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Zip Gun Girl

by M.E. McMULLEN

Let me tell you about Lucille.

She shines like a beacon on her times, really, but you have to learn to say no to her. Lucille's is a bold Hollywood story told in flashes of period pop attitude and contemporary film making: '*Zip Gun Girl*' by Annie Lewis; from a story by Anne Schmeckle, based on a concept by Ann Boleyn Boixster. These are pen names. There is only one *she* here and she is Lucille. Ann was her mother's name. She prefers it to her own. The character 'Lucille' of the zip gun film drew great strength from *her* own mother in the back story Lucille gave them; a mother who gave her perspective, she said, to deal with the tumultuous, post-quake times of the setting, which was true of the real Lucille's mother as well; dearest Ann, who coached Lucille to 'keep it simple', advice Lucille appreciated but never tried to follow, not even for a second.

I am one of the real Lucille's foils. My name is Henry Moss. I'm a director.

Not many people were aware that our smash indie hit film, *Zip Gun Girl*, which grossed over ten mil and redefined the role of women in the *murder for hire* marketplace, came in at just under a million. When we made it, Lucille was twenty seven with several dozen parts in several dozen films under her belt and writing credit on some decent pictures. There was a plague going around Hollywood at the time, and Lucille was lucky to have avoided it. Strictly a mental thing, they said, affecting maybe one in ten. Since the big quake and the long, dark months of civil unrest melting into long dark years, you couldn't buy a weapon in LA, so, some people, especially plague-driven paranoids, began to produce home made weapons with what they had on hand. Such was the simple premise of 'Zip Gun Girl' when Lucille inked the deal and brought the script onto the Hornblow soundstage for the first readings. One especially regrettable manifestation of this mental plague was that it brought street weaponry back into vogue.

Using a piece of wood, some duct tape, a nail, large rubber bands and a rifle bullet, Lucille made a working zip gun. She blew

a large hole in a piece of three quarter inch plywood testing it. The footage of this first test sequence was used in the opening credits of the film actually, building a grainy, faintly homemade context for what followed. A gruff woman voiceover hammers you right out of the gate: *The 'excuse' for making these weapons and for this escalation of street violence was this dreaded 'LA mental plague', as they were calling it. Spread by an invisible, tasteless, odorless and undetectable agent of unknown origin, this vile malaise turned ordinarily serene, well-functioning people into erratic, pushy monsters shoving frayed screenplays in strangers' faces, chasing studio bigwigs through parking lots, threatening the world with irresponsible, anti-social ambition-fueled violence, willing to do virtually anything to satisfy their overreaching greed.*

The chase began the day I first saw Lucille on the set.

She'd hired me to direct *Zip Gun Girl* after her first three choices turned her down. I'd worked with her once before on a documentary called *'Ladies of the Humidor'*, about cigar smoking

women of sometimes great, sometimes dubious, accomplishment. That was a thing with Lucille: the `reality' of her films being *'good, bad and worse all mixed in together'*. That first day, she told me, "We can do this for under a million, Henry; turn ten or twelve on it." I grinned and shook her hand, but we both knew it wasn't *just* about the money.

Later, I cornered Lucille in a conference room after cutting her off from Gloria and her sycophant staff with a deceptive memo. I started throwing out some ideas for her to think about before we got started. I'd seen the draft script, which was in need of serious revision, which she didn't like to hear, of course, but needed to know up front. "To do this right, Lucille," I said, "we have to chase down some of these premise ideas first."

"Like, —" Lucille is beautiful; tall and willowy, with big eyes and rich, champagne hair. When she gets a snit going, a look comes into her eyes like a lioness might get when she's about to run something down and kill it.

“Like this descent into anarchy outside L.A. proper which is our basic scenario here, *and* the massive destruction left in the wake of the racial, religious and ethnic wars, *and* the political and economic upheaval that followed the big quake, giving rise, most lamentably, to an absolute breakdown of the family in favor of ‘*people clusters*’ which are gradually taking the place of traditional family units, point being that it’s quite a bit of background baggage to be bringing to the dance.”

“You just summed it up in less than thirty seconds, Henry.”

“Might not be so easy in the film, Lucille, unless you want to carry it with voiceovers.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

Like everybody else around LA, Lucille’s *protagonista*, Lucille, is caught up in the middle of the societal maelstrom chosen for the movie’s setting, making hers the fragile point of view from which these perilous times on the ‘new west coast’ are viewed. The character ‘Lucille’ is an aesthete of sorts, much like

her creator, the real Lucille, finding beauty in the expression of thoughts and trends that are mostly ugly and demeaning to humankind, especially Angelinos.

“Ever more addictive and destructive drugs are being introduced into this already volatile societal mix,” she’s noted in the margin of the script, which I’ve taken to be a kind of informal ‘*mission statement*’ about the direction she hopes the production to take, as prelude to seeking some ascertainable impact from making this film.

In a telling opening panorama scene, Lucille looks out on the spreading lawless zone from the safety of the heavily fortified Office of the Chief Inspector, played by Donald Fishman, quipping: “*The massive deterioration of the moral and ethical fabric of society is all but assured outside the zone unless something is done and quickly.*” I take this for wooden dialogue and try to juice it up to something with a little more pizzazz, like: “*Break out the surplus flame throwers and automatic weapons, boys. We’re*

going out to Griffith Park tonight and exterminate us some cockroaches, spiders, bugs and other useless vermin types.”

