

THRICE

FICTION™



ISSUE No. 2 — JULY 2011

PERFECT WITH

Ann Bogle, Jack Foley, Brandon Rogers, Chris Mansel,
Vahid Jimenez, Marty Mankins, David Simmer II,
Adam Avable, Matthew Hill, AND Robert Kroese.



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THRICE

FICTION™

“PERFECT”

Issue No. 2 • JULY 2011

RW Spryszak, Editor

David Simmer II, Art Director

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A Perfect Voice

RW Spryszak, Editor

It took a while - two issues, to be exact - before I came to realize what exactly it was that I wanted in the writing we present here. The graphics and art work, being Dave's universe, have already gotten the kudos they deserve.

For myself, I always knew the kind of writing I liked to read - as well as the kind of writing that bored actual piss out of me... no really (long story) - but I could never put a finger on the exact vein and count the beats so I could formalize and define it for you. The fiction I mean, of course.

But now I know.

In looking at the work that is bundled here under the loose guideline of "perfect" there is a wide spectrum herewith contained. Like a Chinese fan invented by a blind amphetimined lunatic. And yet there's one common denominator and if you are ever to submit here or like what we're doing and would simply like to know why that is, I will tell you that all you need to think about is "voice."

Just Voice.

Voice, in writing, is an illusive thing. I can describe aspects but I doubt I could completely obtain a final definition for you.

It's as if you come upon someone who is perfectly contained within themselves and have a context inside their head that is fully formed. And you stumble onto it and you hear them speak for the first time and as you listen you come to understand that there is a matured subtext underneath everything that will take a world of time to figure out but is captivating nonetheless.

Well, actually, that would obtain a final definition for you so never mind that paragraph just before.

It doesn't have to be first person in order to work. A writer's voice telling the story is as important as the story itself. And in these pages we publish thrice a year it may trump the story. I can't say for sure. But I'm enamored. Enlightened. Enchanted. Embalmed.

Voice.


Where the words come out of a fully formed sensibility and lash out at you without apology for their quirks and apprehensions. Attaining its apogee without regard for the ground. A self-contained phenomenon beholden to nothing. Where you open a door and come in at the middle of a sentence and realize something you want to know about has been going on and your curiosity is at full roar.

That's the kind of writing I like and the kind I'm going to work hard in making a staple of *Thrice* for as long as this gig runs.

For anything else that follows - whether it be the kind of writing and stories that appeal to you or not - what you'll never be able to deny is that what we present is work that is easily understood as centered on Voice.

Talk to me with your soul your heathen killer. Make me forget the mundane bane and the prodigal sun burning up the atmosphere as we spin off into the black hole or something something and something or other.

You get the idea.

And if you don't, just read on and look for the Voice. I see verbalization all so clearly now. *Thrice Fiction* has its standard as of Issue #2 otherwise known as "Perfect." 

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Free Country

Ann Bogle

Then I drive home over winter-rutted roads in the rain, thinking of the sin or error or wrong I have done. It is wrong to let another man inside me while my man is home, right in assuming I was gone overnight. (Now the men are switching so there is not one man but two men aware of the other, investigating, someone will say “pandering”.) Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, even Fridays, Sundays, the phone is on the pillow, but on Saturdays, it rings in its cradle. Saturdays I become a purveyor of film history, film noir. I tell my woman friend the new man’s penis is too large. I tell her once. She asks me later, not noticing the sequence, whether I asked about it at the doctor’s—large cock, she calls it, and I say I told the doctor my boyfriend’s in a wheelchair, not that another man’s too wide for me. The doctor addresses hot flashes. Her office is my temple. She illustrates by example, “Men who lose their testicles to cancer have the worst hot flashes.”

“We’re getting older,” my boyfriend says, after the cell phone rings in the rain. “Where are you?” he says.

“Near the Walker,” I say. “Where were you?” he says. “I couldn’t go walking, so I went driving,” I say, and he accepts it, because of my years of driving and his of lying, because of my liking his lying once I got near to it. “It’s 44 in New York,” he says. “It’s 44 in Minneapolis,” I say, happy to be even.

“The manager of The Who lives in 2K,” he says. “The Who is still a band?” I say. “They played at The Super Bowl last year,” he says. “How could I forget it?” I say, feeling my age and the meaninglessness of female life. “She had knee replacement surgery,” he adds.

“Which matters more,” I say, “that the poetry editor’s brother and photo curator lives above you and can connect to your poetry or the manager of The Who lives down the hall and can advise you on knees?”

“Do you remember the Lithuanian temptress?” he asks. A rut insults my tire. He would have seen his children last night, but ruts on Long Island injured his former wife’s tire, debilitated it, she said. He doesn’t lie as I make my way home. It’s a free country. ↻



ANN BOGLE has short stories appearing online at Black Ice, Big Bridge, Minnetonka Review, Mad Hatters’ Review, Istanbul Literary Review, Metazen, Blip, Wigleaf, Big City Lit, fwriction : review, and Fictionaut. *Solzhenitsyn Jukebox*, a collection of five stories, was published by Argotist Ebooks in 2010. *Country Without a Name*, 24 stories and prose poems, is due from Argotist in the summer of 2011. Visit Ana Verse at: <http://annbogle.blogspot.com/>

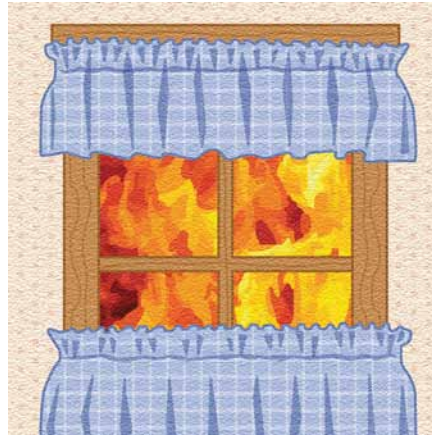
Perfect

Jack Foley

It's perfect, he sd.
What's? she sd.
Perfectly awful. Look at this.
He showed her the page. It had two marks on it. An a and a q.
What's that? she asked.
My poem.
That's not a poem, she commented, that's two separated letters.
Two letters can be a poem, he sd. But you're right. It's awful. Perfectly.
Maybe you should submit it somewhere.
I know a couple of places. One of them might take it.
That would be perfect, she sd.
I'd look like a perfect idiot, he sd.
Perfect, she sd.
I wish I cld be a perfectionist.
Maybe you could be a prefect. That's close.
But no cig.
We live in an imperfect world, she remarked.
Yet we may be perfectly happy to do so.
In my dictionary "perfect" is defined by "exacta."
Do you know what is rather thick, medium-sized cigar tapering toward both ends?
A Perfecto.
Perfect.
Perfect means "done, finished," she remarked.
You mean I'll be perfect when I'm dead.
Not until.
Let me see your breasts.
She unbuttons her blouse. She is wearing two bras. She removes both of them.
Looking at her breasts he says, They're perfect.
No, they're not, she says. One of them has a scar, see?
They're perfect, he says.
And kisses her. ⑤



JACK FOLEY is a poet and critic living in the San Francisco Bay area. Foley's radio show, *Cover to Cover*, is heard every Wednesday at 3:00 p.m. on Berkeley station KPFA; his column, *Foley's Books*, appears in the online magazine, *The Alsop Review*. In June 2010, he received the Lifetime Achievement Award from The Berkeley Poetry Festival. Foley's most recent book of criticism is *The Dancer & the Dance: A Book of Distinctions* (Red Hen Press); his most recent poetry chapbook is *A Disordered City*, available as an eBook at: ekleksographia.ahadadabooks.com/ebooks/jack_foley_disordered_city.pdf and in print as part of *Ahadada Reader 3*. For more information, visit his website at jack-adellefoley.com



The Fire at Paradise Creek

Brandon Rogers

By the end of the first day, they were taking turns reading the widow's postcards; the two of them on the eve of the solstice, 10 at night, framed by the distant smoke of wildfires. They thought they had known her name, but all the letters were signed, 'Elise.' Each note bore a title. The older ones were illustrated with Xs and Os. Later ones were not. The young woman read first.

You Once Said.

No place on earth could match this landscape for sunsets. The absolute levelness of the high plain frames the winter wheat sky so alarmingly that you find yourself mumbling fire and turning back to the east for relief. When the sun alights upon the horizon, you expect to feel the rumble of cosmic collision. You once said it was perfect.

The young man read second.

It Reminds Me.

The sunrises leave nothing to the imagination anymore. There is no promise of light, no wonder, no anticipation, no blushing of the sky. The sun simply appears. It's dark, and then suddenly it's day. It's the flick of a light switch as opposed to the smoldering of a fire. It reminds me of waking too early and shielding your eyes in discomfort. XOXOXO

Elise was only semi-conscious the first two days after they found her, trapped head-first at the bottom of a 50-gallon drum buried in the yard behind a barn. The young pair, who were leasing some of the farmland, had stopped to warn the old woman of an impending fire that was sweeping across the Palouse. They saw a single boot lying in the yard as they were driving away, just enough of a peripheral curiosity to warrant investigation. They managed to pull her out of the tomb, her hair full of rotted grain, and carried her back to the house. They telephoned for help. They were told that all the roads were cut off by the fire.

She would drop in and out of fitfulness, into a state somewhere between clarity and what seemed like

clairvoyance. Had she perished, the details of her passing would have elicited the macabre sympathy of a rural public woefully starved of excitement. *Can you imagine what that must have been like, to die that way?* But the old woman had borne those travails, had continued to breathe, and now played inhospitable host to boundary-weary guests.

She was a widow in the figurative sense alone, as the man to whom her letters were addressed had not passed away. They had discovered this in one of the more recent letters, and the knowledge of this truth, along with the disclosure of her actual name, caused them to feel as though they had been misled by the relative stranger. Had Elise the ability, she might have said, *He's dead to me.* More likely, she would have cursed their uninvited intrusion.

But they had formed their own bond with her, the young woman in particular, through the reading of her furtive editorials describing a dying relationship. Gradually, the young man rose more and more to the other man's defense, *in the spirit of objectivity. At the very least, we owe him that. You have to admit, she does seem a little eccentric.*

When he had said this, she frowned. She read aloud from one of the postcards, which she now carried with her in a leather satchel. It was titled, *Nobody's Perfect.*

One afternoon, the young man stood leaning against the first tree in a long line of Lombardy Poplars, decrying the very thing she most loved about the prairie. She imagined Aaron Copland composing a fanfare to his audacity. As he talked, she removed the postcards and silently read one titled, *A Compliment Carries Further than a Complaint.*

He said, *It drives you insane. Of all the places on Earth, you'd never expect to get lost here. It's like a puzzle where every goddamn piece is the same color. It would take a lifetime to put this place together.*

After the solstice had passed, Elise's breathing grew shallow and the power went out. The young man had taken the pickup to see if the roads had cleared. The young woman

remained, dabbing Elise's lips with a washcloth and quietly humming a lament.

She had grown curious about the drum where they had found her. She kneeled over its edge and peered into its circle. There were many of these buried drums in the yard, most containing stores of food. But this one had been emptied, and the young woman imagined the experience of falling headfirst into the abyss, unable to right herself or find her way out. She went so far as to lie on her stomach and dip her arms, then her chest, into the barrel. She inched slowly further, just catching herself at the fulcrum. She kicked her feet, trying to experience the difficulty with which the boots would come off.

She yelled into the barrel, immersed herself in the

sounds of desperation. Still, she did not feel as though she could precisely recreate that moment. She wondered about the man in those postcards, whom had only been named in one letter, which Elise had titled, *Alan, Oh Alan*. She yelled out his name. Still, it was not enough.

An encouraging wind blew slowly over the land, carrying with it the burnt smells of the scorched earth. Inside the drum it would be cooler, she knew, and the farinaceous scent would be comforting. It would remind her of coming inside after a long day's adventure on the last of the summer Sundays, walking through her mother's kitchen on her way to her tiny room, where she would sit beneath the window and watch until the last light of the prairie fire was filtered into darkness. ⑤



BRANDON ROGERS is a technical writer by trade, primarily in the field of education, where he has written/edited seven books on topics ranging from financial aid to college admissions. His fictional works have appeared in *McSweeney's*, *The Dead Mule* and the *Portland Mercury*.

She Lets Her Intentions Guide Her

Ann Bogle

Evelyn is 42. I listen as she explains that her “heart goes out to her”—to the woman whose husband she’s stealing; there’s no credit in that, I say, maybe in heaven. I listen as if to a speech by Obama. She could get a job that way, but I know she’s afraid to be hired. She relies on our mother and calls her arts and crafts minor.

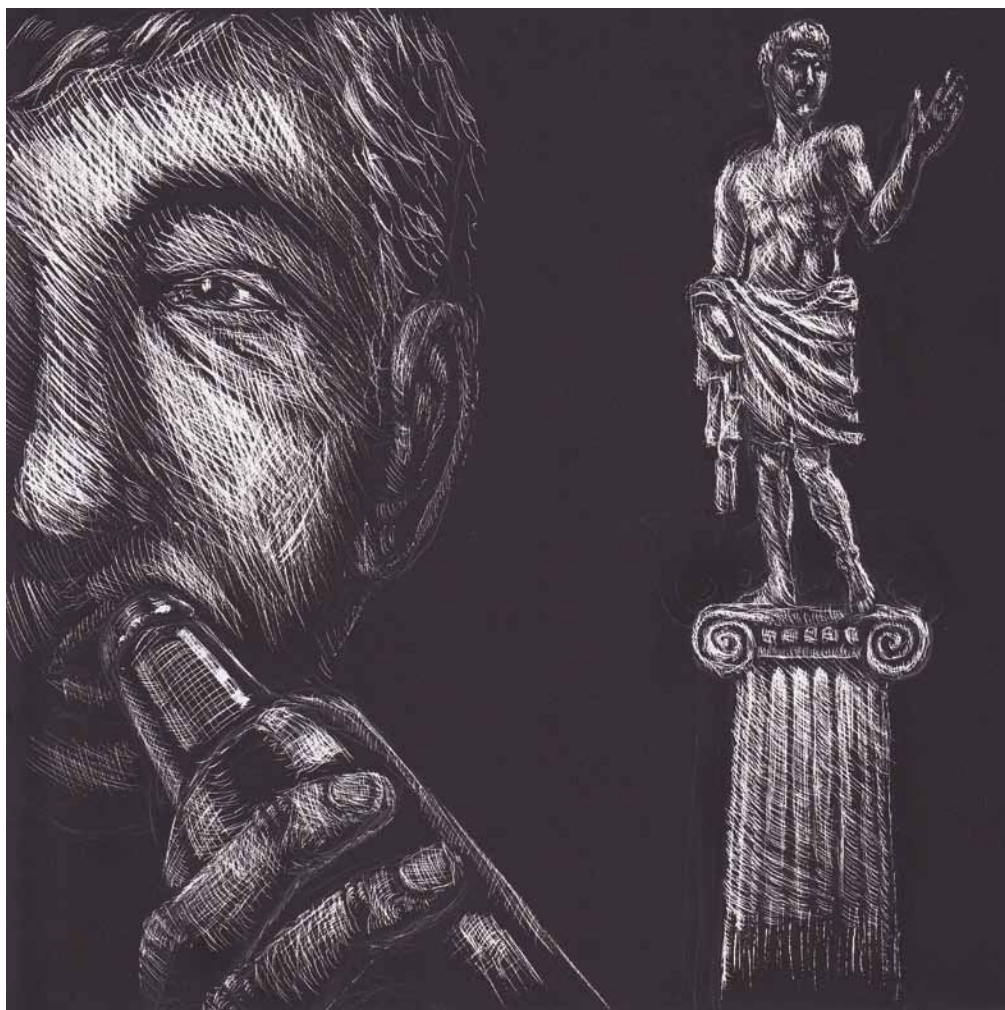
A friend of Evelyn’s has canceled plans for the evening, and I am her fall back. We sip the beer I brought. I look at the flowering pots she’s seeded on the balcony. She says she’s glad she grew up in a liberal faith.

