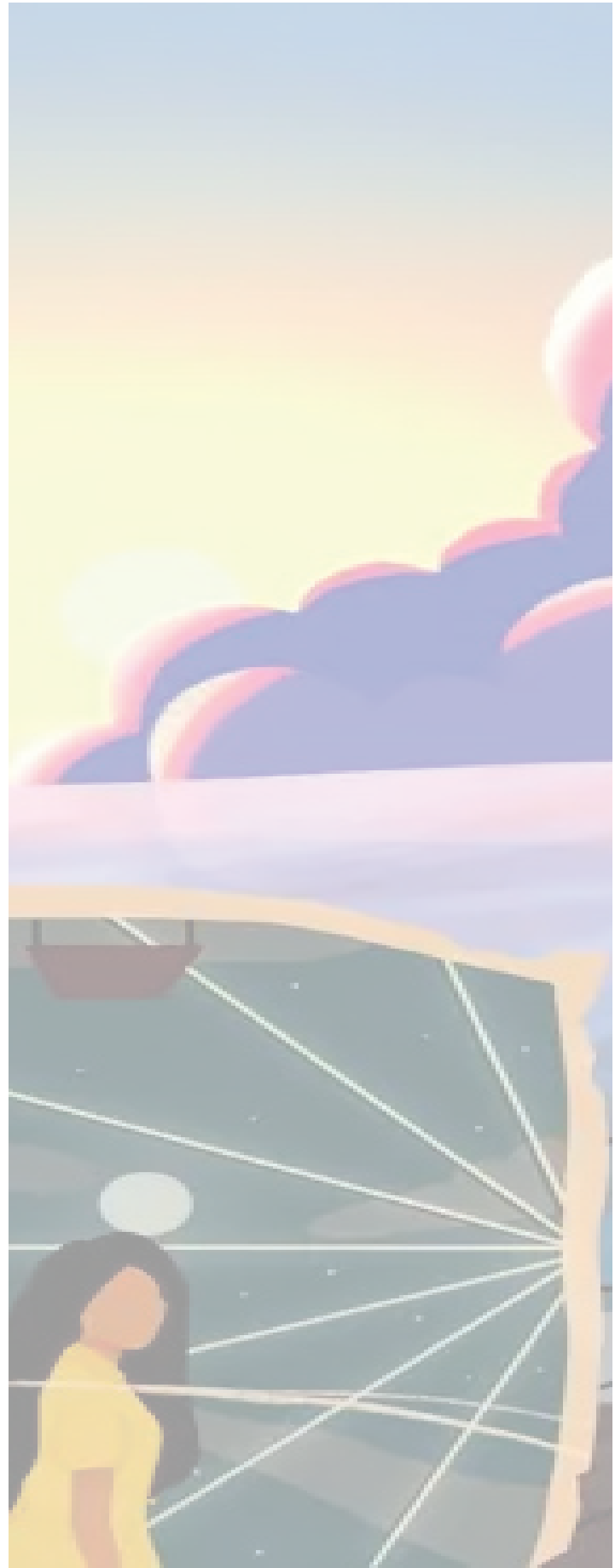
When morning comes Rikki doesn't know where to go. He walks to the Gospel Mission building, hoping to get a cup of coffee. He has a little money from the job he did, but it's all he's got. He's gonna need clothes, a blanket, a shelter. Shit. He needs everything. The front door's locked, so he goes around the back, sees a girl through the doorway making peanut butter sandwiches. He asks if he can use the bathroom.

"Of course," she says, "you're always welcome."

The light from the doorway casts a glow about her face. Her strawberry blonde hair is tied up in a loose bun, strands brush the freckles on her cheeks. Rikki stands motionless, as if his feet are glued to the cement stoop. Tears slide down his cheeks. He tastes the salt on his lips. He remembers now. His girl, his baby girl. His baby's hair was the same color as the girl standing before him. Blonde with precious tints of red strawberries. It brushed against her tiny cheeks and her eyes; he can see them now. Her eyes were blue, the color of the purest ocean.

"Are you okay?" the girl asks.

Yes, yes, *I am*, he thinks. "Is Matthew here?"





Illustrated By Iuniki Dkhar

FIRST RIDES

Catharine Cooper

Catharine Cooper, an avid surfer and swimmer, lives in Baja California with her Australian Cobberdog, Loki.