Needless to say, street life after the onset of the mental plague became an even dicier business and this fact is at the heart of the film’s tension. Those long, dark corridors of concrete that led out from the zone were lawless at night, but Lucille, the character, who lived somewhere out near Griffith Park (just as Lucille, the writer did) managed to run the gauntlet each night, greatly complicating my project to chase her down and define her in some context that would allow me to work amicably with her instead of strangling her as I’d once threatened, much to her amusement.

In the film, Griffith Park is neutral turf.

The Sax, a street gang, took over the northern third of the park, and another bunch, the Jax, claimed the southern third, leaving a large area in the middle pretty much on its own. This is

where Lucille, the Zip Gun Girl, hangs out. Marco, one of the Sax leaders, played by Steve Fishman, knows about this girl moving freely through the middle turf at night. He calls her his *frond*, meaning she is a part of his tree, which is to say, his intended concubine. He boasts that he will personally disembowel, or, at the very least, run over with his car, any punk who messes with her before *he* gets a chance do her himself. *Post-apocalypse chivalry*, Lucille calls it. *Not only is Marco a pig and a vicious killer*, she notes in the margin, *‘but he’s also a major cad.’*

This pronouncement of Marco’s infuriates a very resourceful kid by the street name of Baggy, played by Jason Fishman, not because he knows Lucille, which he doesn’t, but because he doesn’t like the idea of a punk like Marco making claims on somebody moving freely through the middle of Griffith Park like he fucking owned it or something. Baggy would make it his baggy pants business to find this Lucille and hip her to what Marco Bozo, as Baggy calls him, had in mind for her. Baggy’s cool. If he has a flaw, it’s his studied lack of involvement. Baggy’s one of these

semi-decent chaps you see occasionally, who would screw somebody over only when they had it coming *and* it was absolutely necessary. *True blue to a point*, Lucille says, noting in the script margin that Baggy's an exception to the ruthless killer credo prevailing in the streets.

The beggar, Sammy Mo, whose full name is Modigliani, is well-known to the pimps, bums, alkies, crackheads, petty boosters, and assorted street hustlers all the way from the Ventura Highway to Sunset Boulevard. He comes around telling everybody to come to Bill's Hill, which is a rise in the middle of Griffith Park, at midnight, because he, Sammy Mo, the Rag Picker, is going to be giving away his worldly possessions. This might've been laughable, coming from a homeless street bum, but there's more here than meets the eye. It seems that Sammy, played by Arnold Fishman, has pictures stashed around that'd been passed down through his family over the years, like since the twenties, painted by a great, great uncle on his father's side, Amedeo, an artist back in Italy. The *homeless man give away*

scene is set off against the dark backdrop of the Hollywood Hills and uses over a hundred extras. All the ex-Angelinos up in Utah will marvel at this turn, Lucille says, *the way Romans used to marvel, no doubt, at the Christians being fed to the lions*, it being Lucille's belief that they took this LA 'plague' stuff with them on their flight east, and that they definitely wouldn't see what she was going for with the *homeless man give away*.

'*Street folk of all ilk gather*,' she writes in a margin note, '*while the old beggar Sammy Mo produces from his shabby coat a stack of handwritten certificates, each redeemable for some item of property: spent Sterno tins, broken cell phones.*'

Seventeen shopping carts would be returned to their rightful owners. This give-away scene is lit with the feel of a rock concert, the crowd quivering with a fervor bordering on hotfoot religiosity as word of all this do-goodery spreads around. Somewhere at the edge, Lucille watches in rapt concentration. Beggar Sam, meanwhile, hands out certificates for a non-functioning Zippo, a

broken toaster and a set of work gloves with some fingertips missing.

Marco's bangers drift through the crowd, meanwhile, getting to the heart of the scene as Lucille sees it, showing themselves with their cheap talk and slovenly demeanor as desperately depraved young males of an age where denigration of the female persona comes easy, this as part of a warped overview; as where this preposterous give-away negates a core tic of the times that the world is a shithole where you look out for number one and stick it to the other guy before he sticks it to you. Ordinarily, these crowd scenes were going down on a soundstage called '*Hornblow's Florida*', named for the first movie shot there, some years back. The real Griffith Park, as somebody pointed out, was far too dangerous for a location shoot.

The beggar, Sammy Mo, used to be a big man. Ran a major studio.

The story of his slide into degradation is not a pretty one, but it was *not* true that he lost everything by sinking his money into a

dud of a picture called 'Hornblow's Florida'. Yes, that picture had a bloated budget and flopped at the box office to no one's surprise. Yes, the assholes upstairs gutted it and released it in the middle of the night to be sure nobody would go see it. Yes, Lucille wondered why the moguls would deliberately derail their own picture. So did a lot of other people. There were theories: a swindle of some sort, trumped up tax losses, ego and turf battles. Only the moguls knew for sure.