The handsome French husband’s slender American wife lives with the two boys in a Victorian house across town. He calls it a marriage for Immigration. He takes Evelyn rock climbing. I take up his side when I hear he’s a romantic.

The American wife and Evelyn know people in common who send Evelyn angry messages. They’re angry because

they thought they knew her. They are New Age. Hell is unsketched in the notebook of New Age people. “There’s a balance in heaven for mistresses,” I say, thinking “mistress” could be a pride word, but Evelyn admits to no name, only to love for the neighbors. “Is he your neighbor’s husband?” I ask, inviting her to explain whether neighbor applies to women who covet—“deliriously desire”—husbands from Angers. ⑤

Ann Bogle’s bio can be found on page 3.



When Our Friends Become Successful

Vahid Jimenez

I'm only half paying attention to the television, choosing instead to dwell on the past, as I often do when I drink alone. I had more or less managed to stop thinking about Cole and his invitation when I heard his name. Startled, I looked up and saw his broad smiling face on the TV. *Goddammit, Cole Donovan. Even here at my favorite watering hole I can't seem to get away from you.*

"Hey, you see this guy on the teevee?" Tim says. My bartender. I'm the only customer in here this early in the afternoon. "This Cort Donovan or whoever?"

I cough, once. "It's Cole."

"Eh?" He turns his head my way, then turns back towards the television mounted above the bar, still polishing glasses. "This clinic or free hospital thing that he's up here opening," and he gestures with his dishrag, "it's in my neighborhood, about ten blocks away."

I know. I know right where it is, what he's doing. I know because Cole called me yesterday, to try a second time to get me to respond to an invitation he'd first extended over a month ago. *You sure you can't make it, old sport? It's just going to be one of those silly affairs with a lot of speeches and they're going to force me to wear a tie,* he'd chuckled, *but it's still the realization of one of the dreams we had together back at university.*

We had a lot of dreams back then, I'd said. *I don't remember half of them.*

Oh, come on. The clinics for the poor in this city, and others. This is only the first step to what we used to talk about, about how we'd work to wipe out poverty, equalize the playing field for the people of this great nation.

You sound like a politician.

Except I'm not in this for me, or for political gain. When have I ever showed interest in public office?

Well, I'd love to be there, Cole, but I can't. I have an important client meeting.

A meeting? When I called you last week, you said you were going to be out of town.

I am. It's an out-of-town client meeting. Our firm is expanding into other markets. Quite successfully, I might add.

Oh. Well, if by some chance you happen to have a cancellation, do please drop on by for the dedication. Linda and I would both love to see you again. It's been entirely too long.

Yeah. Well, there probably won't be a cancellation, but if by some miracle there is, I'll be sure to drop by.

Glad to hear it. You take care.

You too, Cole. Tell Linda I said hi.

I will.

And so here I am in the tavern a few blocks away from my apartment, trying to just get away from the boundless altruism and goodwill of one of my oldest friends. I'm near my apartment because of course I'm not really out of town, of course I don't have an important client meeting. I sell life insurance policies, which is a respectable enough way to make a decent living if you're any good at it, but I'm middling at best. I have clients, but not big important ones that I need to pay visits to out of town. I don't sell securities, the way that Cole thinks that I do. He's never questioned why I have rented the same one-bedroom apartment for the last ten years, politely smiling and nodding when I tell him the lie that it's all I need.

"Sure is something, isn't it?" Tim says, his back still to me. "Nothing like the shitty, run down old clinic we used to have down in that area."

It really is something, I have to admit, though I wouldn't expect any less given Cole's millions upon millions of dollars. That's another dream we'd shared, back in our college days: to launch any number of businesses together, ideas we'd scribbled on notebooks, whispered about excitedly, full with the flush and foolishness of youth we promised each other we would make ourselves as wealthy as our dreams. Not too long after graduation, while looking for jobs, he tracked me down and told me he wanted to take one of those ideas, for a software company and product, and make it a reality.

What do you say? No one else is doing this, man—and if you want to make it big, you have to make it first.

Jesus, Cole, I don't know. Neither us have the programming chops to make this happen, even working together. Then

there's the marketing, and support --

So what? I'm putting together a pitch, and the environment is ripe for venture capitalists to sink money into this. Anything we can't do ourselves, we'll hire people to do. It might take a year, or even two before we're profitable, but when we are...

Okay. Okay. Let me see what you have, and then I'll have to think about it, I'd said, and he did, and I did, and then I thought about it some more, and eventually Cole realized that "I need to think about it" was my way of saying "I will never nerve myself up to take this leap," and so he went about it without me, and well just look at the man today. He literally does have to hire people to count his money.

"Boy, just look at that," Tim says, entranced by the scenes on the flatscreen. Shots of Cole at the ribbon cutting ceremony, all smiles and waves, his absolutely gorgeous and faithful wife Linda at his side. Cut with this was footage of Cole at a charity golf event, Cole getting out of his limo, Cole at the marina with other important people, Cole walking out of the lobby of his office building. "What I wouldn't give to have that sonofabitch's life!"

And I can't help but think of what I didn't give to have that life, how I'd backed out of the deal even after he offered to let me join him again, when his company was first starting to turn its profit, before it became the giant it was today. It was fear that kept me from joining him the first time, claiming I wanted a regular job first and the security of a little bit of cash in the old savings account; the second time around, it was merely sullen pride. It could be me up that screen with him, smiling down at the crowds, with my college sweetheart by my side because she wouldn't have left me after listening to months of me whining about how life cuts some people all the breaks and harping on what a failure I was.

We could be standing up there in the sun together, both uncomfortable in ties, grinning at each while we cut the ribbon to the new clinic we'd funded. People in bars would see us on TV and think about what they wouldn't give for either of our lives.

Instead I'm sitting here in a bar at three thirty on a Thursday afternoon, drinking a Heineken and waiting for happy hour to start so I can save two dollars on a plate of nachos, and it's just Cole up there on the TV, and he's the only one of us smiling right now.

I love him and I hate him. Cole Donovan: perfect goddamn asshole. 🕒



VAHID JIMENEZ has been writing stories as long as he can remember, although only recently has he decided to try letting other people read them. His first published story appeared in the debut issue of *Thrice Fiction*; this will be his second. He takes the odd photograph, too. He lives in Portland, Oregon with his girlfriend and a lot of comic books.



Hey Floyd, You Look a Little Pink

Marty Mankins

After a long day at work, Jimmy hopped on his bike and made the three-mile journey home. He was tired, but he had big plans for the rest of the week. It was only Tuesday and he didn't want to waste any more time than he had already the past weekend.

As he pulled up onto the grass of his home, he began to remember a day when he wasn't as worn out from a long day's work at the insurance office. He would take his time getting ready in the mornings, often sitting down to meddle about his home office, doing pretty much mindless tasks. Once showered, he would head upstairs to fix a couple of eggs – sunny side up – with toast and juice, of course. Then it was a leisure ride to work, taking side streets and a short bike path along the canal, stopping off at the corner store for an energy drink.

Once at work, he would find himself immersed into the busy day filled with mindless duties that he loathed. "One of these days", he would often repeat to himself, "I'm going to leave this place and find something that isn't such a time burden." But some twelve years have gone by and here he is, at the same place, and enduring the same mundane work situation.

Jimmy's focus now turned away from his work, he began to plot his plans with his friend Floyd. Floyd was a lumbering character, not caring much about anything. His work, not quite as stress filled as Jimmy's, was more routine. He would show up for his nine-hour shift at the fab shop, taking an hour lunch to practice his guitar out in his car and consume a ham and cheese sandwich his mother would make for him. Floyd was just three years younger than Jimmy and at the tender age of 22, it was still somewhat acceptable to remain living under the same roof as your parents. He didn't have much money, but he had lots of time. Most of his time was spent listening to music and planning his dreams of being a rock guitarist.

Which brings us to one of the events that Jimmy had planned for this week - a concert in the park on Thursday night, with several bands and artists showing up to entertain whoever wished to show up. Food vendors lined the outskirts of the park, selling their meals to the masses, which during the summer, can be a few thousand people.

Thursday afternoon came and Jimmy's increased anticipation mounted as quitting time arrived. Once home, he changed into more casual fare. Checking the time on his phone, it was a few minutes to 6pm. Not wanting to miss the bus, he ran like hell to the stop, reaching it just as the bus pulled up to the curb.

He met Floyd at the park, near the area where the bands unloaded their instruments. They grabbed a couple of tacos and a few churros from one of the vendors. Grabbing a bench seat, Jimmy pulled out a couple of beers that he had brought from home.

Taking a bite from his taco, Jimmy turned to Floyd and posed a question, "Speak to me... what is it that you want to do with your life?" "Isn't it obvious, bro... I want to be in a band, like these guys," Floyd pointing his finger towards the nearby parking lot. Jimmy turned his head to watch a rusted out Chevy van pull up with four lanky males exiting the vehicle and unloading their equipment.

"See, that's where I want to be next year," Floyd had dreams, even if he didn't put much effort into it, other than play his guitar, which he wasn't all that bad at. As the band members carried their equipment along the walkway, Floyd yelled out to them, "Hey you, what's the name of your band?"

"Young Lust," spoke the tall blonde kid with the guitar case.

"Cool name... can't wait to hear your sound," Floyd responded back with delight on his face.

As they finished the beers, tacos and churros, Jimmy and Floyd got up and walked closer to the stage area, finding a place on the grass, waiting for the first band to take the stage.

"Welcome to Landside Park... " the emcee for the night yelled into the microphone. "Thank you all for coming. We have a great line up of talent tonight."

Floyd and Jimmy looked around to see that there was quite the crowd that had gathered. "Wow, normally people don't show up until the third or fourth band starts playing," Jimmy observed.

The emcee continued, "Up first tonight is a band from Pittsburgh. Give it up for Young Lust!"

The lead singer, wearing a worm black T-shirt and skinny jeans, approached the microphone, "Is there anybody out there?" The crowd roared back in response. "OK then... Let's do this!"

The band tore through their first few songs with such fervor that you would have thought they expected no one would be into them. But it was quite the opposite, with the crowd on their feet.

Jimmy looked over at Floyd, watching him play air guitar in a lead mock stance. He was really getting into this band. Their sound was 60's-70's blues, with a slight psychedelic tone to their overall sound.

As the band started into their fifth song, Jimmy pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, tapping out numbers on the screen.

"Dave... it's Jimmy"

"Who?" The voice on the other end must not have heard since the music was pretty loud.

Jimmy spoke even louder into the phone. "DAVE!!! IT'S JIMMY... FLOYD AND I ARE..."

"Dave who? Dave's not here... you must have the wrong number."

Jimmy continued to speak in a loud tone, "THIS ISN'T DAVE GILMOUR?"

"No, it's not dude. You have the wrong number..." the unknown call recipient tersely replied back, ending the call.

"Oh, he hung up..." Jimmy's musical moment he wanted to share was now lost.

"What was it you were going to tell Dave?" Floyd asked Jimmy.

"Dave loves music as much as you and I do and I was going to tell him that I wished he were here to see this band." Jimmy still wanted to find out why he got the wrong number.

"Well, I liked them... a lot." Floyd's response was matter of fact, leaving no doubt how much he liked these guys.

After the other three bands played, which paled in

comparison to the sounds of the first, the two friends decided to meander over to the parking lot. Looking over at the rusted van, Floyd shouted out, "Kick ass set."

A muffled "thanks" came from a few of the band members as they packed up their equipment. Floyd could sense they were focused on getting all of their gear into the van.

As Floyd and Jimmy left the parking lot, the sky filled with clouds and the delicate sound of thunder in the distance. The temperatures had cooled off from the increased heat of the day. It was nice, but a rainstorm was coming and they didn't want to get caught in it.

"Maybe you should follow that dream to be a guitarist. You seem to admire the bands that played tonight." Jimmy was being honest in his response. "Yeah, as I said earlier, I want to be up on that stage next year." Floyd looked up at the bus stop sign, his mind wandering towards having his own rusted out van.

Jimmy's future visions of his own signs of life were not quite as animated as Floyd's. He was more about enjoying any time away from work instead of following his dreams. In fact, he really wasn't sure what his dreams were exactly.

The phone rang. "Hello"

"Hey Jimmy, it's Dave. How are things?"

"Dave... I tried calling you tonight."

"Um, no you didn't... err... you did? What time?"

"Around 7:30pm. Floyd and I went to Landside Park tonight. This cool band played... Young Lust was their name."

"Oh man, I would have loved to have gone. I left work late and ended up grabbing a beer at Billy's Pub on the way home. I was still there around that time."

"Well, it was a great show and these guys could really play."

"Ok, next time give me more notice and I'll join up."

"Will do, Dave. Talk to you later." Jimmy hung up the phone and walked over to the window of his house. In the distance, he could see the smoke stacks from the factory, much darker than they normally are during the daylight.

"At least I don't work there," he said to himself. "That's a tough gig there... all that smoke going up in the sky... the pollution."

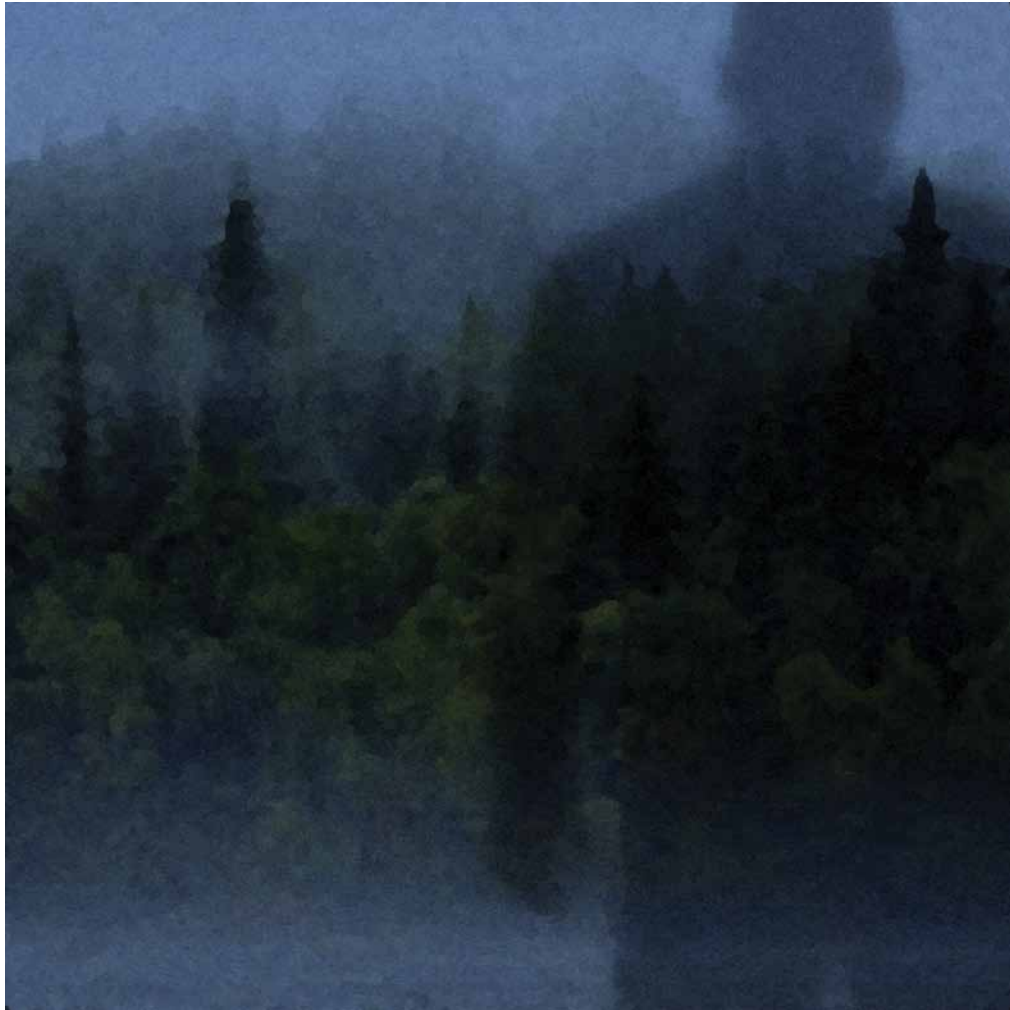
Walking back over to the couch, he sat down, grabbed the remote for the stereo and turned it on.