It was the summer before driver's licenses. The summer before serious dating. It was the summer of my two besties, Val and Sue, on the warm white sand at Pearl Street beach in Laguna. Our skin turned the color of maple syrup, our bodies pressed down on blue striped towels, and our mouths filled with tuna fish sandwiches, dill pickles, potato chips, and icy lemonade. We drizzled lemon juice on our hair, cajoling the sun to make us blonder. Easy for Val and Sue, blonde from birth, their locks turned summer white, while my dark sienna flamed reddish highlights with a few strands of gold.

Val brought decks of cards, and we played endless hours of hearts, chattering about boys and parents, and our upcoming sophomore year. She was the tallest at 5'5" and freckled, Sue in the middle somewhere with permanent rosy cheeks, and me, the short one, at 5' with the more golden skin. We were a trio, both in the water and on the sand.

“Coop,” Val asked, “you got oil?”

I reached in my beach bag and handed her the bottle of Monoi Tiare coconut oil, our ticket to a dark tan. On the front of the bottle, a buxom Tahitian girl clad only in a lei. The fragrance was enough to transport our imaginations to any tropical island. Scents of pikake and plumeria wafted around us as we smoothed the golden liquid onto our shiny skin.

“I’ve got the new Seventeen.”

I spread the magazine on my towel so we could read the headlines together. “Swinging Fashions for Summer Girls”, and “Can a Girl Change a Boy?” On the cover, a smiling teen with bobbed sandy hair and teeth as white as the crocheted top she modeled.

“Find the dresses,” said Sue, our fashionista, already plotting what to wear our sophomore year.

I leafed through the pages to photos of skimpy shifts with puffy little sleeves in various shades of pale green and linen white, not sure at all how they might look on me. Following the fashion pages, an interview with Peter, Paul, and Mary discussed the trio’s fall touring schedule, and an article on how to have clearer skin held our attention, as we fingered our pimples hoping they weren’t too noticeable.

After we’d baked to a toasty crisp, I grabbed one of the shiny black inner tubes from the pile we’d made earlier, and tossed it toward Val’s legs.

“Catch,” I said just before it bounced off her feet.

“Coop,” she cried. She sat up and brushed off the sand. “You are a brat.”

I retrieved the inner tube, raised it over my head, and tossed it toward her slender body. She deflected the rubber donut with her fist, her waist-long hair twisting around her body as she glared up at me, shielding her green eyes with a raised hand.

“You’re going to pay for that!”

She jumped up as if to chase me,

followed by Sue. The three of us grabbed our inner tubes and raced to the water.

We were lucky. Inner tubes were prized possessions, and Val’s dad owned a gas station with an endless supply of patched jobs, the remnants from customers who needed new tires. He pumped them to their max, so tight a dime would bounce off the surface.

We heaved the tubes into the foam and jumped in after them. Our fingers curled over the edges of their donut shape, and we pulled ourselves up into the middle. Leaning forward, so part of the tube rose in the air, we kicked our feet to get beyond the break line.

Sue got caught pushed backwards and we yelled at her to hurry up. We floated beyond the waves, legs wrapped over the top of the tube, butts hung down in the center. We watched seagulls glide and squawk, as the cool 72° Pacific splashed around our bodies.

“Here comes a set!” Val cried, and on the horizon, we could see the bump of an incoming wave. We kicked ourselves closer to the shore, and as the wave began to break on us, we tumbled over and over in the sandy foam to the beach. Sputtering with sand encrusted hair and lips, giggling all the way, we pushed ourselves back out into the water, where we repeated the roll and churn until our fingers turned blue.

Nothing mattered that summer but my friends, the color of our hair and skin, and our play in the ocean. The troubles at home temporarily forgotten, the politics of the impending Vietnam war far far away.

After the tubes, we graduated to surf matts, saving our allowances to purchase them in town at a beach accessories shop. The inflatable channeled rectangles had ropes strung across the front to hang on. Mine was tomato red and Val’s was an ultramarine blue. Instead of crashing over the tops of waves, the matts let us catch the front and ride the foam toward shore, bouncing with every lump and bump of the choppy surface. The canvas rubbed rashes

on the inside of our arms, but we never complained. Our faces pressed so close to the water, we felt as if we were flying, the spray rushing into our faces and blew over our heads.

Next, boards on wheels.

Not a board you could buy in a shop like today, but one cut from a sheet of plywood with my dad's saw. I sanded the rough edges into a narrow oblong shape, and painted it bright glossy white, the only paint I could find in our garage.