Meanwhile, I chased the constantly evolving Lucille around the set trying to drag some conclusions from her. What did she want from this? What did she need from that? Just when I thought I'd pinned her down on a point about another upcoming financial issue, a bright-eyed new Lucille emerged from the bushes. This new Lucille had been concealed inside the old Lucille that'd been wrapped inside an older Lucille, *ad infinitum* like one of those Russian doll sets. This new Lucille shuts her director out of her conscious awareness altogether, forcing him to

chase her around the damn soundstage saying things like, “*It’s your budget, Lucille. You have to tell me what we can do.*” Sensible, perhaps, but hardly the point. Lucille, I conclude, doesn’t know what she wants, or how much she wants to spend here as opposed to there. I am ready to walk, given an emerging awareness of why three directors turned her down.

Tough times on the set. The director continues to press, hoping to be fired so he won’t go down in flames with what is shaping up to be a low budget turkey. Finally, Lucille bolts from the set one day, turning to confront the director, who’s chased her out into to the parking lot like an aggressive stalker.

“In order to envision the scene where Marco captures Lucille on a moonless night in the middle of Griffith Park and tries to rape her,” she says, “we have to go out there tonight and hope Marco shows and tries to act out his *macho* fantasies.”

“*Hope* Marco shows? Little flash for you, Lucille. Marco will come with bells on his balls if we tell him it’s show up in character or hit the bricks.”

“You asked what I wanted, Henry. I want everybody, the actors, the gangbangers, the homeless man’s give-away crowd, everybody, *to be surprised*. I want to capture that surprise in the film. That’s what I’m chasing here. A *feeling* that will fly from the screen and into the hearts of the audience.”

I had to ask.

It isn’t fair, but nobody said it would be. What would I do when I finally caught up with Lucille on this film? We’d see. I’d give her a long sneer for sure, a piece of my mind, perhaps, wondering when she was going to turn me loose on some actual directing and stay out of my way. Meanwhile, we leave the safety of the soundstage for the primitive dangers of the real Griffith Park. No need for imported smog or dubbed in mountain ranges here.

The sudden rush to the midnight shoot set the cast off to near riot mode, fearing they were about to be excluded from a location shot. Lucille told them at the very last minute to be

there in character. The Fishman brothers, all trained in martial arts, were ready. There'd be half a dozen cameras running at various angles. "Just remember, it's every man for himself once the gang rumble kicks off," she said.

"What makes you so sure there'll be a, —?"

"We're starting one."

The narrow, underbrush-lined path from the parking lot to the park entrance at St. George Street was where we expected to encounter the first Dragons. The Dragons were the real street gang that controlled the area, turned into the fictional Saxes and Jaxes for the Romeo and Juliet rip-off screenplay. Their credentials as thugs and vicious street predators were impeccable, going back to pre-quake days. The tattoos and missing teeth were real, so, there was no need to run them through wardrobe or make-up.

"Are you getting anything?" Lucille asks, and the field intercom is soon buzzing with

confirmations. Camera Two has three Dragons in view. Camera Six has an angle on five more Dragons creeping along on a path just ahead. Cameras Four and Five are covering the Big Sammy Mo give away, where crates supposedly containing old paintings and drawings are about to be opened. Meanwhile, we're thinking about putting the low light crews out front while trying to see what reaction these gangbangers will have to a bunch of Hollywood jokers invading their turf.

"By the way, Henry, I figured out the reason," Lucille says. As usual, she's a few steps ahead, crouching in the dim light of the streetlamp, clutching something.

"What reason?"

She's up and gone into the dark, that fast. I hear the camera crews chattering. Nobody can see much. The Dragons are around, staying out of sight. Then, we see our guy. At first, he looks like Jason Fishman lurking there in character as Marco. Then, at another angle, he doesn't. The light's deceiving, which is how we planned it. There's a commotion off to the right. Then, a shot. I

can hear the crew over there calling out. Lucille'd been attacked. She'd gotten off a zip gun shot at the guy.

They'd run through the blocking of this several times on the set. Lucille comes out of the dark and is confronted by Marco. After an exchange, he calls her *puta*, and she's had enough. She kicks him. He throws her against a rail. She fights ferociously, eventually righting herself and blasting him with the zip gun. Lucille has said that 'cut' is generally not part of the documentary film lexicon, and that finds application here.

The attacker flees, only to be accosted nearby by Baggy, played by Jason Fishman, probably the most interesting and multi-faceted of the five Fishman brothers, also the tallest. I'm pretty sure I see him afterward on the walkway near the spot where Lucille was ambushed. His concept of Baggy, from the first reading through every revision, was generally in harmony with ours. Baggy had some measure of character in a place where character was sometimes a liability. Baggy was an optimist, believing that Marco could be taught to behave like a real man

where women were concerned, in time, after he'd had his balls broken a few times by girls twice as smart and three times tougher,

I reach the ambush spot looking to steer clear of my own camera frames. The light is coming from my right, filtered through tall palms, so, I move left to the shadows. At the clearing where I saw Baggy, I take a set of cement stairs leading to a walkway between tall bushes, creeping along like a commando on a raid. The light is no better here. The scene is set up with such subtlety, in fact, that, at first, I don't recognize it as a scene at all. Baggy is there, framed in a thin shaft of light. Marco and Lucille are engaged in an intricate dance. Marco has wrestled Baggy to the ground, but Baggy has spun away, taunting his rival with little jabs and shoulder feints. Lucille stands between them, holding the reloaded zip gun. Now, Marco, whose leg is bleeding from the last shot, has made his move, attacking Baggy with kicks and screams. Lucille shoots him again with the zip gun. He turns

and looks at her, looking very surprised, as none of this gun stuff is in the script.