"Ticking away... the moments that make up the dull day."

15



MARTY MANKINS has been writing since he was 12 years old, when his first story he submitted for his English teacher Ms. Bradford was both praised and critiqued. Since then, he has been published in various magazines, periodicals and tech journals. His latest short story, *Double Or Nothing*, was published in 2010, as part of the series *Weirdly Vol. 3* by Wild Child Publishing. Besides writing, Marty considers himself amateur filmmaker, posting the occasional short video of a scooter ride or an adventure in the snow, with an eye towards creating more elaborate and entertaining works at BanalLeakage.com. He is a self-labeled music and movie buff, obsessed with all things retro and a desire to return to his home state of California some day. Marty currently resides in Salt Lake City, UT with his wife Reba and their cat Rocko.



The Turn

David Simmer II

My last shot catches him in the shoulder but he doesn't stop. I'm more disappointed than scared, but my dwindling supply of ammunition has my heart beating faster. If I'm going to survive this, it's not going to be in a fight. Or hiding behind this tree.

So I run.

The creature spots me instantly and charges forward. Unlike the zombies you see in horror films, he is surprisingly fast. Faster than me. Outmatched in speed and strength, it's time to use my wits. Hoping to use my smaller size to my advantage, I turn into the densest part of the forest. Here I can crawl under bushes and slip between spaces in the foliage where he cannot. This slows him down, but not enough. The zombie just crashes through any obstacles in his path, seemingly unfazed by the barbs and branches tearing at his decomposing flesh. I glance back to see his

arm hanging useless from when I shot him and find it oddly comforting. It's nice to know that he can suffer damage, given that he's dead and all.

A plan develops. I know these woods.

Reasoning that I can climb faster with two good arms than he can with one, I bolt towards the sound of water. He's making noises at me now but I paid no attention. Instead I pocket the pistol in my hoodie sweatshirt and started climbing a steep bank which rises from the creek. It's slick with mud and loose dirt, but I make good progress by grabbing hold of tree roots and clumps of grass. I pace myself knowing that one mistake could mean disaster.

The monster is close now, clawing in frustration at the earth in a desperate attempt to reach me. What he lacks in mobility he compensates for with determination, and I feel his fingertips brush my legs as I finally managed to scramble to the crest. In a blur I retrieve my gun and whirl to face

him, but he's gone. He's given up on climbing and is instead circling around the embankment for an easier path to the top.

Time to start running. Again.

As I tear through the brush, darkness begins to fall. This will most certainly be the death of me if I don't find refuge soon. Like all undead creatures, this one can undoubtedly see in the dark. Though he probably doesn't need to since zombies can smell fresh meat from a mile away. Exhaustion is starting to set in, but my pace quickens. There's no place to hide, but there has to be somewhere I can get out of his reach. Perhaps a big tree I can climb or old cabin I can barricade myself into. I press onward through unfamiliar territory and break through a thick patch of underbrush to find... a clearing.

This is not good news at all. The zombie would overtake me in seconds if I tried to run in the open, but turning back is suicide. The undead may be able to navigate a forest in the dark, but I cannot. So now I'm scared. Now I taste fear as adrenaline chokes at the back of my throat. I waste precious seconds attempting to evaluate my surroundings only to realize I have no idea where I am. I strain against the darkness to spot a landmark I recognize, but there are none to be found.

Suddenly twigs are snapping and grass is rustling behind me. The creature has arrived. I turn, look into the face of the beast, and fire. My hands are shaking and my eyes squeeze shut as I pull the trigger. When I open them again, my undead pursuer is gone. Did I hit him? Relief washes over me as I kick at the grasses. The only way to be sure he's dead-dead and not undead-dead is to find the body. Except there isn't one. I missed. Then I catch a glimpse of a shadow moving behind some trees and realize my brainless, mindless, unthinking opponent is... hiding? Apparently the comic books got it all wrong. The monster has some sense left in his rotting head after all.

And I have only one shot left.

He's half-hiding in the brush now, waiting. With no better alternative, I move cautiously to the north along the tree line. I can hear him shadowing me from the bushes, but the looming darkness makes it difficult to see much of anything. Including the ground, which is why I trip on a stone wedged in my path. I fall flat on my face, pistol in hand. I take a half-second to be grateful the weapon didn't go off and waste my last bullet. But the thought is fleeting as I struggle to turn around.

The zombie lunges forward as I squirm to right myself, but slows when he notices the gun pointing at him. And then he speaks, his good arm outstretched. Or he tries to speak. At least I assume he is trying to speak. My blood is pumping so hard that any sound he makes is drowned out by the blood rushing through my ears.

For a fleeting moment I feel pity for the poor creature standing in front of me. He appears almost human, but I know it's an illusion. A sad residue of what he once was that's evaporating before my eyes.

I pull the trigger.

The sound is deafening.

My hands are not shaking this time. It's a head-shot that drops him where he stands.

He's dead-dead. At last.

A part of me doesn't believe it's over, so I kick at him.

Nothing. I prop myself up on my elbows and kick again. Still nothing. I inch my way towards him in the darkness, pointing my now useless pistol at the shadowy mass that is his head. But nothing.

I scramble to my feet, pocket the gun in my hoodie once again, and stare down at the monster at my feet. The waning moon provides precious little light, but he appears to be dressed in dark blue and covered in dirt and blood. Slowly I reach out to touch him.

And lights from across the grassy field snap on.

Somebody is yelling. Two somebodies.

I crouch down and start crawling back to the trees. They sound human, but I'm not willing to risk it. If I had some ammunition left, maybe. But not after what I've just been through.

Once in the forest, I blindly feel my way through the trees. With no moonlight to speak of, it's pitch black. My vision being useless I strain to listen for the creek. Maybe if I can find it, I can follow it back to someplace I recognize. But all I hear is a scream. I wonder if the zombie was not dead-dead after all, and fear he has found two victims for his dinner.

Beyond exhausted, I crawl along the forest floor until I find some bushes where I can sleep for the night. I try not to imagine what else might be lurking in my hiding place, but my thoughts go to dark places.

As my mind starts to drift, I find myself wondering how it all started. People become zombies when bitten by a zombie, everybody knows that. But who bit the first zombie? I personally have never seen anybody get bitten. It's probably a disease. You go to bed one night, some virus comes floating through your window while you sleep, and BLAM! You die... *but not really*. You just become the perfect killing machine.

A chill descends in the night air as I hold my knees to my chest and fade away.

•

I awaken as the sun rises, flooding the forest with a golden light. Crawling from my bushy sanctuary, I get my bearings. Turns out there was a path less than twenty feet from where I slept. My spirits lifted, I start following the trail through the forest. But cautiously.

Eventually I start seeing things I recognize. There's Deer Creek. There's the Bonny Park fence line. There's Simpson Ridge off in the distance. I'm about thirty minutes from home. Or what passes for "home" now-a-days.

As I continue to make my way along the path, I start to hear something. Something sharp in the distance. *Dogs?* Yes, definitely dogs barking. Beautiful, wonderful dogs who are more than just a girl's best friend, but the best zombie detection system money can buy.

Not knowing whether they were barking because they were just being dogs... or whether they were barking because the undead were nearby... I slip off the path and start cutting a wide circle around them through the trees. Here I can peek out from relative safety and see if it's time for me to start running. Again.

I hear voices. Voices belonging to the living as they wander around the woods. They seem to be searching for something. And just as I realize that they are probably searching for me, I feel a hand on my shoulder.

"Kaitlin? Kaitlin Fine?" The voice is kind, but when I

look up at him, I can't see his face because the sun is directly behind him. I imagine he looks like Brad Pitt.

"There are a lot of people who are going to be very happy to see you," he says with a warmth that makes me a little misty. "I FOUND HER! OVER HERE! OVER HERE!" The man is waving his arms like a lunatic. While he's turned away from me I take the gun from my hoodie and toss it behind a tree, noting the location so I can retrieve it later. Heaven only knows I'm going to need it. The man turns and smiles at me. Not able to help it, I find myself smiling back.

"Oh my God! My baby! You're safe!"

My mother breaks into a full run the minute she sees me exit the police car. Before I can protest, I am slathered with hugs and kisses. "Mom, stop it! You're embarrassing me!" I say, trying not to sound overly-dramatic.

My dad appears as if by magic. "You can't blame us for being worried out of our wits!" he says in a rush. "We come home to find an abandoned police car, your baby-sitter dead, and you missing..." his voice trails off. "We're just happy to see you, bug."

"I can take care of myself!" I say defiantly. "I've told you a hundred times I don't need a baby-sitter telling me what to do!" *Especially a zombie baby-sitter*, I wanted to add, but felt it best to hold my tongue. What do parents know from

zombies after all?

"Excuse me, but we'd like to get everybody inside" the police officer says, herding us towards our garage. Then, more quietly he says to my father "The responding officer was found shot dead in a clearing the other side of Bonny Park. We don't want you out in the open in case the killer is still in the area."

"I want to go to my room," I say, my voice calm.

"Sorry, but that's a crime scene," the policeman utters through gritted teeth. "Now, I know you're still very upset, but we have to ask you some questions. We've got to know what happened here."

Two zombie bodies and he can't put the pieces together? What an idiot. "MOM! I WANT TO GO TO MY ROOM NOW!" I shout, this time not bothering to be calm at all.

"Kaitlin! You stop this right now!" mother snaps. "You're not going anywhere until you tell us what happened to you! Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly," I whisper to nobody in particular.

And that's when I see it. I look up into her face and I see the change. She's turned. The zombie virus has her, and now she'll be against me. Just like my math teacher. Just like Mrs. Stanley at church. Just like my baby-sitter. And just like that cop that showed up last night. We're in the middle of the Zombie Apocalypse and nobody sees it but me. 🧟



DAVID SIMMER II

has been writing fiction for over two decades, and has contributed words and art to everything from comics, magazines, and books to packaging, catalogs, and technical manuals. When not working as a graphic designer in the Pacific Northwest, David enjoys traveling the globe, taking photos, and eating chocolate pudding. He has a website at Blogography.com, and maintains a journal of his 137 Hard Rock Cafe visits at DaveCafe.com. As co-founder and art director of *Thrice Fiction* magazine, he spends his more recent days wondering where his life went as deadlines loom ever closer...

This month's stunning cover, *Queen of Hearts* by Echo Chernik, is available as a high-quality print directly from the artist's website at ECHO-X.COM along with many other works, including Echo's book, *ECHO NOUVEAU the Art and Life of a Working Girl: 1995-2010*... be sure to check it out!





Hooker

Ann Bogle

I returned to Minnesota from Montreal a week ago to realize that my sweetheart in Manhattan had hired a Ukrainian escort, a young woman he said on second reference was Russian. No name, he said, she didn't have one. She did have two small white dogs. She returned to his apartment again and again, carrying the dogs. Once, she flooded the bathroom. He said shit swirled in one of the closets.

As if my shit had ever swirled in a closet, as if that were my role.

"I need to visit," I said straightly. "What about the Russian mob?" 🌀

Ann Bogle's bio can be found on page 3.



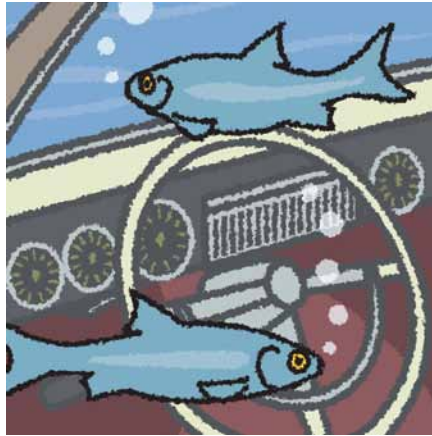
Litterbug

David Simmer II

A small cricket dodged the raindrops falling around him like bombs. Darting from wrapper to twig to leaf, nothing offered adequate shelter, so he bravely forged onward. Eventually the cricket found a half-flattened bottle on the side of the road. The perfect place to wait out the storm. "Stupid rain!" he said as he crawled inside, his troubles now behind him.

The convict trudged through the pouring rain, knowing he couldn't return to the comfort of his cell until all the garbage had been collected. "Stupid rain!" he said as he reached for the mangled plastic bottle in front of him. 🌀

David Simmer's bio can be found on page 13.



The Smell of Water

Part One • Chris Mansel

Whether it was overflow from a rain shower, or something someone had poured out of their window as they stopped their car, or just a puddle, Oren had to touch it, he had to feel it, and most importantly he had to smell it. Oren slept in storm drains in dry weather. In the more rainy times, the summer for example, he would sleep in a place only he knew about. If you were to swim out into the river, and if you were to return almost to the shore in a certain spot, and if you swam down about twelve to twenty four feet you might find a passageway in the earth where the water flowed in and didn't exactly return. In the manner that underwater drilling stations have a section where the divers can enter the ocean and the ocean doesn't enter the rig, Oren had a place where he could swim to and escape from the pressure of people and still enjoy the smells. In this place he had his books, and many of the comforts of living, if you lived like Oren.

Maybe you've seen Oren. I imagine you have. He only goes in stores that he is sure won't say anything to him, he really doesn't like to speak to anyone, not really. That's kind of like every one of us in some ways, which is why Oren can walk around in public and not really be noticed as anything out of the ordinary.

It's accepted that no one enjoys the warm summer breezes more than Oren as he sits staring out through the grate a hundred feet above the river. He watches as the kids play at the playground, as the drug dealers sit on the dock with their fishing lines in the water, the campers swinging at flies, and the sun setting in the distance. On the fourth of July Oren lays on his side in his grotto trembling at the fireworks going off above him. He can feel the explosions as they reverberate through the water.

What would someone think to see Oren easing into the water with a clear bag around his neck full of whatever he

will need until he decides to emerge. Sometime Oren will stay down for days and just enjoy the quiet and the smell of the water. Other times Oren will just simply sit on the rocky bank with his feet in the water and watch the barges float by, imagining their great weight bearing down on his grotto. He will sit and watch the hands on deck shivering in the cold or wiping away the sweat and know that if it all gets to be too much he can escape into his cavernous peace and just wrap himself in the smell and read.

Sometimes Oren will swim out a little bit to the bottom of the river and enjoy something that hardly anyone will ever see. At the bottom of the river are hundreds of cars abandoned, wrecked, or put there to gather insurance money because of theft. Oren will get behind the wheel of a 1947 Cadillac and sit there in the smell of the water and the quiet and imagine his self-driving down the highway while the fish swim in and out of the windows in the car.

In his grotto Oren has an old acoustic guitar he had strung with field wire. The music he played would ease his soul and he would sing the words he felt would go with what he was playing. A man had heard Oren play once on the bank and asked Oren where he had learned the guitar. The question had struck Oren strangely. Oren just looked up at the man, it was a Sunday morning, and he said, "After a while I thought I had it down pretty good then I took the strings off and left it be for a while." The man looked puzzled, "Why would you take them off when you were starting to play well?" Oren innocently said, "I didn't want the guitar to thinking I thought I was better than it was." The man walked off laughing at Oren and Oren let out a cry and struck the strings with the back of his hand, causing the man to stumble and look back. Then it was Oren's turn to laugh.

Oren would play his guitar or read by candlelight or he would just sit and stare off into the blackness of the water and know that everything was all right. Never once did it

ever occur to Oren to live another way. As long as he could remember he had lived this way but at times he would wonder just where had he come from and why he was so different. All of these thoughts were going through Oren's mind one day when a young black lady named Axelena sat down beside him on the bank. Oren turned in her direction and said hello. She just stared out at the water and didn't say anything at all. After a few moments Oren too turned back toward the river and they both sat in silence.