My mother looked on in horror as I took my precious roller skates and tore the wheels off of them.

"But those skates cost ..." she started to say.

I cut her off before she could finish her sentence.

"It's okay, Mom. I'm still gonna skate, just on a board."

She gave me one of those looks, the kind I ran from before she could ask another question.

Once I pried the wheels off the shoe skates, all it took was a hammer and some nails to attach them to the board.

Tucked under my arm, I carried my prized board across what was left of the dusty chaparral that had previously surrounded our hilltop house. A new subdivision had carved up the slopes, turned the gopher mounds, snake holes, coyote dens and raccoon paths into flattened parcels ringed by asphalt cul-de-sacs and street signs. Houses had yet to be built, so the streets were mine to bike, and now skate, with little to no traffic.

My first run was on the flats. I set my pretty construction on the pavement, put my right foot in the middle of the board at an angle and pushed for speed with my back foot. When I was moving fast enough, I put my left foot on the back of the board and rolled down the street. The board was not much designed for turning, but going straight ahead she was perfect. Whee! My hands were tingly, heart racing, and rolled to an easy stop where the street

ended. Behind me, one of the slopping hills beckoned. My next ride.

I carried my board to the top and looked down. The longer I looked, the steeper it got. It wasn't as steep as our driveway, but still ... My heart pumped, my mind raced, pushing pin points of fear out to the edges.

I sucked in my breath, put my foot on the front of the board and hopped on. Woosh! Down I went, toward the concrete culvert at the bottom. My hair flew behind me, a tiny scream slid from my lips, the lamppost a blur, and suddenly I realized I had no brakes, and the curb was getting closer and closer. Just before it hit, I leapt off, tried to run as fast as I'd been skating, took a tumble into the dirt lot, shoulder first, and rolled over a couple of times. I banged up my knee pretty good, there was blood trickling down toward my socks and a slab of skin was hanging. When my board smashed into the curb, the nails popped out and the back wheels tore off.

I sat in the dirt, dazed, and looked around. No one had seen me, so no embarrassing moment. Dust covered my shorts and shirt, and my hands were as skinned up as my knee. But damn, I'd done it! I'd skated down the hill! I picked up the pieces of my board, injured but smug, and limped home. Mercurochrome and Band-Aids would fix the scrapes, but I needed to work out a braking strategy.

Val and Sue did not share my skateboard interest, but the beach still held us together. Boogie boards arrived on the scene, the next iteration of water propulsion apparatus after surf matts. Designed by Morey Pope, who lived in Laguna, the Styrofoam boards were like matts, but shorter and firm, and not filled with air. We slid our feet into fins, and kicked our way through the shore break. The feeling was different. We were more in control of our speed and direction. We could sit inside and catch little rollers, or make our way outside and line up for a turn on a large face and lean forward,

legs pumping up and down for extra speed. We could carve turns and even try some tricks like spinning the board in a circle. The boogie boards were faster. More maneuverable. Like graduation from middle school to high school.