Marco's wounds are not life threatening, but his gangbanging days are over for the time being. Turns out there's a real Marco, who pushed the Fishman Marco aside, and this real Marco is wanted on a stack of warrants. Assault. Rape. Robbery. Arson. At least, that's the story in a press release passing off the cast and crew of the midnight Griffith Park shoot as heroes for catching a genuine midnight marauder, Marco the Dragon Gangbanger. Why he was there, working apart from the hired Dragons, bent on harming Lucille, the beautiful hot shot movie star, is anybody's guess.

At coffee, I asked Lucille how she managed to entice a wanted criminal to that spot and time, inferring, I suppose, that she might've let us know she was harboring dangerous people on the set. It made her very angry. "You're the director of this movie in name only, Henry," she said, practically spitting the words at me. "Your fucking life story will be called 'The Sidekick's Lament'.

It has always been about reaction with you, Henry. Your reaction to all these cinema tricks we pull, these slights of hand, watching the scripted events bump against the reality is priceless, Henry. That's why we wanted you on the set. It's your reaction we seek, not your direction. Your reaction to seeing your direction undermined by the forces of deaf and dumb 'reality'. The Fishmans wanted you, Henry. I wanted you, but you must never question my methods."

"I wasn't, —"

"Enough, Henry," she said. "We use people to wring what we want from them in these projects, and that extends to me. Your candid facial expressions are like a barometer to how the project's going. One raised eyebrow from you, Henry, can send a whole speech, a whole career, right to the recycle bin. Even the Fishman boys say it, and they are notoriously stingy about passing out compliments to anyone, including each other. By the way, I know why the studio trashed the film in that *Hornblow's Florida* situation. It wasn't hard to figure out. They would've done the

same thing to our little indie *Zip Gun Girl's* financing and distribution if they had to, just to prove their point. It's all about their point."

"What point?"

"That they're bigger than you are, Henry. That you better not fuck with them. That they were here before you got here, and they'll be here after you're gone. That nobody will even remember your name, but their names are on the side of the building. It's something they want you to remember every second of every minute of every day, Henry, because that's the way it is. The homeless shelters are filled with the chumps who forgot or never knew."

She tapped her coffee spoon to her temple.

"It might have been a foolish chase, Henry, your tracking me across the breadth of the picture that way like a damn bloodhound, thinking you were the director when the picture was actually directing itself, but your presence was of great benefit, believe me. I bask in your reactions, Henry, squirmed

under them. Sometimes I loathe seeing them, sometimes I exalt in them. Your delight is my delight. Have a Danish, Henry."

"No thanks."

"You know, Henry, when you think about it. It's all a chase, isn't it? All of us chasing carrots, Henry, avoiding sticks? Luke Stern dropped dead at his desk the other day. Chasing right up to the end."

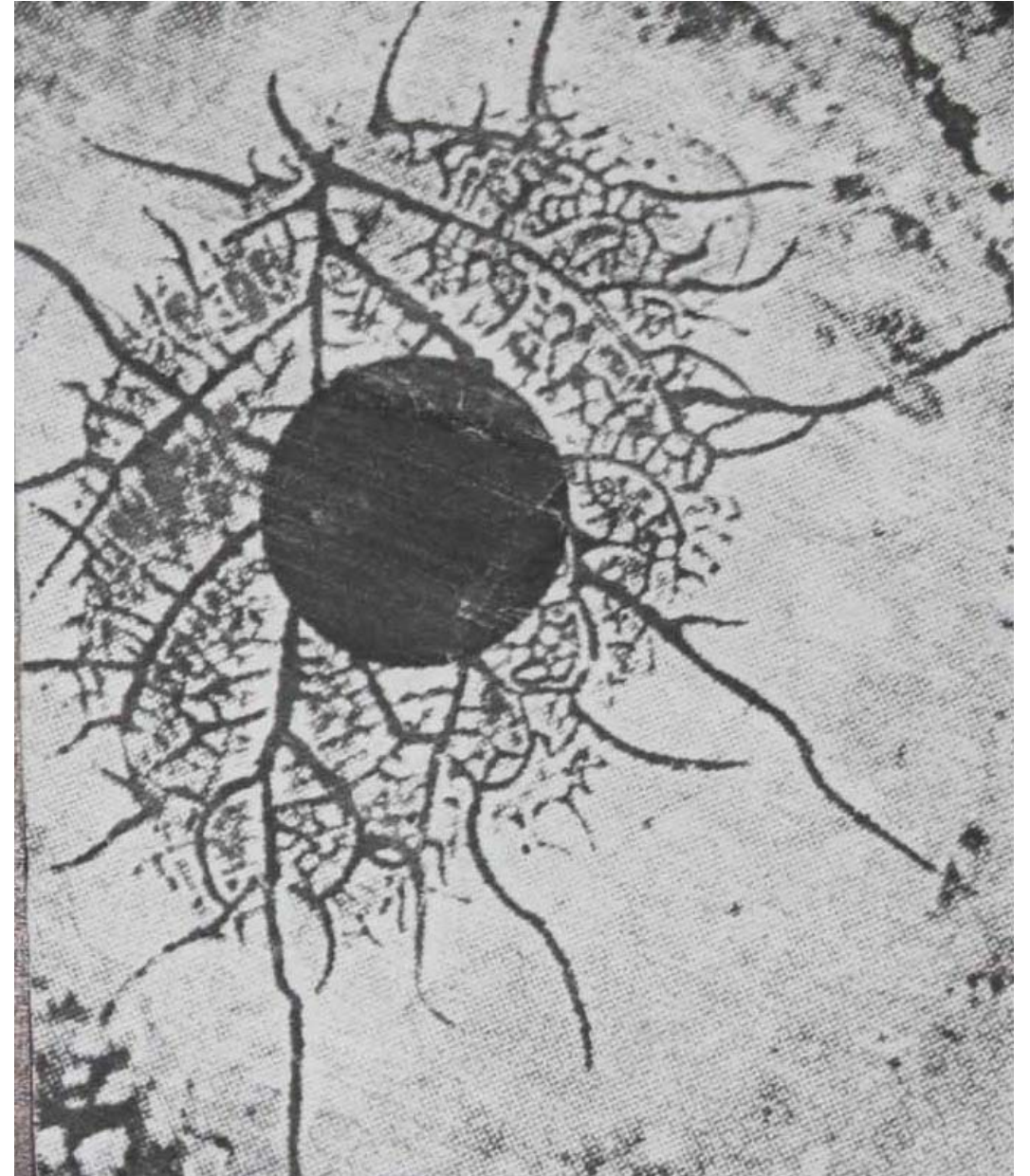
It occurred to me that Lucille really *was* a beacon on these chaotic times. I'd caught up with her, if only for a second, and had that realization that it really did take people like Lucille to brave these uncertain days and to challenge the world-weary wisdom of the times with solitary visions. Soon, she'd be going on about the next project, drinking coffee, wolfing down Danish pastry while the moment was lost forever.