Axelena spoke to Oren, "I been watching you for a while now and I see you go down in the water and you don't ever come back up. Now I know you ain't got no gills on you, so you must have something in you the lord left off of me."

Oren became nervous and Axelena could tell something was wrong. She placed a hand on his thigh and said, "Now it's okay, you know? Honey, whatever you got going on ain't nobody's business, even mine. I was just curious about you. I ain't gonna raise no sand bout nothing."

Oren laughed and said that even if he told her she wouldn't believe him. Axelena turned serious and told Oren that her Mother was a mid-wife and so was her grandmother. She said that she had seen the lord do some really evil things and also he had done some pretty beautiful work. "I have heard the devil cry like a bobcat from the backseat of my mama's car, I have seen the tears roll back into a dead man's eyes, and I have never known the love of a man without feeling his fist before his lips. Whatever you got to share, honey, you can leave it with me."

Oren was intrigued and just a little shy. Axelena turned back toward the river and sat in silence again. Oren had been lonely for a long time and had always wanted a friend. He got up and stepped down in the water and turned back toward Axelena and took her hand. "Come on," he said, "I'll show you." Axelena laughed, "Tear down the plow for the seed." Together, hand in hand they swam down into the water.

Lying in the dark, the candlelight fading as fast as the glint of smoke reflecting off the water, the grotto was

unaware when Axelena and Oren popped up through the water. Axelena pulled her self up on the dirt floor and look around as she shook away the water from her hair. Oren was very apprehensive and sat quietly waiting for Axelena to say something. She got up and walked around through the two rooms Oren had dug with his hands. The rooms were decorated with Buddhist imagery. A huge mandala measuring twelve feet by twenty was facing the water, it's ripples reflecting from the candles made it seem like it would come to life each time a fish swam by the opening of the grotto. Oren had placed prayer wheels in the walls and as Axelena passed through the rooms she extended her beautiful, delicate fingers and traced their edges and they rolled in silently as her footsteps traced the neat dirt floor. Arranged on a small table were many books, they looked haggard and well read. Axelena stopped at his prayer mat and small statues of Buddha and bells. She turned and asked Oren, "Is this where you pray?" Oren looked up at Axelena as she stood above him and said, "Yes, that is where I pray." Oren reached over behind him and grabbed his guitar. Oren strummed slowly in an open D tuning while Axelena sat down beside him and listen to him play. Axelena began to be really drawn to Oren's innocence. Down in the grotto she was away from all of her problems. She just sat and watched Oren play for hours until she fell asleep at his side. When she woke Oren was gone. She looked around her and somehow knew he would be back. In a few minutes Oren was back. He got to his feet soaking wet and opened the bag from a round his waist. From the bag he pulled fruit and water. Oren sat down in front of Axelena and offered it to her. Axelena smiled and bit into the plum he had bought for her. She laughed as she chewed and wiped the water from Oren's hair. A tear came to Oren's eyes and he laughed too. For centuries, ever since time began it was accepted that heaven existed off somewhere into the skies, somewhere in space, perhaps. For some that may be true. But for Oren heaven existed in the eyes of Axelena. From the first moment he saw her he knew somewhere deep inside of him, that if he ever lost her

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he would go down into the water and never come back up.

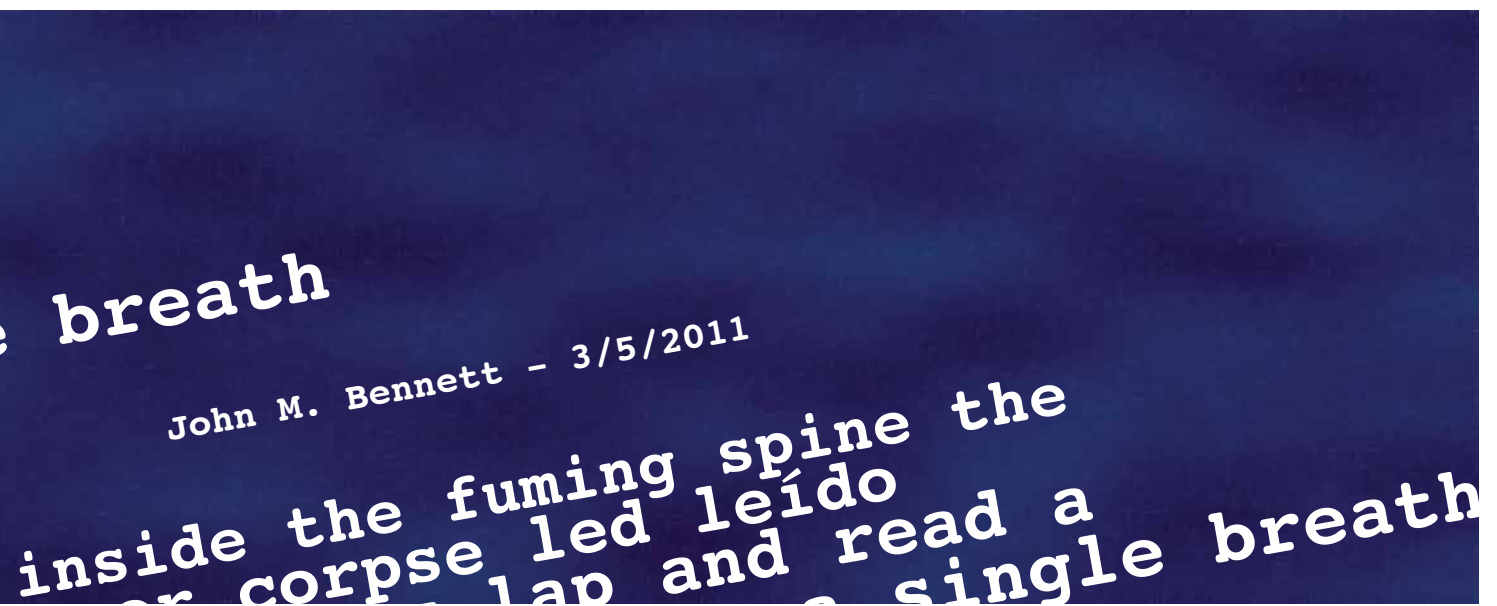
While Oren and Axelena sat there lost in the moment, a moment that would define their relationship, friendship, and lives in the time to come; it started to rain. It rained for four days straight. The Tennessee River rose up over its banks and the campers, and fishermen had to retreat to higher ground. When Oren and Axelena came up from Oren's grotto they found a world that had changed completely. Oren and Axelena swam about and looked in amazement at the water that had seemed to swallow up the trees and the playground where the children played on warm summer days. When the amazement passed Axelena started to laugh. She laughed out loud and no one heard her except Oren. Oren liked that quite a bit. Nothing would ever pull him away from her. Not even the rain.

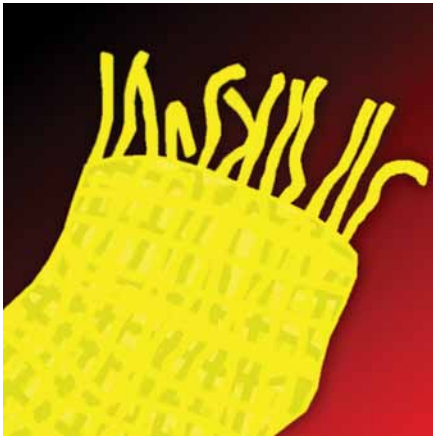
The next day Axelena convinced Oren to help her look for her family. Axelena explained that where her family lived was beneath the waterline and it often flooded. They trudged through the runoff and slowly began to come to the edge of the water. They set off down Waterloo road until they came to where Axelena's family lived. Oren saw them first and tensed. Axelena felt his hand grip hers hard

and she looked at his face and followed the look in his eyes. Her family had all drowned and their bodies had washed back up and under the front porch. It must have been at least two days since they had died because the bodies had begun to bloat from the water. Axelena made her way up the path and took her Mother's legs and drug her up to the porch. Oren stood there motionless. He was terrified. Axelena eventually drug the bodies of her Mother, Father, and sister up to higher ground and buried them. By the time she returned to Oren he had sat down on the porch and was very still. Axelena sat down beside Oren and washed the mud from her hands in the water by her feet. Oren turned to Axelena and said, "I'm sorry...I...I'm sorry." Axelena said, "They were all I had in this world other than my grandmother and she lives pretty far away, down in Mississippi. I'll be going to see her now." She looked at Oren with tears in her eyes, "Are you gonna come with me, or you gonna stay here. Now, you don't owe me anything you know. I care about you and this, none of this gonna change anything with you and me." They sat there for what seemed hours. Staring out at the water Oren said, "Where is Mississippi?"



CHRIS MANSEL is a writer, filmmaker, epileptic, musician, photographer and a permanent outsider for some reason. He is the author of *While in Exile: The Savage Tale of Walter Seems*, *Ashes of Thoreau*, *Interviews* and two books of photography entitled, *No Burden* and *Ahisma*. Along with Jake Berry, he formed the band Impermanence who have released one album, *Arito*. He releases music under the name dilation Impromptu who have released four albums and have just released a new CD *Indentions On The North Face of Everest*. His writing is published on the web in many sources.





Yellow

Adam Heath Avitable

Her yellow scarf caught my eye as I passed. Without a thought, I raised my hand to it, as if to extract a piece of lint. If she saw my movement in her periphery, it didn't seem to register, at least not until I grabbed both ends of the scarf and pulled them tight. By then, though, the only reaction she could manage was a look of incredulity as her life ebbed away. Sixty seconds passed until I relaxed my grip, tucked my gloved hands into my pockets, and continued on my way.

That was almost nine months ago. Two hundred and sixty-three days, to be exact, since the night that I strangled a stranger on a quiet street. For ninety-four nights prior to that evening, I walked randomly throughout the city, waiting for my chance, never quite knowing if I would feel it when the time was right and, most importantly, if I would be capable of doing what I needed to do.

My experience disappointed me. There was no euphoria, no sadness, no adrenaline. Just recognition that at my hands, a hunk of meat that processed oxygen and expelled carbon dioxide was now a hunk of meat that didn't. I know that it was irrational to expect more, but I did.

Nothing has changed for me. There are no nightmares or restless nights for me. Each morning, I wake up refreshed, exercise, eat a healthy breakfast, and go to my job, where I work diligently. In my free time, I enjoy going out with my friends. Sometimes I date women whom I occasionally fuck.

I haven't shared my actions with anyone. Who would understand the need to perform the perfect murder just to experience it? Who could I talk to and explain that it feels like nothing? That I have suffered no mental, physical, societal, or moral repercussions for my actions? That karma and God are just words with no power? That I finally have figured out what I need to do next, in order to attempt to feel something?

An uneventful day at work led to an uneventful walk home. As I did every day, I stopped at the store and bought the same item. Was my step a little quicker than usual, in anticipation of the events of the evening? Did my heart beat faster? I can't remember, but I would rather think that I acted exactly the same as every day before.

I entered my apartment and locked the door behind me. I was home, and it was time. I took my purchase out of the bag and placed it in my bedroom next to the two hundred and sixty three identical items. My clothes went into the hamper and my shoes into the closet, where they belong. I sat on my bed, naked, ready, careful not to wrinkle the bedspread. One by one, I examined all two hundred and sixty four pieces until I chose the one that would do the deed. It was the first one I bought, almost nine months ago.

Stretching it in front of me, feeling the soft material, I stood on the bed and wrapped it six times around the beam in the ceiling. The other end of the yellow scarf went around my neck until my breathing became labored. And then I jumped. 🌀



ADAM HEATH AVITABLE is a humorist, nudist, satirist, misandrist, elitist, and cunning linguist who likes to drink martinis with a twist. When he's not terrifying the world with testicular photography over at his blog at Avitable.com, he wastes his law degree by doing stand-up comedy and offering free mammograms out of the back of a van.

Story art courtesy of the author.



Hit by a Club

Marty Mankins

A crowd forming out front had been waiting in anticipation for the doors to open. The heat of the day began to dissipate, being replaced by an evening chill that was still considered warm. It had been a good five years since I'd been to this club. It was a memorable experience and one that I planned to keep in my mind for many years. Tonight may have the chance of eclipsing that, but it would have to be monumental – even grand scale like proportions.

As I stood in line, I felt a tap on my shoulder. “Have you seen this band before?” As I turned around, I saw a 20-ish female, dressed in a summer dress, adorned with light colors and small straps holding it onto her small frame. Glancing down at her feet, I was expecting to see a pair of white sandals, but instead saw a dark pair of dark boots, which seemed out of place for her outfit, but appropriate for a performance at a club.

“I haven’t, but I’ve heard good things,” I responded. As I turned back around to be in unison with the rest of those in line, my mind focused on getting inside and finding a place in front of the stage.

As the doors to the club opened, the patrons began to move forward inside, each one seemingly filled with anticipation.

“A vodka Red Bull and a lemon drop,” I said to the bartender. “And a shot of Jameson,” a slightly familiar voice behind me spoke. It was the girl that was in line behind me.

“um, ok... a shot of Jameson, as well.”

“Will that be on your tab, sir?” I had to think about this for a brief moment. It’s just one drink – from one person to another. “Sure, why not.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that.” Her words seemed sincere, but I was still a bit taken back by her boldness. It’s not that

I wasn’t going to turn her away. I mean, how could I have. It would have seemed rude, not that her sudden expectation to add her booze to my tab wasn’t.

She stood in front of me, shooting the whiskey shot and then setting the glass on the bar. I threw back the lemon drop and sat my empty glass next to hers.

“Do you come here a lot?” I asked, still holding my vodka Red Bull in my left hand.

“Yes, at least once a month. Normally I come with a couple of friends, but they had to work tonight, so I decided to come alone.” As she talked, her dark green eyes stayed focused on me, even with so many others around us.

“I’ve not been here in a years, but I remember this place being a bit smaller.” Trying to construct some sort of small talk while wondering when the first band would start doing their sound check.

“There’s other clubs in town that are better, but this place seems to still bring out a lot of people”. As she turned around to assess the increasing crowd, I looked around myself, mostly to mimic her actions, just not intentionally.

The first notes of the guitar were followed by “test check... test check 2, test check 3.”

“C’mon,” the sundress girl reached out for my right hand, latched onto it and pulled me with her into the small dance floor area in front of the stage. We snaked through several people and found a place about two people deep from the front.

Once in place on the dance floor, I drank the rest of my drink and held onto the plastic cup like I was expecting to refill it later on. The girl turned around and gave me a friendly look.

“So what’s your name?” The first band hadn’t taken the stage yet and it was obvious she wanted to kill the time with more small talk.

“Paul. What’s yours?”

“Jeanie. Jeanie Clark.” I didn’t offer up my last name, nor did I feel compelled to, but for some reason, I ended up blurring it out.

“I’m Paul Westerberg. Nice to meet you Jeanie.”

“Did you just say your name was Paul Westerberg?” It was the first name that came into my head. I really didn’t want her to know my real last name. And I thought for sure she would have no idea who The Replacements were.

“You know that’s the lead singer of an 80’s alternative band, right?” The distrusting smirk on her face let me know she wasn’t buying it.

“Um, yes... I know.” Busted by a cute little club gal, I was about to come clean with my real last name when she interrupted. “My last name is not Clark, but I don’t know of a musician named Jeanie Clark.” Relieved, I responded back to her. “Why don’t we just stick with first names tonight.” She nodded in response and turned back around to face the stage.

The first band played a set of eight songs, mostly hard rock with a bit of rockabilly thrown in to be different. Jeanie turned around. “Shall we get more drinks? This time, I’ll buy.” I guess she was trying to be nice and return the favor,

or so that was my only expectation. "You stay here and I'll be right back. We don't want to lose our place."

I watched others check her out as she made her way through the packed club towards the bar. She seemed certain of herself and had little trouble in letting others know she was a regular.