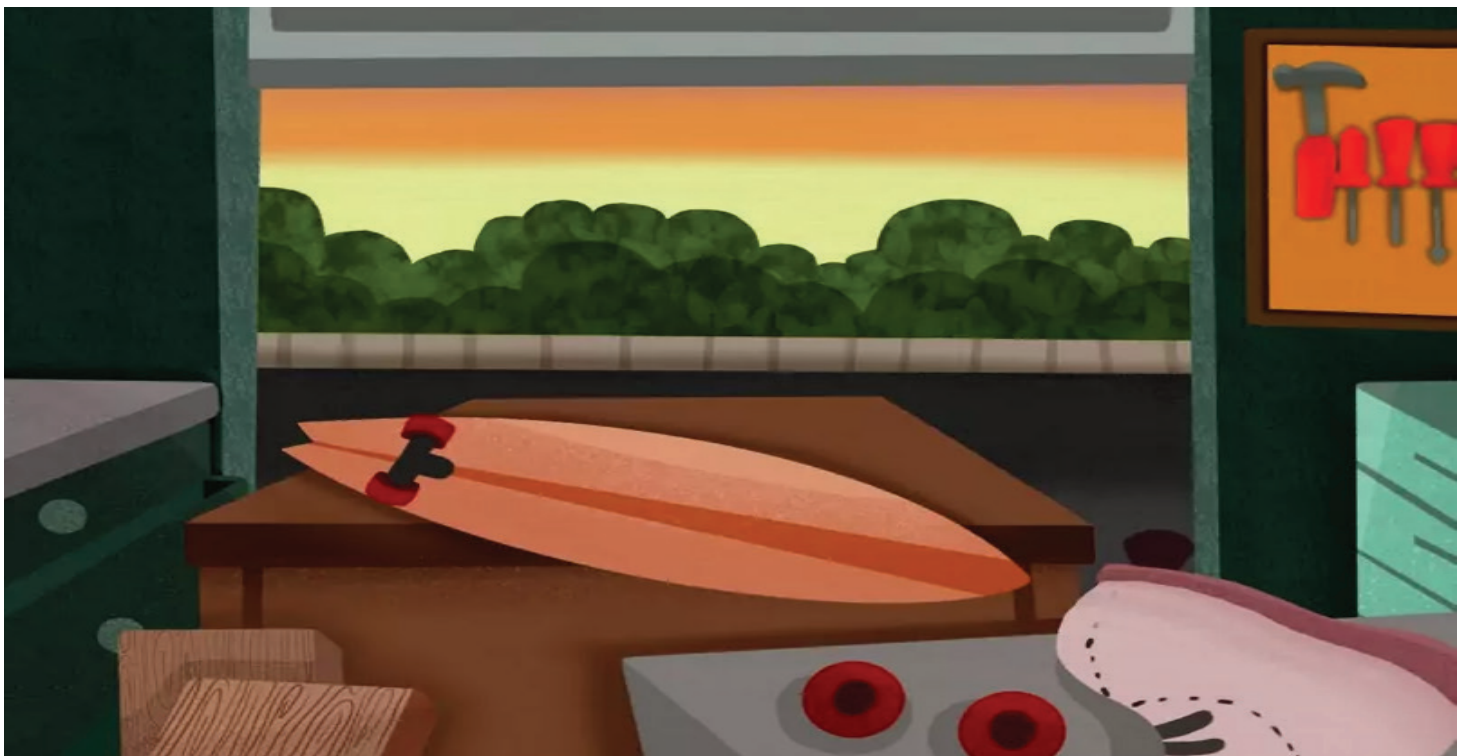
Things started to shift our sophomore year. Val and Sue became closer, our trio more their duo, while I drifted. Lots going on besides my charging hormones. My parents took bickering to new heights with mom throwing plates or dinner and Dad rarely home. I discovered through the tom-tom drums of gossip, that a girl in my junior class and her younger sister, were bragging about my dad. How he spent the weekend with them. Where they went. What he had bought them. It was extra complicated because the older sister was also a friend of Val and Sue. They were caught between wanting to tell me and wanting to shelter me from the information. And if to tell me, how?

There were whispers, and the kind of hush-hush in front of lockers where conversations abruptly stopped when I

walked past. I felt the brunt of something I didn't quite understand. As if being a teenager were not complicated enough. I mostly ignored what was going on, pulled a little closer into my own shell. The beach became my refuge, a watery haven where family issues whooshed away with the offshore breezes. At least I could pretend.

Along with all-things-shifting, I moved my hang-out from Pearl to Oak Street, a different crowd of kids, a mix of high school and college, and a different wave, one that curled both left and right, and broke just off-shore. The real deal, the fiberglass surfboard, landed under my body that summer, along with an even darker tan, more like light molasses, and gin rummy games instead of hearts.

Surfboards certainly weren't new, but were changing rapidly. First made by hand in the Hawaiian Islands, the boards had been carved in the late 1800s from local trees, such as Koa. Surfing was considered a deeply spiritual act, from art of riding waves to praying for surf. The chiefs used surfing as training, and to



Illustrated By Iuniki Dkhar

settle disputes among themselves. There were two types boards, the 'Olo,' rode by chiefs or noblemen, and the "Alaia," rode by commoners. They weighed up to 120 pounds, and ranged in length from 10' - 16'. The most famous Hawaiian rider, and the first to tackle a wave in Australia, was Duke Kahanamoku. He is often considered the father of surfing.

In the late 30s, balsa wood began to replace redwood, dropping 60 pounds off 100-pound boards. Balsa was soft and light, while redwood was tough and durable, so design construction shifted to sandwiches, strips of redwood 'stringers' glued between pieces of balsa running the length of the board.

The first fiberglass board was made by Pete Peterson in 1946. Using post WWII technology, he crafted a hollow plastic mold with a redwood stringer, sealed with fiberglass tape. Bob Simmons followed, utilizing fiberglass technology by creating a Styrofoam core with rails, coated in fiberglass.