"Maybe a musical, Henry," she'd throw in, just to get my reaction. "Think about it while you have a Danish."

"No Danish."

"You'll like it, Henry, I promise."

“Maybe next time.”



Cloud Break

by ANDY NELLIS

It's awake and it's hungry. I can feel it creeping from the hidden places; the lost islands of my mind. Phantom tentacles reach out and grasp at my weak synapses, squeezing them dry.

Laughing faces turn to straw masks; Their smiles erode into cracked, jutting crags. They prod. They jab. They snicker. They have no idea.

I feel my hands moving and I scream. I scream but it's so very quiet.

I must stop it. I must drown it. I must wash it away. A spiteful god killing his Noah.

I release the storm upon it, soaking my soul with the fiery liquid release and I hear it struggle and choke, I hear it fade away.

I inhale so much crisp air as the straw masks fall away; the scowls turn back into smiles. This night is safe for now and so I shout:

Drinks are on me!



Where the Acorns Fall

by WENDY ASHLEE COLEMAN

I still hate that damn store bought meat. It taste like it never had no heartbeat. Daddy used to take us out with his big money clip of hundreds and liquor up momma with the purple flow until she could touch the stars and he'd order us these big, fatty marbleized, \$40 dollar cuts that looked like juicy, perfectly grilled, bleedin' angel steaks on a plate. Then he'd just watch us; me, and momma that is, as we'd just pick at these slabs of money with our fancy forks, barely puttin' a dent in 'em. He was always so perplexed considering the fang sharp carnivores momma and us normally were. Momma always got headaches from those \$100 dollars bottles.

"*Any bleedin' box better than that Merlot shit,*" she'd always tell me pronouncing Merlot with its t. I told her the t's silent but she'd always just shaker her head and laugh. Don't think she ever believed me.

I asked nana once why we didn't like what others loved. Nana used to tell me that *what we love in life and what we don't has more to do with, ...where the acorns fall more than anything else.* In the deep country, wild grasses, nuts and especially acorns are consumed by the deer, pigs, and in some cases, free-range farm cattle. It's what gives 'em that wild tang and is why domesticated farm stock are raised on a limited breed of grass, hay and corn based grain and are almost always on a strict acorn free diet. But in the country, the acorns drop every fall by the millions, and many a animal feast on these fatty little treats for the winter, a lovely break from the usual tree bark and weeds. Every time when I'd walk outside in the evening and the neighborhood grills would start to fire up supper, stinking up the cool fall air with the smell a mesquite char and savage hunters meat, I always can't help but think of momma.

My mother; you should have seen her. She looked like Marilyn Monroe with the type of long blonde hair that would go all the way down her back and tickle the top of her ass crack,

often puttin' her in these panicky scratch attacks that would make her swerve the road hunting for that itch. And her hair, it would smell like them pinkish flowers especially when she would lay out and let the sun cook it to a warm bake, her hair would get hot to the touch, like you just pulled it out of the oven and it would reek the scent of beauty all around her. It was colored to perfection like a golden waterfall going down her back and I can remember like it was yesterday holding her perfectly soft and conditioned hair to my nose becoming just intoxicated with the scent. I'd sniff it and sniff it until I just couldn't stand it no more and then I'd always, inevitably taste it in disappointment and then wonder why something that could smell so good and look so good, could taste so damn bad. I didn't want to taste the flavor; I wanted to taste the smell and the sight of something that wasn't real. And that was my poor momma's legacy. She didn't taste like the flavor she was pretending to be. Perhaps it was an acquired taste, maybe like hot, red eye gravy on toast, but I liked how the real momma was. She was like the real Marilyn Monroe,