"Here ya go... cheers" She clinked her shot glass of Jameson against my lemon drop and threw it back. I gulped mine just as quickly. She leaned down, placed the glasses on the ground just minutes before the next band took the stage.

"These guys are good... I think you'll like them." And with those words, the spotlights lit up as the guitarist hit the first strum. We both danced and moved our heads back and forth throughout the hour-long set.

The house lights came on and the crowded venue started to make their way to the exit. "No encore, but still a great set. Did you like them?" Jeanie tilted her head to the right as she spoke.

"Yeah, they were pretty good. I liked them a lot." I wasn't fibbing here. I enjoyed the music, even if my mind still was curious where things could go with this girl. I wasn't really interested in her, but it was hard to ignore her cute and mildly aggressive personality.

"So the night is still young. Want to go somewhere?" As she looked at me, I reached into my pocket to check my phone. It was 11:45pm. I didn't have work in the morning, but I didn't want to tell her that. Or did I?

"Sure, I don't have work tomorrow. What do you have in mind?" Confused, but also a bit curious to know how the rest of the night would play out.

"There's this diner around the corner. Jed's Bistro. Ever been there?" I had, but it wasn't one of my favorite places to eat. It was deemed a greasy spoon, but not a horrible selection of food. She seemed to be in charge of where to go, so I nodded in agreement.

"Ok, let's go then." As we made our way out to the street, she asked where I was parked. "A good two blocks away. Isn't Jed's just over there?" I pointed towards the south, thinking I knew where I was.

"Oh yeah, it's just a block away." She latched onto my hand again, as she did earlier in the night. "So you know The Replacements?" I asked her, continuing our facetious last name conversation from the club as we walked.

"Of course. Who doesn't know that band? They had a great sound that lots of other bands have mimicked over the years." For someone that I guessed to be in her 20's, she was well versed in her musical knowledge. Slightly changing the subject, she continued, "So why did you not tell me your real last name?"

I replied back without missing a beat, "Why did you not tell me your real last name?" She responded in a coy tone, "Ahh... touché. I was always taught growing up to never give too much information to a stranger."

"Well, that is good advice. I guess I must have gotten that same advice, too." This wasn't true. I simply was more of a private person that didn't like to divulge too many details. At this point of the night, I was now concentrating more on not revealing too many more details about myself to this girl.

Walking into Jed's, we were greeted by a white-aproned gentleman, "booth or table?" "Booth please," I spoke before Jeanie could, proving I could be assertive in my own way. As we sat down, another waiter brought over a couple glasses of

water. "Can I take your order?"

As I looked up at the waiter, Jeanie glanced at me and spoke without pausing "I'm starved... let's order now." We placed our order and I turned to watch the waiter walk away. I wondered in my head when the food would arrive, as I was a bit hungry myself.

"I've had a nice time tonight," Jeanie proving again she's not one to stay silent about what she's thinking about. I wondered why she said that now, instead of when we would part ways, which I was expecting to be after leaving this diner.

"Me too. I enjoyed the show," speaking rather honestly, but reserving any comments about how I felt about this forward, yet intriguing girl.

"So what do you think of me, Paul?" Another honesty and no holds barred question that would require more time to process than I had. Do I like her? I think so, but damn, is she forward. Would I want to see her again? I guess, but I don't know what to think about something like a second date... or a first date for that matter.

"Well, I have to admit, you are persuasive and you speak your mind and you have a very outgoing personality." I wanted to say something without it sounding verbatim from a list of canned responses.

"Well, yes, that's me alright." And then without even thinking about it, I wanted my curiosity sparked. "So what was it about me that made you come to instead of the many other guys tonight?"

"Oh, you were ordering drinks and I wanted one, too..." Jeanie's eyes were focused on mine, waiting for a response. Before I could even think of something to reply with, she cracked a smile and spoke, "Nah... I was just kidding. I thought you looked nice and that you wanted some company tonight." She was partially right. I wouldn't have minded someone to hang out with. Going to concerts alone isn't bad, but it is more fun when you can share it with others. Normally that would be with others you know, but in this case, meeting someone new could have also defined "others."

As our food arrived to the table, I felt a bit of relief, but also was starting to get into this conversation. My internal questioning of how interested I was in this girl was taking over my lack of social skills.

After finishing the meal of eggs, toast and bacon, I eyed the waiter, who promptly walked over and dropped off the check. I looked at Jeanie and she at me, as we both glanced over at the check on the edge of the table. "Dutch?"

"What's dutch?" Jeanie appeared to not know what dutch meant, so I went into further detail. "Shall we split the check?" Which she quickly replied to, "Oh, I get it... you want to make sure that I'm not expecting you to pay the whole bill, right?"

Holy shit... is this girl serious or just fucking with my head. I'm not sure how to respond here, other than with something apologetic. I could tell by her repeat smirk, that she was once again kidding, which brought some relief to my emotional state. As she reached over to pick up the bill, I wanted to reach out and grab it first, but I resisted.

Turning the check over, she reached into her back pocket. "Here's \$8, that should cover my portion of the bill plus the tip." As she placed the cash on top of the check, I reached into my back pocket for my wallet.

"And here's my portion of the bill, including the tip." I placed a \$10 bill on top of the cash and smiled back at Jeanie. "Oh, look who's trying to one-up me in the 'I'll be the cavalier person here' department." I was catching on to her type of responses. Honest, yet funny in nature. With maybe a bit of random natured digs at this whole scenario of two strangers at a diner together late at night.

Leaving the booth, I grabbed the cash and check, took it over to the cashier and paid the bill. "It's all good, thank you," assuming they knew that we were leaving a decent tip.

Jeanie and I walked out of the diner and down the road, back towards the club. Small talk ensued once again. "I had a nice time tonight. Would you like to do this again?" With a pending end to our night, this seemed like the right place and time.

Jeanie smiled at me and responded, "Yes, I would. I never expected to meet a nice guy, even if it takes him a while to get my joking around." I guess any physical responses weren't cloaked by my internal reactions very well. Found out, if you will. Read me like a book. A cliché phrase, but it described me well tonight.

As she reached into her pocket, Jeanie turned to me. "Call my phone. 685-444-3825." I reached into my pocket and quickly swiped my phone and tapped the phone app and dialed. "444- what were the last four numbers again?"

"3825. It spells 'fuck' on the letters." My response was abrupt, "What? Why would you want to spell fuck? Who came up with that?" An odd response, but it was all I had on short notice. It was a semi-serious question.

"A friend of mine always thought it was funny to get those numbers. She gets lots of booty calls and giving out her number, she would always laugh as she told the guy 'call me... 555-FUCK.' I thought it was funny, too, even though I'm not in the business of fielding booty calls."

I chuckled and replied; "It also spells 'duck,'" trying my hand at being funny with a stranger. "You know, so if you were giving your number out to someone else." I bumbled through my intended humorous response, but it turned into a crash and burn.

Jeanie laughed, looking down at the ground, then back up at me. "You're right, although for others, I just give out the real numbers. No need for confusion."

We approached an obviously empty club. Where cars had lined up and down the road earlier in the evening, it was now all visible curbing and sidewalks. "I parked just around the corner. Where did you park?" I now awaited her response.

"A friend dropped me off earlier. I was hoping I wouldn't have to call them to come pick me up this time of night." Talk about an expectation. Was she really expecting me to drive her home? I mean, I will. I'm not going to leave her to walk or bother her friend at this time of night.

"So you need a ride... wait a minute. Let me rephrase that..." "I looked around, then backed away and called out to Jeanie as if she were stranded on the side of the road. "Hi

there... do you need a ride home?" Laughter once again escaped from this still quite energetic girl. "Sure, stranger. I'll take a ride."

Approaching my car, I pulled the keys from my pocket and unlocked the car. "Aren't you going to get the door for me?" Jeanie stood on the passenger side of the car with a perplexed look on her face. Running around the front of the car, I offered my best response, given my lack of skills in the ways of female etiquette after an evening out on the town.

I opened the door, waited for her to get in, and then closed the door. Walking back to the driver's side, my mind thought about how long it had been since I had opened the door for someone. Was it my mother? Did I offer that kind of valet service to my last date? Speaking of dates, when was my last date?

Closing my door and putting on my seatbelt, I turned to Jeanie. "Where's home for you?" "Phoenix, Arizona." Her response should have been expected, but I was more focused on taking her to where she lived here, not where she grew up. We both laughed and she turned to me and smiled, "Go down to Main Street, then take a left at Elmwood. I'll guide you more once we get closer."

Since it was late at night, there was hardly any traffic out. It was a very quiet scene for a city that's so busy during the daylight hours. "How ofte..." I was ready to ask a question that I had asked earlier, but stopped myself as to avoid any embarrassment.

"What's that? Were you asking me a question?" I responded back to Jeanie, trying to cover myself, "No... I was thinking of something else and lost my train of thought."

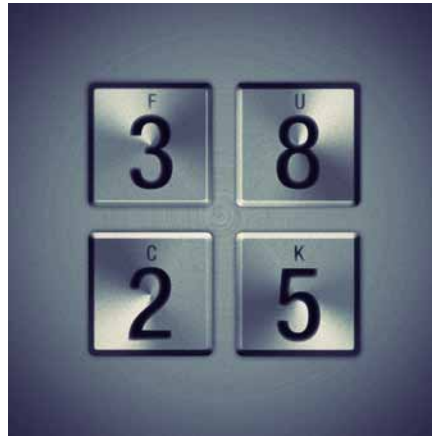
Silence filled the car for a moment, which seemed like minutes. "Turn left at Station Avenue, then a right on Glass Lane. My house is the third

house on the right." Making the appropriate turns, I pulled up past the driveway and stopped the car.

"I had a nice time tonight." I had heard this before, but it seemed to work better now. "Me too. I really didn't expect this, but glad it did." This wasn't a canned response. It was true. Jeanie leaned over, grabbed my face and turned it toward hers and planted a rather simple kiss on my lips. "You have my number, right?" Checking my phone, I looked at the last number dialed. "Yes, I do. 3825." As she opened her door and got out, she leaned back in and smiled back at me. "Or it could spell something else."

The passenger door closed and I drove away. As I got back out on the main road, I started to think about this entire evening. It was very much unexpected. I never imagined randomly meeting someone, especially a girl of this nature with an outgoing way and an up front attitude.

Looking back at my phone, I went back to the last number dialed and tapped the screen. It began to ring. "Hello?" I quickly turned the car into the next road and flipped around. "Does this number spell something?" The response back was a pleasant one, "Yes, it does." 📞



Marty Mankin's bio can be found on page 10.



Uncle Veryl

Matthew Hill

For my eleventh birthday, my grandfather on my dad's side had given me his old single shot Remington .410. He said it would be a good starter gun, one good for quail and whatnot. So after the adults had a few snorts, and the kids had the cake, my Uncle Veryl sits down next to me and says, Hey, tell you what. Let me take this .410 home and I'll clean it up for you. I'll even get some shells and make sure it shoots right. So of course I said Sure – I mean, I actually believed that Uncle Veryl would be true to his word and deliver on what he said.

A couple of months went by, and I was really wanting to try out that little .410, so I called up Uncle Veryl and asked him if he had my shotgun cleaned and ready. There was this long pause on the other end, & then he tells me he's not sure what I'm talking about. Would I perhaps be thinking of someone else who might have the gun? Completely flummoxed, I hung up & told my Dad, who immediately picks up the phone, & after mentioning my .410 to Uncle Veryl, the two of them proceed to have a very nasty conversation about a borrowed car that was returned in wrecked condition some years back.

My dad slammed down the phone and said we'd pick up the shotgun IF we go over to Uncle Veryl's ranch for Christmas dinner. Well, to call it a ranch would not be

quite accurate – Uncle Veryl actually had ten acres south of San Jose that he had some neglected looking sheep on. He would raise a crop of cucumbers, or pumpkins, or whatever, just to make some money to run the place, & then would hardly water or weed the plants during the summer months. Come October, there was barely a pathetic looking crop to show for his neglect, & he usually couldn't find a buyer for the produce. So he'd open up the pasture gate, & let the sheep go at whatever was starting to mold on the ground. Sometimes the sheep would be eating out the inside of the pumpkins, and occasionally one would get his head stuck inside one. The animal would panic, and run around like Ichabod Crane on four legs, crashing into the fencing until the pumpkin broke apart.

So, we never did make it to Christmas dinner at Uncle Veryl's place, because there was no dinner. Two weeks before the holiday, he was driving his Ford tractor on the bias across an embankment when it tipped to the left, crushing him as he hadn't had the presence of mind to jump off. My dad waited a month before he brought up the subject of the .410 to Veryl's widow, Aunt Clea. She said she had just cleaned out the house, and given all of Veryl's stuff to a local charity. When my dad told me this, I went down to the creek, found a good branch, and started whittling a slingshot for the quail. 🕒



MATTHEW HILL has authored five books of poetry & prose poems, several chapbooks, and has also edited two non-fiction compilations of various quotations. He served as editor/publisher of the Marshall Creek Press series of experimental literature chapbooks (1995-97), and has a book of short fiction soon to appear (*The Amplitude of Growlers*). Currently he resides in the southern part of Northern California.



Two Hundred Fifty

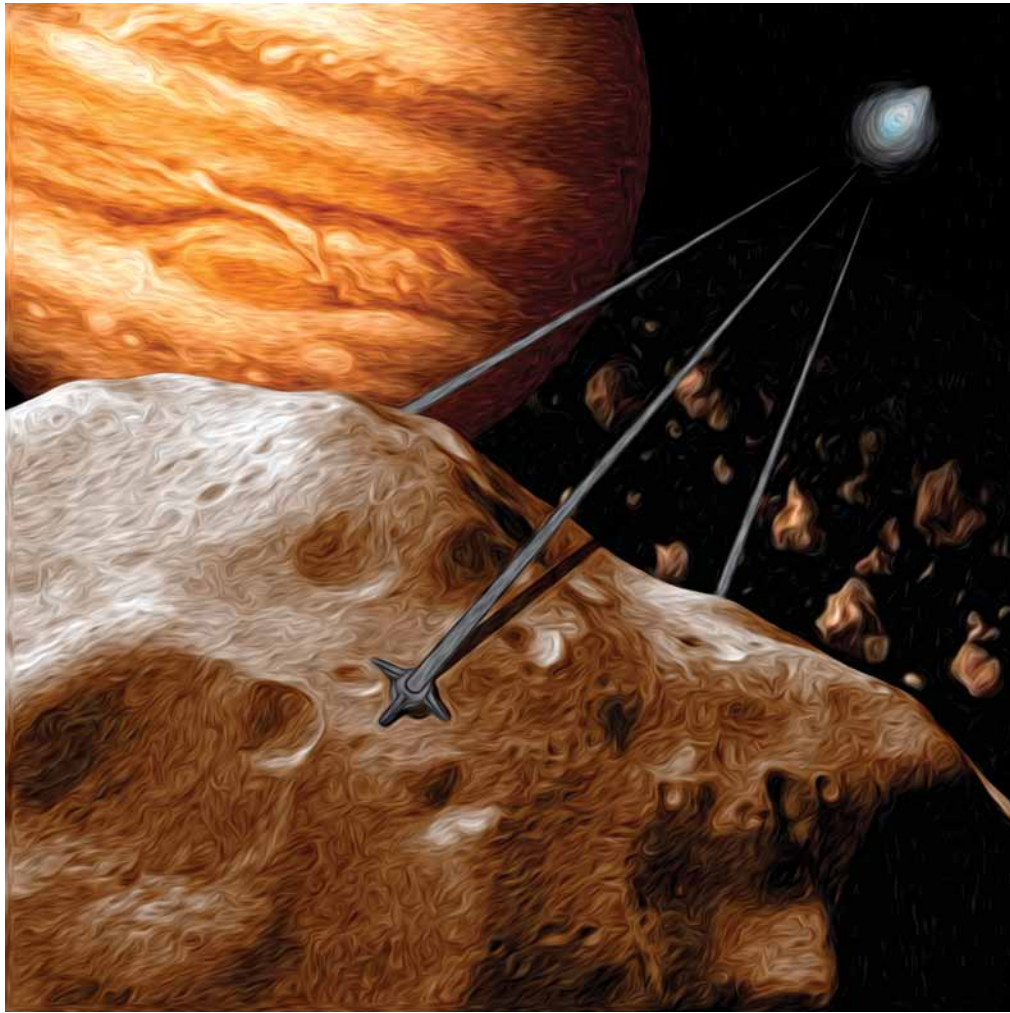
Ann Bogle

Sometimes I think we are in it all together, responsible to each other and for what happens to one another. We can prevent suicides. Other times I think this thinking is jaded, that having strange longings for world peace is unjustified. Happier and more optimistic people than I feel we are not in it for peace, not responsible for war or suicide. One million people die every year at their own hand, the hand that swallows the pills or plies a knife or loops a noose or turns on the gas. It amounts to more deaths than homicide and war combined. For every person who dies alone that way, another twenty try. An attempt that leads to death is called “completed.” I think it affects rent. The dead guy is not the bad guy, the only bad guy in a serene film about beauty, the living not the good guys on a team that wins at war. He is in his own category. He carries a name or label. He has a “profile” under law. In China it’s women. Some people are against fear. I am more against hate than against love. Someone will try to tell you

that love is a sickness. Someone is always diagnosing.