Boards had been through several iterations before the 60s. One of earliest experiments cut the heavy wood boards in half, starting a trend to shorter boards that continued for over a century. Fins were attached to the bottom for better stability and mobility. Rails were shaved for more radical maneuvers.

The boards on the sand in front of me at Oak Street were a mix of fiberglass and balsa, the history of surfboards and shaping combined in one pile, sans the early Hawaiian models. Their lengths ranged from 10' down to 6', with relative weight. To me, they were all beautiful and honestly, I had no idea how their differences affected their performance.

I'd spent hours watching the boys surf while sitting on the beach, analyzing their paddle strokes to match the speed of the wave, then glide into place and then push themselves up to stand. They looked graceful, powerful. It looked both easy and difficult. I wanted to try.

One of the guys in the water rode a wave all the way to the beach, and laid his board on the sand in front of me.

"Coop," he said, all smiles and nose drip.

A light flush flashed my cheeks. Greg was 18, tanned muscle, with a shag of salt-crusted shoulder-length sun-bleached hair. He was long limbed, had a washboard stomach, bicep carved arms, and stood at least a foot taller than me. I knew he had a girlfriend, but still... I had a secret crush on him and sparkled on hearing my name.

I mustered my nerve.

"Can I try your board?" I asked.

"So you wanna be a surfer girl?" he asked. A quirky smile turned his whole face up, and the palest blue eyes washed washed over me.

"Why not?" I said, hoping he didn't notice the squirming effect he was having on me.

"Go for it," he said, and pointed to his board.

I didn't hesitate. I picked up the nose of the long board, heavier than I expected, and dragged it to the water. Once I got it flat, floating, and waist deep, I laid down and started to paddle. It wasn't any harder than a boogie board. Just no kicking, all arms. I pulled up next to a couple of other surfers, studying the way they sat, the way they watched the horizon. The way they studied the waves as they headed toward shore. Greg stood on the beach watching me and I did not want to look foolish.

"So how's this work?" I asked the guy closest to me. Deep auburn hair hung around his tanned shoulders. A turquoise blue and silver St. Christopher medal sparkled from a chain around his neck.

"Paddle 'til you feel the water moving under you and stand up."

Sounded simple enough. I watched the guys catch a couple more, then took my turn. A tiny bump, just big enough I thought, and I lay down on my belly and started pumping my arms. I felt the shift

in the water, from me paddling against the flow, to the wave moving underneath me. I pushed my hands down on the edges of the board and promptly drove the nose under water. The board pearled, drilling downwards, tossing me head first over the edge. The board flew into the air on the front side of the wave and rolled over itself toward shore. I got washing machined in the foam and came up sputtering. My top was askew. Before standing up, I tucked my breasts back inside the top's triangles and tried to wash the heavy sand out of my bikini bottom.

Undaunted, I swam to shore, recovered the board, tried not to look at Greg's smirk, and paddled back out. Second wave. Same damn thing. Shit. How could those boys do it so easily?

This time when I swam to the beach, Greg had recovered his board from the sand and held it out to me smiling.

"Move farther back on the board," he said. And when you push up, shift your weight back to your feet, off of your hands."

I nodded. My mouth full of salt, sand grit between my teeth. Unsure of anything to say, except thank you, and grateful for his words of instruction.

He handed me the board, I cocked my head and batted my eyes (such a 15-year-old thing to do), flashed him a smile, and paddled back out. When it was my turn, I shifted my weight back like he had instructed, and popped to stand. Salt water whooshed past me, the wave broke behind me and I was on my feet like the other guys. The wave was short, closed out and crashed over me, but I hung on to Greg's board this time and paddled back out. I repeated the cycle five times until it felt comfortable, like I had a rhythm.

"Surfer girl," he said when I returned his board.

"That was too much fun," I said.
"Thank you so much."

"I've got an old board," he said.
"You can have it."

"Are you kidding?"

"Nope. I never ride it. It's yours."

I tried not to bounce up and down, but my excitement was obvious.

"Pick up this afternoon if you want. In fact, you can store it at my house. I live just up the street."

My body twittered, eyes pinned to his eyes. I knew I would toss and turn that night, replaying the day, the way Greg's eyes had danced when he looked at me. The fluidity of the water, the roll of the curl. The fact I'd stood up without falling. I could hardly wait for the next set of waves.