you see, a natural brunette whose hair tasted like fine straw and dollar store shampoo, with split ends that could tickle a child's tongue to giggles with no chemical burn or after taste, like a fresh picked organic apple, dull on the outside but the real deal to the core. She had natural breasts that would leave any newborn starving and an abnormal leanness that read 'meth head'. But daddy took care of all that rough and somehow dug up the gem down in there, and goddamn, could she doll up. It was like some mad science experiment where she went in white trash but came out glimmering in white diamonds, bluing up balls all over town. But behind the flowing long hair, and the jewelry, and the big tits daddy bought her, was a woman whose depths didn't reach any further than a parking lot puddle after a gentle shower. This was a woman who once thought "Concealed Carry" meant any jacket with an inside pocket. The same woman who looked at middle school and thought of it as *a bit of an over kill*, a momma who loved to have shotgun pellet spitting contest with nana as they dined on fresh squirrel.

Her favorite dinner...fried gizzards and Milwaukee light. Her favorite dessert, those heart shaped message candies you'd get as a kid during Valentines, you know the kind that tasted like sweetened chalk. Yeah, that was momma's favorite. Every year we'd rush to the supermarket and just clear out the shopping shelves with that stuff. We'd leave every February with a good year's supply of the shittiest candy on earth and when I would look at her perfect smile and how her natural blood red lips would just clash with the world's most perfect, whitest teeth, it always seem to remind me of a fresh slaughter in the snow. Her porcelain face, it just be reflectin off the early spring sun and her happiness, her smile, it was so real, so genuine that to this day I doubt what I tell ya now, would even begin to be believed as the truth, but it is.

Everybody thought momma was some druggy who fried just about every "thinkin cell" in that noggin of hers...but the truth was momma didn't fry anything cause, well, she never had nothing in the pan to fry in the first place. She came out of gene

pool more polluted than Tulsa cocaine but she never did anything any more serious than beer and fried foods. Hell, she never even smoked weed or even messed with any of the hard shit, despite all the money and credit cards dad gave her. Forget Valium, and Xanax and Prozac, that's for bitches with problems and momma had none. Her clothes, she bought at Kmart because she thought Wal-Mart was too uppity and as for Sears, JCPenny, Mace's, well, "*They can go on and fuck themselves*", as momma would so elegantly put it. She was a trailer park queen that cried her eyes out the day daddy took her away. It was all good intentions on Daddy's part. He wanted a better life for the woman he loved but what he didn't understand was that life, the life of condo living and Cadillac's and diamonds, that all meant shit to her.

"You know why you can't take no trailer park out of this girl, sweets? ...Cause in the camp... you aint dead... till ya dead."

It took me a long time to understand what my momma meant but as I got older I began to understand. Momma always loved them storms, and wind and nature. I remember, when

daddy was at work or out doin' the things he shouldn't, mom and I, we'd sneak over to grandma's little single wide and watch the weather, watch the satellite images of this big, scary, red glob of destruction headin' our way and momma and nana would open up the doors and the windows to smell the eerie pre storm calm, and I would remember how the thousands of the rustiest, white trashiest wind chimes you'd ever saw, the ones that they had hanging all over the place would just start to, sway lightly into each other at first and then soon begin to clash with dings that would fill the air and never leave, and the storm would begin to play this beautiful, rhythm-less music that would become as loud as an symphony and the heavens would begin to flash with light and yell in rage as it would start to conduct this orchestra of rusted shit with command. Soon the trailer would creak and crack and sound like we were bein' pushed out and forced to bounce up and down on some nasty pirate's rotting plank and with every cracking sound your mind would think, "this is it, we're airborne like Dorothy was", only in this version, Dorothy's

gonna be losin' her virginity to pieces of our neighbor's above ground swimmin' pool.

And I'd watch momma and nana and a group of guys she always referred to as "the boys" laugh and smile seemingly without a care in the world, even as the lights in the house would flicker on and off, and I would hold my teddy tight and watch as they'd ride this storm out bravely like experienced sailors caught up in a storm on the high grasses, the flat sea of green acreage that went on and on like great oceans, land so flat that every sunrise, every sunset seemed so close that you could reach out and feel it with your fingertips. A place where each beginning and end felt like it was meant just for you, and, unfortunately a place where every damn stormy front seemed like it was coming just for you. During every spring squall, I remember my momma taking me out and pointing towards the horizon with a nervous smile, at what sometimes would seem like an army of cyclones slowly birthing from a wall cloud hundreds of miles away. Occasionally, the storms would get so damn strong the sounds of a wind chime

being picked up and crashing into a car window or the side of the house would sound like explosions that would just damn scare your shit frozen. I know the idea to surround oneself with a bunch of potential deadly shrapnel seems like a stupid idea, but the old timers would use this and other assorted yard art as a kind of a pre-Doppler warning system. So I guess when wind chimes and clothes and couches started flying or Ol' Booger, the neighbor over there was just a ducks dick away from being decapitated by a rusty muffler that'd been lying in the driveway for a month, I guess it meant shit was gettin' serious. When it got real bad we'd go to a neighbor who had a doublewide that I suppose was more solid but always seemed just as scary to me. Cause the thin, tin-can like walls would just echo every hard gust of wind ten-fold, so much so it would feel as if god himself was clawing at us, trying to get us. The next step after that was goin' to the trailer park community cellar that could fit dozens, if not fifty people down in her belly. And even when the sounds of loud crashes and blown transformers would make it seem like a war for our very

souls was being waged above, I'd watch momma's face, glowing in the candlelight smiling and laughing and taking in the musty cellar scent of a life that she loved, that she lived for.