I walked and then I ran. I was in the woods on a paved path and couldn’t tell how long a block was: I just ran from tree to tree, blue racing line to blue racing line, thinking of kilometers. 🌀

Ann Bogle’s bio can be found on page 3.



Into the Dark

Robert Kroese

Matt Edlund craned his head to the left and pulled down on his neck tendons with his right hand, producing a cathartic series of cracks. It was an entirely unconscious movement, something he did every few minutes as he stared blearily at the mass of rock suspended in the middle of the LCD screen in front of him. The rock hadn't moved for nearly six hours, which was, all-in-all, a good thing, but it made for some pretty boring television.

"How are we doing on the mass estimate?" He said into his collar mike.

"No change from the last three times you asked," said a woman's voice in his ear. He could hear the wry smile in her voice, and he pictured her rolling her eyes. That was Serena. Patient. Long suffering. Always in control.

"Sorry, sweets," he said. "Guess I'm getting a little bored with this show. Seriously, it's like watching a Terence Malick movie."

"Who?" she asked absently.

"Never mind," he said. "I'm distracting you. Just do your thing. I'll shut up now." Serena didn't share his encyclopedic knowledge of twentieth-century movie trivia; she used her brain for more important things, like calculating the mass of the three-kilometer-long asteroid that was tethered to the rear end of the *CMS Morgana*.

The asteroid, officially named (21482) Olive, was an irregular hunk of stone, iron, and various other minerals like platinum, cobalt and palladium. The stone was worthless, dead weight. The iron, while not worthless, certainly wasn't worth a 600 million kilometer round trip to retrieve it. The hope was that there was enough of the other stuff to make this expedition worthwhile. Asteroid mining was a hit-and-miss business; CMS had been lucky to have made enough "hits" in a row to become the leading extraterrestrial mining company in the solar system. A few misses, though, and they'd be out of business. The magic number

was three percent: if an asteroid's composition was at least three percent "valuables" – that is, valuable minerals – then the expedition would pay for itself. The mix was always different. Some minerals were worth more than others, and prices were in a constant state of flux, but the three percent rule of thumb had remained surprisingly reliable since asteroid mining began with CMS's first flight nearly twenty years earlier.

Still nothing happened on the monitor. The rock remained motionless as ever. Matt yawned and cracked his neck again. He resisted the urge to ask Serena for an update.

Ideally, Serena would have calculated Olive's mass before they had anchored it to the *Morgana*, but that wasn't how mining worked. Actually, in an ideal universe, CMS's unmanned probes would have calculated Olive's mass and composition precisely before the *Morgana* had even arrived, but that wasn't how mining worked either. Asteroid mining was, in short, a series of increasingly more accurate intelligent guesses. The CMS geologists would select the optimal asteroid for mining, based on size, estimated composition, distance, orbit, proximity to neighboring asteroids and other hazards, and a host of other considerations. Then a mining ship like the *Morgana* would be sent out to tether the rock and tow it back to earth.

At this point the composition of the rock didn't make any difference to Matt and Serena. The *Morgana* didn't carry enough fuel for them to seek out another target, so they would tow Olive to orbit around Earth, where the drillers would determine whether CMS was going to have another quarter of strong earnings. But getting Olive back to earth was by no means an exact science either: the geologists had determined Olive's mass to within a margin of error of plus or minus zero point eight percent – which was impressive, but zero point eight percent is a pretty big margin when you're towing a few million tons of rock through the gravitational sphere of Jupiter. A trajectory error of a tenth of a degree might be the difference between getting home safely and spending the next thousand years as the latest addition to Jupiter's collection of moons.

The most accurate way of measuring Olive's mass was also the most primitive: see how hard it is to move. And that's precisely what Matt and Serena were now doing. He had fired the *Morgana's* thrusters at full power for exactly three seconds, and now Serena was attempting to calculate how far out of its orbit Olive had budged. Or maybe she was trying to calculate the difference between the *Morgana's* current position and where the *Morgana* would have been if it hadn't been tethered to Olive when Matt fired the thrusters. Matt had graduated with honors as an engineering major from Cal-Poly, but even trying to keep track of the number of variables Serena had to work with gave Matt a headache. The *Morgana* floated at the periphery of Jupiter's realm of influence, so she would have to take into account Jupiter's pull as well as that of several neighboring asteroids, in addition to the mass of the *Morgana* and the thrust it had

produced.

"Okay, got it," Serena said at last.

"So?" Matt asked. "What's the magic number?"

"I'm sending you thrust vectors."

"So that's how it is, huh?" Matt asked.

"Yep," replied Serena. "Don't worry your pretty little head with things like mass and acceleration. Just do what you're told."

"Yes, ma'am," replied Matt. The sad thing was that Serena was only half-joking. She knew that the mass number would be meaningless to Matt; all he needed to do was punch in the thrust vectors. Serena was the brains of this operation; he was, at best, the hands and feet.

Matt squeezed his eyes tight and cracked his neck one more time. With any luck, they wouldn't have to do another calibration for three days or so. He unsnapped his shoulder harness and lightly pushed off against the rubber-matted floor. Grabbing a rung above his head, he propelled himself through a narrow steel tunnel, re-emerging in the *Morgana's* nav center. Serena greeted him with a smile and a hug.

"That's the longest we've been apart for three months," said Matt.

"I don't think it counts as being apart," replied Serena. "You were ten meters away. And we were in constant radio contact."

"Still, I missed you terribly," said Matt.

Serena stuck out her tongue at him. She was petite, with short brown hair and a pretty face liberally dotted with freckles. There was no one Matt would rather be stuck in a tin can with for six months.

"Tomorrow's our anniversary, you know," he said.

"Is it?" Serena asked. "We should –"

A warning chime sounded and a red light flashed above their heads. "Shit," said Matt. "What now?"

Serena scanned the warning message that had popped up on her monitor. "Winch number three is sticking," she said. "Can you cycle through the self-test?"

"Yeah," said Matt, maneuvering himself in the zero gravity to his station next to Serena's. She had been using both stations for the thrust vector calculations, which is why Matt had retreated to the rear observation station. Now he nestled himself next to her again and brought up the self-test application for the towing winches. "Gimme a sec."

Olive was tethered to the *Morgana* by three steel cables. The thinking was that if one of the cables was severed by a rogue meteor or one of the pitons that secured the cable to the rock broke loose, there would still be two cables in place. The problem with this system was that it required a mechanism to equalize tension between the three cables – which is where the automated winches came in. If one cable was pulling too hard, it would release some slack on that cable and tighten the other two in an effort to keep the load evenly distributed. If one of the winches had jammed, that was bad news.



After a frustrating several minutes of tapping keys and waiting for a response from winch number three, Matt sighed. "No good. It's stuck bad."

"Okay, now what? Go out there and fix it?"

Matt shook his head. "Protocol is to try to torque it loose. Loosen the other two cables and hope that winch three releases."

"Jesus," said Serena. "That sounds dangerous."

"Not as dangerous as suiting up and trying to un-jam it with a crowbar." He tapped a series of commands into the keyboard, overriding the dynamic tensioning system and letting cables one and two go slack. Then he entered the thrust vectors Serena had sent him minutes earlier. At present, there was minimal tension on cable three because it and the *Morgana* were in free-fall, but when Serena's thrust schedule kicked in, the *Morgana* would begin a series of accelerations that would adjust its path to allow them to slingshot around Jupiter and back toward Earth. Hopefully the acceleration would be enough to un-jam the winch – but not enough to tear the piton free from the rock.

"When's the next thrust?" Serena asked.

"No time for that," Matt said, winking at her. It was an obvious joke, but he knew she'd have been disappointed if he hadn't taken advantage of the setup.

"Ha, ha," said Serena dutifully. "Seriously, when?"

"Thirty-eight minutes. We'll know soon enough."

They waited in silence.

Matt and Serena had gotten married two years and 364 days earlier. They were the first husband-and-wife extraterrestrial mining crew in history – but if all went well, they would likely not be the last. Originally these asteroid-retrieval expeditions had been designed as one-person operations, and in truth there was no technical reason to have two crew members aboard. But CMS altered its methodology when it lost its second miner to suicide. Both had been driven insane by the solitude and gone out the airlock – the latter one sans pressure suit. Cynics argued that CMS's change in attitude had more to do with the fact that the second suicide also cost them a ten-billion-dollar spacecraft than concern about their crewmembers.

Whatever the rationale, CMS was ultimately forced to redesign its vessels to accommodate two crew members, in order to ward against the loneliness and depression that went with extended space travel. They spent a small fortune trying to devise a scientific model of the perfect two-person mining team only to come to the obvious conclusion that the best possible team was a happily married couple. And just like that, Matt and Serena Edlund – an unexceptional air force test pilot and a computer scientist toiling away on CMS's navigation software, respectively – vaulted to the top of the list of candidates to man the first two-person mining mission in CMS's history. There had been three other couples under consideration (two male-female teams and a lesbian couple), but Matt and Serena had outscored all of them on both individual psychological tests and cooperative problem-solving exercises. They were, as far as CMS was concerned, the perfect team.

"Here we go," said Matt, as the thrusters fired. Gravity suddenly pulled him down into his chair. On the monitor in front of him was Olive. Three barely perceptible silver lines – the tethering cables – began at the bottom of the

screen, disappearing after a few inches into the shadow of the asteroid.

A minute jolt shuddered through the craft.

"What the hell was that?" Serena asked.

Matt bit his lip. "Hopefully, the winch letting go. Otherwise..."

Something was off about one of the lines on the bottom of the screen: its angle had changed slightly. That could only mean one thing.

"Oh, fuck," said Matt. "Hold on."

The number three piton had snapped, and now the loose end of the cable was recoiling toward the *Morgana*. There was a flash at the bottom of the screen as the remnant of the drilling assembly caught the sunlight, and then it disappeared from sight. Half a second later, there was another jolt, this one bigger than the first. The crunch of metal reverberated through the cabin. The warning chimes sounded and red lights blinked furiously.

"No loss of pressure," said Serena.

"Thank God," replied Matt. "Hopefully it didn't... ah, shit. The oxygen plant is reporting severe damage. It's completely offline."

Matt power-cycled the plant, but there was no response. "Can we get it on one of the cams?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Serena. "Number fourteen, I think."

Matt switched his display to show the input from camera fourteen. The view wasn't pretty.

"No way we're fixing that," said Matt grimly.

The *Morgana* was a monstrous assembly of preassembled modules, stacked like a tower of Lego bricks. One of these was the oxygen generation plant. It would have made more sense with a ship of the *Morgana*'s size to use two smaller oxygen plants, but the manufacturer only made the modules in one size, and redundancy wasn't cost-effective. A consequence of this design was that if the oxygen plant got knocked out, the crew of the *Morgana* was in deep shit. And what they saw on the monitor was a gaping hole in the side of the oxygen generation module.

"So what do we do?" Serena asked. But she knew the answer. There was nothing to do. They couldn't even radio CMS for help because they were on the far side of Jupiter.

"Better refigure the oxygen usage calculations," Matt said. "Assume zero output from the OGM. Maybe..." His voice trailed off. He couldn't make himself complete the thought, because he knew it was a lie. Maybe we can both make it home....

Matt sat in silence while Serena re-worked the calculations. As he sat watching her work, he felt completely helpless – the same way he felt when he sat with her in the hospital after the accident. That was nearly two years ago, before they had been selected as the crew of the *Morgana*. They had been on their way to a Halloween party, Matt dressed as a pirate and Serena dressed as a mermaid. Matt had swerved to avoid a stray cat in the road and skidded sideways into a telephone pole. Serena's head had crashed through the passenger's side window and slammed into the pole. The doctors had kept her in a coma for three weeks to control the swelling of her brain. Matt had stayed with her in the hospital, leaving her side only for a few minutes at a time. The thought of losing her was more than he could stand. He had barely slept and lost over twenty pounds from

his already wiry frame.

At last she had regained consciousness and began to show steady improvement. Within another three weeks, she had made a near-complete recovery. Only a few days later, they got the call from CMS, asking whether they would be interested in trying out for a spot on the mining crew rotation. It was an opportunity that neither of them had dared dream of. In the span of a few months, Matt had gone from the depths of despair to the highest heights known to humankind.

And now it was over. At least one of them would die before reaching Earth. Matt found himself hoping that there was no possibility of even one of them making it, so that they wouldn't have to make the decision that he dreaded.

The grimace on Serena's face told him that his hope would be unfulfilled.

"We have, maybe, just enough oxygen for one of us to make it back," she said bluntly. "Sedation would help. If we put everything on automatic, and try to sleep as much as possible...."

"It has to be you," said Matt.

"No," said Serena.

"Serena, listen to me. You're the brains of this operation. You can manage the nav system if you need to, but I can't do the thrust vector calculations."

"You could, Matt. It's not as hard as you –"

"Okay, sure. I could do it, but it will take me five times as long. That means I'd have to spend more time awake than you. And as you say, whoever... stays... has to sleep as much as possible, to minimize oxygen use. In any case, you're smaller. You only use about seventy-five percent as much oxygen as I do."

Serena shook her head. "I don't think I can do it, Matt."

"You'll be fine," Matt said. "You're stronger than I am. When you were in the coma, I fell apart. I couldn't even muster the strength to feed myself. No way I'm piloting this ship back home in that condition. You're not like that. You're stronger than you realize. You'll carry on."

"Matt, no!" Serena cried, horrified. "I can't! You don't understand. I can't make it without you!"

"Serena, goddammit! Don't you think I know how hard this is? But there's really no choice. It has to be you. If you leave me, then we're both dead. You have to be the one to bring the *Morgana* home."

Serena closed her eyes and tears streamed down her face. She unbuckled her harness and moved toward Matt to embrace him.

"I'm sorry, sweetie," he said. "There just isn't any other way."

"Don't say you're sorry!" Serena said. "You're the one who's...." She trailed off.

For several minutes, they held each other in silence.

At last, Serena spoke again. She was doing her best to resume her mathematician's demeanor. "How are you going to do it?"

"I'll... go out the airlock. Otherwise you'd have to..."

Serena nodded. There was no need to explain: obviously there was no room on the *Morgana* for a decaying corpse.

"I'll take some painkillers before I eject myself. With any luck I'll be stoned out of my mind before I run out of air."

Serena tightened her embrace. A tear drop floated in

front of Matt's eyes.

"Okay, let's get to work," Matt said, a bit too tersely. His bravado was pointless; Serena could see right through him. But for some reason he felt compelled to put up a brave front. Something hard-wired into the XY chromosome, he thought. "One final systems check, and then we'll have our last supper. Break out those beef burgundy packets we've been saving."

Serena nodded and did her best to smile. "Okay. Meet you back here at sixteen hundred."

"Yes, ma'am," said Matt, and unsnapped his harness. He pushed himself toward the opening opposite the one he had arrived from earlier. Every day they went through a standard check of all the *Morgana's* systems; he could do his part in his sleep. Of course, after today, Serena would have to do both parts. He considered suggesting that they trade, but that would be pointless. She'd have to learn on her own, either way. In any case, he had no doubt she'd figure it out.

The prescribed order for the tests didn't make much sense on paper – the nav system was to be checked before the electrical system, for example – but the rationale became clear once you were inside the *Morgana*. The tests were ordered by proximity, from the two ends of the ship to the center. Usable space was at a premium in these ships; there simply wasn't enough room for two people carrying toolboxes to pass each other in the narrow shaft that ran the length of the *Morgana*. Despite the retrofit, the quarters were still cramped – even for a married couple.

Still, it was better than being alone. The sanity of even the most well adjusted astronaut was strained by six months in space. Real-time communication with Earth was impossible after the initial burst of thrust, leaving the occupants of the craft in near total isolation only three weeks after takeoff. And once you were behind Jupiter, all communications were cut off, leaving nothing but the crushing boredom of deep space.

There was no technical reason for the *Morgana* to have two crew members, but it was clear after Cam LeFevre took his little space walk wearing nothing but his coveralls that the basic human need for social contact wasn't going to bow to technical requirements. Human beings just weren't designed to be alone for six months at a time.

At first, CMS, beholden to its shareholders, tried to take the cheap way out. Rather than redesign the ship's hardware to accommodate two passengers, they tried to solve the problem with software. The idea was to design a computer program that could mimic human interaction. They called it Sidekick. When the programmers finished it, they locked up a few test subjects with only Sidekick to talk to. Unfortunately, CMS had to cut the experiment short after three weeks because the instance of psychosis was higher with Sidekick than without. Prisoners in solitary confinement fared better than the poor bastards who were subjected to Sidekick.

On the other hand, a single astronaut would never have had to face the choice that had been forced upon Matt and Serena. He told himself that he had made the right call: it had to be Serena who lived. She had a better chance of making it home.

Matt had just reached the fore end of the ship when an alarm sounded. His mouth went dry and his stomach

tightened. He knew that sound: Serena had opened the inner airlock door.

Matt latched his toolkit to one of the rungs that lined the interior of the *Morgana* and tucked himself into a ball, pushing against the rung to send himself spinning head-for-feet. Reaching out again in a practiced motion, he braked himself against the rung, forcing himself to come to a complete stop, then pushed off down the shaft. The fastest way to get to the airlock was with a single, well-aimed jump, but in his haste Matt badly misjudged and ended up crashing into the side of the shaft some ten meters down. Bouncing off the panel, he came to a halt when his head struck one of the rungs. Matt cursed, took a deep breath, and jumped again. This time he sailed straight down the shaft, not stopping until he grabbed a rung across from the airlock door.

Matt turned just in time to see the airlock status monitor display:

DE-PRESSURIZATION COMPLETE

Above this message was an image of Serena, standing in the airlock, smiling placidly at him. She wasn't wearing a pressure suit.

The display now read:

OPENING EXTERNAL DOOR

"No!" Matt screamed. "Serena, stop! What are you doing?"

The door slid open, revealing the dark of deep space and a smattering of stars.

Serena pantomimed blowing a kiss to him. Then she turned and launched herself into the blackness.

As her figure grew smaller, Matt stared in disbelief. Why would she do this? It made no sense. They had agreed, for Christ's sake. She was supposed to be the one to pilot the *Morgana* home.

Her words echoed in Matt's brain: *I can't! You don't understand. I can't make it without you!*

Disbelief was followed by waves of anger and grief – and then self-pity. Well, he thought. Now we're both fucked.

Serena's limp body drifted away as if pulled by the darkness of space.

To Matt's credit, he didn't bother to entertain vain hopes of rescuing her. She'd asphyxiate before he even had his suit on. He watched her float away until she was a tiny white speck in the blackness, and then kept watching for what might well have been hours. There was nothing else for him to do.

He hadn't been exaggerating when he told her he was incapable of navigating the *Morgana* back to Earth. It would have been a challenge for him even if he had a full supply of oxygen, and with his already barely adequate intellect compromised by grief and oxygen deprivation, he didn't have a chance.

At last he looked away, and the reality of the situation hit him: he was alone. As alone as anyone had ever been, 300 million kilometers from the nearest human being. 300 million kilometers. Another meaningless number. What mattered was that Serena was gone, her frozen body drifting

slowly into deep space.

Matt dragged himself numbly to the control center, strapping himself into his chair. He tapped in the thrust vectors Serena had given him earlier, and then activated the *Morgana's* distress beacon. Serena's vectors would get the *Morgana* around Jupiter and headed roughly in the direction of Earth. CMS would pick up the distress call, run a remote diagnostic, and discover that both crew members were dead. They would then send a salvage mission to retrieve the *Morgana* and its haul. The job would get done, even though the crew wouldn't be around to see it.

Matt mechanically unstrapped himself and navigated toward the medical locker. He swallowed a handful of narcotics and then made his way back to the airlock and began donning his space suit. He was under no illusion about his own gallantry; following Serena into the void fully conscious and sans space suit was probably the romantic thing to do, but Matt had no desire to die of a pulmonary embolism, exploding lungs, or any of the other conditions that ultimately led to death in a vacuum. No, he would stick to the plan, even if Serena hadn't: he would launch himself into space and drift into a narcotic slumber, dying peacefully when his 30-minute oxygen supply gave out.

As he sealed his helmet, he began to worry that the narcotics wouldn't take effect in time, and that he would feel his lungs burning from oxygen deprivation for several minutes before passing out. But then the drugs hit him like a hammer to the back of his head, and his anxiety spun 180 degrees: would he even get out of the airlock before he lost consciousness?

The helmet was on; the last thing to do was to don his gloves and seal them. This was really a two person job under ideal circumstances, and

with Matt's brain entering a narcotic haze, he found the task nearly impossible. His fingers felt like sausages dangling from his hands.

"Goddamn it," Matt sighed, as his vision blurred. "I'm sorry, Serena. I'm a moron. I can't even fucking..."

Matt awoke strapped into his cot. Serena was leaning over him. "Good morning," she said with a smile. There was a note of worry in her voice.

"What..." Matt started, groggily. "Serena! How did you...?"

"How did I what?" she asked. "I got us past Jupiter, if that's what you're wondering. I just pushed the numbers into the fancy computer thingy. I can manage some things on my own, you know."

"No," Matt said. "I meant, how did you survive... the airlock? You weren't wearing..."

Serena's brow furrowed as she regarded him sympathetically. "I'm sorry, Matt," she said. "I don't understand. I think you may still be a little confused from the drugs."

"The drugs," Matt repeated. "Shit, I took..."

"You took enough painkillers to kill... well, not a horse. Maybe a donkey. Get it? Because you're an ass. What the hell



were you thinking, Matt?"

"I thought you were dead," said Matt.

"Dead?" replied Serena, shocked. "Why would I be dead?"

"I saw you," said Matt. "You went through the airlock. Without a suit."

Serena shook her head. "Pretty sure I'd remember something like that," she said. "You must have been dreaming. It's OK, Matt. I'm here. I'm alive. We're going to make it back to Earth. Both of us."

Matt blinked and tried to shake away the fuzziness of sleep. "What? How?"

"While you were taking your little nap, I fixed the OGM. It's only at 23%, but it'll get us home. Just barely."

Matt couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You fixed the OGM? How in the hell...?"

"It wasn't as bad as it looked. The casing was pretty much toast, but some of the components were salvageable."

"But how...?" Matt trailed off, not wanting to insult Serena. If she said she fixed it, then she fixed it. But Serena was no mechanic. She didn't even know how to change the oil on their Toyota back on Earth. And yet she had repaired a complex piece of machinery while floating in deep space in a bulky pressure suit?

"It wasn't easy," said Serena. "I think I wore out the manual for the OGM. Oh, and one of our pneumatic wrenches is happily orbiting Jupiter. But the module is producing oxygen."

"Wow," said Matt, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. A good two days' stubble greeted his fingertips. "That's fantastic. We're going to make it home. I can hardly believe it."

The next day, Matt sat at his station, staring at a monitor showing the status of the *Morgana's* systems. At the lower left, a number coyly blinked red at him: 23.4%. According to the ship's computers, that was the current operating capacity of the oxygen generation module. On camera fourteen, it still looked like a trailer that had been hit by a tornado. Whatever Serena had done to the OGM, it wasn't apparent by looking at it. Still, the computer wouldn't lie. Would it? In any case, if the OGM were offline, the oxygen would definitely be getting thin by this point, with two people breathing it. As it was, the cabin was a little stuffy, but the atmosphere was hardly life-threatening. If the OGM held at 23.4%, in three months they'd be back in Earth's orbit – uncomfortable and exhausted, but alive. He should be thankful.

Still, the image from camera fourteen bothered him. The OGM looked completely inert; it was hard to believe it was working at all, much less operating at nearly a quarter of its maximum capacity. With that mangled casing, how had Serena even gotten into the guts of the module to repair it? It seemed impossible. She'd have had to pry the casing off with a crowbar – a difficult feat in itself – and then gone to the trouble of re-securing the casing when she was done. Serena could be meticulous to a fault, but taking the time to put the casing back on after fixing the module bordered on

pathological.

He couldn't go out and check it himself; the exertion would be an inexcusable waste of oxygen. They had barely enough to get back home as it was. And Serena would want to know why the hell he was taking an unnecessary trip outside the ship to check something that she and the ship's computer both assured him were working fine. On top of that, what would he do if he found that the OGM wasn't working after all? There was nothing to be done about it but wait and hope that Serena was right.

Serena. She was alive! He thought he had lost her, but somehow she was alive. Seeing her go out the airlock... that had been, what, a hallucination brought on by the drugs? But he had seen her exit the ship before he took the drugs. Or had he? Maybe the drugs were screwing with his memory.

A faint clink! echoed through the ship: the sound of a tool connecting with metal. Serena was finishing up her systems check and would soon be joining him in the command module. The noise reminded him of something: Serena said she had lost a wrench while working on the OGM.



His guilt at not trusting Serena paralyzed him for maybe a second, but then his curiosity got the better of him. He unstrapped himself and vaulted toward the tool cabinet where the wrenches were kept. Sliding down the catch, he opened the cabinet and peered inside. The pneumatic wrenches were all accounted for. So. Had Serena been joking about the wrench? How could he ask her without implying that he didn't trust her? He couldn't very well claim that he just happened to be looking for a pneumatic wrench; there was nothing in his system checks that

would require such a tool.

As he sat staring at the complete set of wrenches, he heard the noise of a boot on a ladder rung: Serena had finished her checks and was making her way back to the command module.

Matt quietly closed the cabinet door and pushed off against the wall, propelling himself back toward his chair. His heart beat rapidly and his armpits were suddenly damp with sweat. What was he so worried about? It's just Serena, for God's sake. Calm down, idiot; you're wasting oxygen.

Catching one of the restraint straps as he sailed over the chair, he pulled down and spun deftly, landing in his chair with a whoomf! He clicked the restraints into place mere seconds before Serena floated into the module. He took a deep breath and tried to look bored.

"Everything OK?" she asked, regarding him quizzically.

"Yeah," he said, a little too quickly. "I, uh, had a bit of a scare. Misread the fuel consumption figures and almost gave myself a heart attack. But everything's fine, yeah."

"Cool," she replied, maneuvering into her own chair and securing the restraints. "Everything checks out on my end. We should get some sleep."

"I'm not tired."

"Take a sedative. We're wasting oxygen."

"Give me a minute. Maybe I just need to relax a bit."

Serena shrugged and closed her eyes.

After a moment, Matt spoke again. "Hey, what was the name of that restaurant we used to go to in Houston? That place with the cheap T-bones. It had some horrible name."

Serena didn't open her eyes. "Happy Steak?"

Matt laughed. "Yeah, that was it. Happy Steak. We spent a lot of Friday nights there. We should go back sometime, after we get home."

"I don't think it's there anymore," said Serena. "I think it went out of business when I was in the coma." I drove past it afterwards, and it looked like it had been boarded up.

"Figures," said Matt. "We probably kept that place in business."

Leave it alone, thought Matt. You're not going to accomplish anything by pushing her. But his mind wouldn't leave it alone. Something wasn't right. After a moment, he spoke again.

"Hey, what was that game you were trying to teach me in the hospital?"

"Indiana Rummy?"

"Yeah, that's the one. We should play that game."

"We will. When we get back."

"Let's play now. Just one game. I think it will help me relax."

"No way," said Serena. "I'm not teaching you any more card games. You're a terrible student. You complain that I'm over-explaining things and then when you lose, you bitch about how I didn't explain the rules well enough. It's maddening."

"Please," said Matt. "Just one game. I promise I won't complain. How about if I look up the rules on the computer and wake you up when I'm ready to play?"

"Whatever," said Serena.

Matt punched Indiana Rummy into the console. The computer replied with: No matches found.

"Huh," said Matt. "The computer doesn't know the game. I thought it knew everything." In truth, he hadn't expected to find anything. After Serena's failed attempt to teach him the game, Matt had looked it up on the 'net, and had been surprised to find that as far as the 'net was concerned, Indiana Rummy didn't exist.

"I think my grandma invented it," said Serena.

"Your grandmother invented a card game?"

"Sure. The women in my family are a little eccentric. Mathematicians. They used to make up all sorts of card games, just for fun. Indiana Rummy was our favorite, though."

"OK, well, you're going to have to teach me, since the computer evidently isn't familiar with your grandmother's repertoire of card games."

"Later, Matt. Please. I'm trying to sleep."

"OK," Matt said. "Later." He closed his eyes and tried to sleep. But all he could see when he closed his eyes was the mangled OGM casing.

•

Matt looked up from his console. "So you going to teach me this game or what?"

"I'm kind of busy over here."

"Busy!" Matt snorted. "You're doing a Sudoku."

"Yes," Serena replied. "I'm busy doing a Sudoku."

"Come on," Matt wheedled. "You promised."

"Why do you suddenly want to play this game so bad, Matt?" Serena demanded irritably. "You sure as hell didn't show this much interest when I was in the hospital."

"Well, I'm interested now," he said, meeting Serena's glare with a cold gaze. "Teach me the game."

Serena looked away and laughed. "I don't think I remember the rules."

"Really," said Matt. "Your favorite game. The one you tried to teach me six months ago."

She turned to face him again. "That's right, Matt. I don't fucking remember," she snapped. "I don't remember how to play the game. Is that OK with you? I had a near-fatal head injury, remember? Maybe I forgot a few things."

Matt persisted. "CMS ran you through a hundred tests before letting you on this mission. There was no sign of brain damage or memory loss, except for the few moments before the crash. And in any case, you seemed to remember the rules just fine while you were recuperating, after you came out of the coma. If you don't remember the rules, it has nothing to do with the crash, and you know it."

"Jesus, Matt. What is it with you and this game? Just let it go, would you?" After a moment, she said again, more quietly, "Let it go, Matt. Please."

Matt found himself blinking away tears. What the hell was wrong with him? He was with the woman he loved, and in three months they would be back home, with a year of paid leave to spend together, doing whatever they wanted. Why couldn't he just accept that and be happy?

A tap of an icon brought up camera fourteen again. The mangled casing looked as bad as ever. Reason told him there was no way in hell that thing was working at 23% capacity. And then there was the supposed missing wrench. And his "hallucination." He had seen Serena go out the airlock, before he had taken any pills. Maybe the pills had screwed with his memory, scrambling the order of events, but it had seemed so real. He was sure that he had seen her go out the airlock – as sure as he was that she was sitting across from him now. On the other hand, maybe he was hallucinating now.