Here she was some white trash half breed that got lucky cause she could doll up better than Hollywood, yet it didn't matter none. I didn't matter that she had a full heated and cooled basement cellar under her six bedrooms, four-bath house; to her it didn't feel like home because she had no pulse in that home. And that BMW of hers took away so many damn bumps out of her life she'd often find herself aiming for potholes instead of dodging them, I guess just to feel something familiar. I don't think my mom was the dumb cunt that my uncle always politely described her as, despite the fact that I was helping her read letters at twelve. I think she was just a simple woman, smart enough to see that thriving wasn't near as appealing as surviving, at least in her eyes. And although she could pretty up and look like a domesticated piece of ass, deep down she was wild game through and through, and that was something people in the real

world couldn't handle. Her beauty was matched only by her purity. She was a woman uncorrupted by the greed of wanting more, simply because she didn't want more. I think sometimes we confuse fulfillment and genuine happiness with weird or stupid because, well...most of us aren't nuts. It's nuts not want more, ain't it? It's ironic really, because that was one of the reasons my father fell in love with her, and it's also the reason he killed her.

Things got ugly when she filed for divorce. I guess daddy couldn't understand why she seemed so happy moving back to the camp in her little trailer. Or why a bowl of personalized "I love Maiva" heart candies made her just melt head over heels in love with one of *the boys*, harder than she ever did with daddy and his diamonds. Maybe he couldn't understand how he created the finest looking gold digger in town but just couldn't get her to dig none. Hell, before momma, daddy was known for his love makin'. Momma was too, but when ya put both of 'em together in the sack I guess it just made for a dud recipe. He'd have this

man-made silicone, big titted piece of perfection all spread out and momma use ta tell nana, "*He'd just be stumped in them eyes, momma.*" He couldn't understand why he didn't like her more than he should have and momma didn't know why the smell a daddy's Old spice cologne just dried 'er up. Hell, they probably needed a drum a KY to conceive me or maybe she just closed her eyes real hard and did her damndest to recall the smell a sweat and motor oil, the official scent of camp studs.

Maybe they both, deep down just didn't love each other like they thought they should, or maybe daddy really could taste the acorns, who knows. Either way, my daddy wasn't going to let some toothless meth head, half spic steal momma away with a \$15.99 order of personalized heart conversation candies and he definitely wasn't going to let some white trash ho dump him. That's why he killed them, that's why he killed 'em all, he killed all the boys, he killed momma and nana, then he deep throated that Colt like a porn star and took off the top of his head like it was damn hat poppin' off in a stout wind gust.

There were no witnesses but momma and daddy's bodies were found dead in a car and they were holding hands. I don't know what to make out of that. I'd like to think that they fell back in love before he killed her and then himself, that maybe they both agreed to leave this confusing world together and willingly...unlikely yes, but nevertheless lovely to think about. I know momma was just infested with the guilt. She felt bad for not loving a man she should have loved. She felt guilty for not bein' able to change on the inside and I understand that. How many women in that fucking shit hole parking lot she called home dream of some knight in shining armor to come give her everything she wanted. I bet she use ta dream it every night till it happened. Little did she know it was Ol' toothless Tommy next door that got her wetter than daddy could ever get her, even with a fire hose. Life is so fucking strange like that. We finally get a break in life and then when we get that break, we get cramps every-time we pass that dollar store.

I drive through the old camp and park it in front of that ol' tin can every now and then, get shit faced and let my thoughts jus roll outta me. It's repainted now, with a deck, looks the same but coated in difference. I'd sit there rememberin' what me and momma used to say together with a grateful smile when we'd pull up home after a long day, and I'd have some hot chink food take-out burnin' a whole in my jeans and momma was jus tickled to death cause she still had a 20 dollar bill left and it was only Friday. It's what nana use to call "*a nigger rich weekend.*"

I can still hear momma's voice.

"We's here cause we's here cause we's here!!!!!" She'd say while stuffin' her face with those heart candies after our traditional Chinese food Friday.

Since momma left us I've always got this here rattle in my pants. People assume them tic tacs or Altoids and they're always so surprised when they see me pulling out heart candies in July. I always shrug and tell 'em you don't have time and they never argue cause they're never that interested. You see, I got nothing

from momma in the looks department, even her post-op beauty. Well, I got her drawl, which only creeps out in bits and then clumps when I get a little tipsy; and I only get tipsy when I tell stories. I took after my father in every way. I've got an I.Q of 162 and the same damn spicy fire that's gave me the sting to make people think I got the biggest balls in the room. But I'd gladly trade all my Midwest bling for my momma's 36-24-34 and her smile.