"Teach me the game," he said again.

"Matt, no..." she pleaded.

"Teach me the fucking game. Indiana Rummy. Teach me. Now."

Now Serena was weeping. "No, Matt," she cried. "Please don't make me."

"I love you, Serena," Matt said through gritted teeth. "If you ever loved me, teach me the game."

After a moment, she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and nodded. She tapped her screen a few times, and a window popped up on Matt's screen. It read:

Serena wants to play a card game with you. Accept/Refuse.

Matt accepted, and a deck of cards appeared. Seven cards flew off the deck, flipping to appear face-up at the bottom of his screen.

"Order the cards by their face value, regardless of suit," said Serena. All emotion had drained from her voice.

Matt tapped the cards, one by one. Two of clubs, three of hearts, six of spades, eight of hearts, nine of clubs, jack of

spades, king of diamonds.

The screen went dark. Then a message appeared. It read:

Project Avalon has been suspended. Stand by for instructions.

A face appeared on the screen. Matt gasped. He'd know that face anywhere: it was his own.

"Hi, Matt," said the Matt on the screen. He broke into nervous laughter. To someone off-screen, he said, "I feel like an idiot doing this. Can't somebody else... yeah, yeah. OK, I've got it."

Matt shuddered in his chair. He had no memory of making this recording. In the video, he was wearing a dirty gray sweatshirt. His hair was longer, and he had a beard. He looked gaunt and tired. It looked like the recording had been taken about six months earlier, during the depths of his depression, before Serena's miraculous recovery. In fact – was that the sound of a heart monitor beeping? Was this video taken in the hospital, by Serena's bedside? What kind of sick –

His thoughts were interrupted by the Matt on the screen. "Well, I guess if you're watching this, you've made it back to Earth safely. Either that, or something has gone pretty fucking wrong. I hope for your sake it's the former, but this isn't going to be easy for me either way. For you, I mean. Jesus." The man on the screen fought to compose himself. After a moment he continued.

"They're making me do this recording as a condition of the project. I guess it's as much for me as it is for you. They want it documented that I understand what they're going to do to me. That is, what they did to you. Understandable. You're probably going to want to sue them. Trust me; don't bother. You've waived every right you have.

"I want you to know, first of all, that I didn't do this primarily out of grief, although the grief is nearly unbearable. I also didn't do it because of the money, although the money is very good, as you'll soon find out, now that you're back home safely. I did it because I wanted to go into space. That's an opportunity very few people have, Matt. Remember that, whatever else happens.

"OK, so, Project Avalon. They're going to tell you that they retrofitted the *Morgana* to make it a two-person ship. They lied to you. They spent half a billion dollars trying to do it, but it was simply unworkable. If you take some measurements of the ship, you'll see what I mean. There's no way two people could live on that thing. Hell, there's only the one command station."

What the hell was he talking about? Matt wondered. Serena's right over –

He looked up from his station. The command module suddenly seemed very small. Serena was gone.

"Serena!" he called. But only silence followed. Where the hell could she have gone? And what had happened to the command module? Where was Serena's station?

"The studies showed they needed a two person crew," the Matt on the screen went on. "Another suicide and they'd be bankrupt. They thought they had their answer with Sidekick, but you know how that turned out. Well, you know the first part of the story, anyway. You won't remember the rest, because they removed some of your memories. Anyway, I'll get to that in a minute.

"At first the psychologists couldn't figure out what the

problem was. Sidekick was a nearly flawless implementation of artificial intelligence, the perfect non-living companion, but somehow it was driving test subjects crazy. Then they decided to try the experiment again, but without telling the subjects that Sidekick was a computer. A real Turing test, if you will. And guess what? It worked. The problem wasn't with Sidekick at all; the problem was in the perceptions of the test subjects. They were driven insane by the knowledge that their sanity depended on their friendship with a computer program.

"This presented a simple but vexing solution: somehow they had to convince an intelligent, sane, technically savvy pilot that Sidekick was a living, breathing human being. But how the hell do you do that? Well, not to put too fine a point on it, you have to fuck with a person's perceptions."

"No," said Matt to his doppelganger on the screen. "No, no, no..."

The doppelganger continued. "They are going to implant a chip in my head. Back here." He reached to touch the base of his skull, and Matt unconsciously did the same. He felt a small bump at the top of his spine "The chip is an interface between your brain and a computer program. An enhanced version of Sidekick. It creates what they call teleological hallucinations. In other words, hallucinations with a purpose. Your brain tells the chip what it needs, and the chip creates a hallucination that provides it. If you need thrust vectors, it will give you thrust vectors. If you need somebody to talk to, it will give you that. All in the form of your... my wife, Serena."

The Matt on the screen turned away from the camera, holding his hand over his eyes. Matt found himself with a lump in his throat and a queasy feeling in his stomach. He looked away from the screen. There was still no sign of Serena anywhere.

After some time, the Matt on the screen composed himself. "They are also going to alter my... your memories. You'll remember Serena waking up –" He bit his lip, fighting back tears. "You'll remember her waking up, and you'll remember the two of you being selected as the *Morgana*'s crew. You'll celebrate, get drunk, and wake up the next day with a bad hangover." His hand went to the base of his skull again. "After that, she'll be with you, in your head. All the time." He smiled weakly, as if looking forward to relief from his suffering.

"Now that you're back... well, you're going to have to come to grips with reality. Serena's gone. You piloted the *Morgana* by yourself, with a little help from Sidekick and your memories of Serena. They're going to make you have the chip removed. I honestly can't imagine how I will... how you feel about that. Maybe by now you want to cut it out yourself. Maybe you want to keep it forever, and pretend that she's still with you. Either one is a really bad idea.

"Let them take the chip out. Take some time off. See a therapist. You'll have enough money to live on for a few years, thanks to the deal I made with CMS. And I know you're going to want to blame them, but this isn't CMS's fault. They didn't kill Serena. All they did is delay your grief a bit, and give you an opportunity very few people have. And pay you very well for it, I'll add."

The Matt on the screen nodded to someone off-screen,

and the camera zoomed out and panned left, showing Serena, lying unconscious in the hospital bed. There were tubes in her mouth and nose, and more tubes and wires hooked up to her arms.

"No!" Matt sobbed, staring aghast at the screen. "She woke up! Wake up, goddammit, wake up!"

"I'm sorry you have to see this," said the Matt on the screen. "God knows I'd like to forget it forever, but it's important for you to see, so that you'll know that I'm telling you the truth. And so that you remember." He turned toward Serena and said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, baby."

The Matt on the screen nodded and a man in scrubs appeared on camera. The camera zoomed further back to show him standing at a computer console.

"Wake up, Serena," Matt pleaded. "Please, baby, wake up."

The man tapped a series of commands into the console.

"Goodbye, baby," said the Matt on the screen, taking the unconscious Serena's hand. "I love you."

The rhythmic beeping of the heart monitor was replaced by a monotone hum, and the screen went blank.

For several minutes, Matt sat in silence, staring at the blank screen. A voice shook him out of his reverie. It was Serena.

"Matt."

Matt looked up to see her sitting there at her station, just as she had been before the recording started. A hallucination, he thought. She's always been a hallucination, ever since the coma. "God damn you," he hissed.

"Matt, don't be angry at me..." she started.

"You know damn well I'm not talking to you," Matt said. He had been talking to the Matt on the recording. Then he laughed bitterly, realizing that either way, he was talking to himself.

He unfastened his restraints and made his way to the medical cabinet. Opening the cabinet, his eyes alighted immediately on the portable defibrillator.

Somehow Serena was standing right in front of him. "Matt, don't do this!" she pleaded.

It's not Serena, he told himself. Just a projection. A software program. He squeezed a handful of conductive jelly from a tube and slathered it on the back of his neck. He pulled the paddles from the defibrillator and flipped the power switch. The machine whined as the capacitors charged.

Serena gripped his wrists in her hands. "Stop, Matt. You don't need to do this. I can –"

He wrenched his hands away and held the paddles to the back of his head. He never even felt the shock.

**CMS CONFIDENTIAL – PROPRIETARY AND
PRIVILEGED INFORMATION – DO NOT SHARE OR
DISTRIBUTE!**

TO: Mrs. Jane Koeppel

RE: Congratulations!

Dear Jane,

First, let me express, on behalf of CMS management, our deepest condolences on the loss of your husband, Eric. We were stunned and saddened to learn of his recent passing. He was a valued member of the CMS team and truly embodied the ideals that we aspire to as a company.

I apologize, too, for the impersonal nature of this communication. Our efforts to contact you in person have not been successful.

The primary purpose of this letter, however, is to deliver some good news. Pending medical testing and some other formalities, your request to be a crew member on board a future mining mission has been approved!

I realize that this is a difficult time for you, but we urge you to contact us as soon as possible regarding this matter. As you are no doubt aware, this is a critical time in CMS's history, and we are very eager to demonstrate to the public and our shareholders that we have addressed the problems with the winch system that led to the tragic deaths of the crew of the *Morgana*.

As a token of our sympathy and goodwill, we would like to offer you two weeks of paid leave during which you may wish to visit our headquarters in San Diego (at our expense, of course). You can meet the mining mission control team and learn more about what a mining mission entails. You are under absolutely no obligation, but we would love to have the opportunity to talk to you.

Again, we offer you our sympathies in this difficult time. We look forward to hearing from you.

Terence Milan, CEO,
Corbenic Mining Services



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Hard Boiled Eggs

RW Spryszak

Karen is trying to peel the hard boiled egg. The shell is coming off dry and taking large chunks of white with it. It looks like she's picking at a crooked golf ball. "So Jason says there's no such thing as property. The classical line, you know, where all property is theft? That one. But Miles says that if an independent person creates something it belongs to him and he can do with it what he wants. Own it, sell it, whatever. He made it so it's his. Jason says that just restarts the capitalist economy again but Miles says it's a matter of ethical conduct. You can't justify taking something away from the guy who made it and that anarchism relates to authoritarianism or something something. I don't know."

Larry, who was trying to read, closes the book and watches her struggle with the egg. "You didn't cook that right."

"What?"

"The egg. When it comes apart like that, in chunks like that, you didn't cook the eggs long enough or something."

"No I think it's getting them to room temperature in a hurry. Or before you boil them. I'm really not sure."

"Well when do you get them to room temperature?"

"Or you cool them off fast. Or too fast. I don't fucking know."

"Yeah so you don't know how to make hard boiled eggs. Admit it. You don't even know if it's temperature or boiling or what it is."

"Well it's something like that. I don't care. To me they're perfect. I like hard boiled eggs." She finishes and has two clunky white blobs in front of her on a paper plate. She reaches for the white bread and takes out two slices. "So anyway they're going back and forth and you know how they can get. I mean, Jesus. They're both a couple of hotheads. Anyway it's getting louder and louder and personal. So Jerry steps in."

"Who Jerry?"

"The IWW guy from New Jersey. And he starts letting them both have it because he figures anarchism as a life system is an idealistic impossibility. He says it's a pipe dream. 'All that will do is throw power to whoever has the guns,' he says. Of course their argument is that's what we already have."

"What the hell are you doing? Is that mayonnaise you're spreading on that bread?"

"Uh-huh. So anyway Jerry goes 'you two guys are both a couple of shits,' and people are starting to move aside because it's getting really loud and it's pretty clear sooner or later they're all going to start wailing on each other."

"Yeah that's great. It's 2011, here's two anarchists and a Wobbly fighting about the nuances of philosophical anarchism. Wow. There's an important discussion that has a lot to do with absolutely shit."

Karen slices the eggs in half with the knife she'd used to spread the mayo, exposing the yolks. She reaches for a salt shaker and sets it beside the paper plate. Then she gets up and walks to the refrigerator. "Well that's what people were saying like, dudes, this is stupid because nobody gives a fuck about dialectical materialism and all that Karl Marx hocus-pocus anymore and can anybody here get the total insignificance of this scene and all. Stuff like that. But that's not stopping them." She comes back to the table with a glass of lemonade. "They're all in each other's faces about how 'this is antiquated,' and 'you're just plain stupid,' and 'don't resort to ad hominem you cretin' and all that."

She sits down before her meal. She takes a bite of the white bread with mayonnaise and while chewing that flicks the salt shaker a few times over the yolk of one half of a cratered egg. Which she also bites in to.

"What the hell are you eating?"

"It's a deconstructed egg salad sandwich."

"Wouldn't there be some kind of pickle something if it was a deconstructed egg salad?"

"I don't know what's in egg salad, actually."

"Then what are you doing?"

"I told you, it's deconstructed."


"Hard boiled eggs with salt, white bread with mayo, and lemonade. Are you pregnant?"

She raises her eyebrows and says with a full mouth, "that'll be the day." Swallows. "So anyway Jerry picks up a lamp from Gus's table and makes like he's going to whack Jason over the head with it because he says if anyone from the union makes something he ought to have a say in what happens to it and Jason says that's the whole root of capitalism again."

"Yeah. I can hardly wait to hear how this comes out. Don't tell me, they just sat around until four in the morning and talked it out, then to no one's surprise not one of them got laid."

"Well yeah kind of. Gus yelled at Jerry and he put the lamp down. Then Eva went up to all three of them and told them to fucking grow up. That there'll never be a revolution in America unless it comes from the Right and it'll be more fascist than anything else so they were all talking a bunch of shit for no reason."

"I don't know how you can eat that. I'm getting sick over here."

"No it's tasty. Really." 

ARTISTS & POETS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE



ECHO CHERNIK ... "Queen of Hearts," Front Cover ...

has over fifteen years of experience as a professional commercial artist in the advertising field, and five years as an instructor of graphics and digital illustration at Pratt Institute, Westchester Community College, Marymount Manhattan, and Skidmore CCI. She specializes in art nouveau influenced poster design, advertisements, package design and book covers. She is currently working out of the studio in southwest Florida for a change of scenery and inspiration (from New York City). When not illustrating, she also enjoys 3D modeling, kick boxing, target shooting, studying Japanese, baking, and outings to the park with her daughters. Visit Echo's website at echo-x.com



CHAD ROSEBURG ... Page 7 ...

is of possible Jewish descent. Superstition, Klezmer music and Chinese candy wrapper designs inform many of his artistic works. He is interested in the places at which art, music, technology and language intersect.



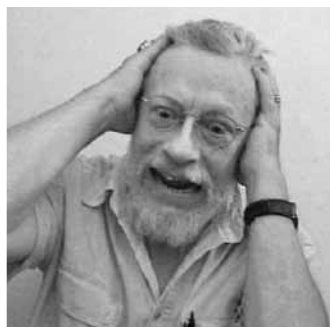
NATHAN GARVISON ... Pages 9, 19, 21 ...

is a creative person through and through. He sees every opportunity, large or small, as a chance for good design to happen. His heart lies in branding and corporate identity as well as editorial design. Type design is integral to everything he does. He is a recent graduate of Portland State University with a degree in graphic design, and resides in beautiful Portlandia. Nate can be found online at CMYKNate.com



DAVID SIMMER II ... Pages 1-5, 11-15, 22-34, Back Cover ...

is a graphic designer and world traveler residing in the Pacific Northwest of these United States. Any artistic talent he may have is undoubtedly due to his father making him draw his own pictures to color rather than buying him coloring books during his formative years. He is co-founder and art director of *Thrice Fiction Magazine* and blogs daily at Blogography.com



JOHN M. BENNETT ... "Nacatlamoxtl," Pages 16-17 ...

has published, exhibited and performed his word art worldwide in thousands of publications and venues. He was editor and publisher of *Lost and Found Times*, and is Curator of the Avant Writing Collection at The Ohio State University Libraries. His work has been collected in several major institutions, including Washington University (St. Louis), SUNY Buffalo, The Ohio State University, and The Museum of Modern Art. His PhD (UCLA 1970) is in Latin American Literature. He can be found online at JohnMBennett.net

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