Most people in general aren't interested in the quiet, pear shaped women like me, no matter how smart they are, or successful they might be. Sure I can get cock, I can get it whenever I want, just like I get anything else I want but professional courtesy fucks are like what my late Daddy use ta say. "*Pussy is like bottled water in this biz. You don't even ask for it anymore. You get there and it's already on the table*" and since I took over for daddy and my Uncle Hardy, they make sure they always got my flavor on the table. I'm not complaining. I've gotten more quality cock than a chubby chick like me ever deserves and

I'm not like momma that way, I don't miss drinking outta the hose and the toothless Tommy types never looked good to me. Sorry, momma. But I guess I'll never be able to understand what it's like to just walk into a room and make men ache with a craving so intense it often looked as if momma was putting these men in real genuine pain as she'd walk by and leave her scent. What a high that would've been, to have every guy in the room lusting after you with such a primal intensity that the love for their wives or girlfriends or whoever rented space in their brain was just momentarily forgotten, all the memories, all the laughs and love just erased and never to be restored, not in the same capacity, because their mind is scared with the idea of what this woman could be.

Women like momma are the types that possess men to scrap that beautiful picture they already have spent so long painting. And they don't do it for the thrill of a new color like many women think, but instead they do it for that bare, milky white empty canvas of possibility that does nothing but display the

flawlessness that is nothing. Nothing is beautiful because it could be anything, and ain't nothing can ever be wrong with nothing.... It's like lookin' over the fence and seein' the other side. Hell, the grass ain't greener, it ain't even there yet, but you heard it's comin' and you heard it's going to be greener than anything you'd ever saw. That anticipation is better than the greenest sod you ever seen cause your mind can make it greener than it ever could be in real life.

“if she tastes as good as she smells...”

Thinkin' like that there's what got daddy trouble. He was one the married men at that very party when he saw my momma coated in a fancy rented dress and some shoplifted make-up. But ya see, it was too late for him because he fell in love before he got the real taste of what momma really was. She was twenty-two at the time, and it was late November when they met and the acorns had already fallen, just like they'd fallen every season since she's born.



Not the Kind of Girl Who

by MEGAN DOBKIN

Ash. Puckered lips blow outside the window. Ash.

Smoke. Can't have the Pathfinder smelling. Smoke.

Coffee. May have had too much. Coffee.

Montana Avenue. Jeannie fucking hates it. Montana Avenue.

Women. With nothing to do but walk. Montana Avenue.

Boutiques. Overpriced Montana Avenue. Boutiques.

Yoga. If one more person says she needs to try it. Yoga.

OK. Fine. Jeannie will try yoga on Montana Ave. OK. Fine.

Parked. Coffee and cigarettes in her car before trying yoga on Montana

Ave. Parked.

Jeannie's on Montana Avenue.

Jeannie's on Montana Avenue.

Jeannie's on Montana Avenue.

And it doesn't feel good to her.

Let's be clear.

Jeannie is not the kind of girl who hangs out on Montana Ave.

Jeannie is not the kind of girl with that kind of time.

Jeannie has no interest in learning to bake or throw pottery.

Jeannie isn't the kind of girl who wears "Juicy" on the ass of her sweats.

Awnings. Colorful awnings with women underneath them. Awnings.

Somewhere to be. With all they have, don't these women have that?

Somewhere to be?

Mani/Pedi. Oh yeah, they have a mani/pedi appointment at two.

Mani/Pedi.

Purpose. Jeannie would die without one. Purpose.

Sleep. She needs to have done something with her day before she is able to.

Sleep.

Lip Gloss. Who the hell cares what is this season's perfect one? Lip Gloss.

Jeannie's on Montana Avenue.

Jeannie's on Montana Avenue.

Jeannie's on Montana Avenue.

And it feels indulgent to her.

Jeannie would never be the kind of mother with the \$600 stroller.

Jeannie has never ordered a coffee in over three words.

Jeannie isn't the kind of girl who would ever take a pill to get happy.

Jeannie isn't the kind of girl who makes selfish choices
and calls it "taking care of herself."

Jeannie isn't the kind of girl who would live off of a man's money.

Jeannie's on Montana Avenue.

Jeannie's on Montana Avenue.

Jeannie's on Montana Avenue.

And it feels sad, really sad to her.

Self-sufficiency. Don't they want it? Self-sufficiency?

Trapped. Don't they feel it? Trapped.

The Path. Don't they want their own? Path?

Lost. To Jeannie, they all feel that way. Lost.

Fucking Montana Avenue.

Jeannie pitches her smoke.

Careful not to stink up her car.

Her to-go coffee cup joins

the sea of trash covering her floor mats.

She turns her heavy keychain towards her.

On it hangs every former office key

she has ever had. It pulls on her ignition
in a way she hears is unhealthy for the car.
Plastic water bottles smash under foot
as she makes her way out of the car. She grabs
her yoga mat, still in its plastic wrapping.
She stomps her way to join a group of women
she doesn't know
to do yoga on Montana Avenue.

And with no real concept
of who, in fact, she may be,
Jeannie thinks some more
about the kind of girl that she isn't.



Childish Things

by NANCY ANTLE

When Clark, a friend of her mother's, put his penis in Fran's hand she was eight years old. She'd never heard of a pedophile. She thought he made a mistake. That his thingy had somehow slipped out of his PJs when he lay down beside her in his sleeping bag. She still remembered how it felt – or thought she did. Maybe she was mixing his penis up with others she had felt since then – hard and soft at the same time. Like one of the artist erasers her mother, Ellen, used at her job at the college – only bigger.

Fran could not remember how her hand found its way out of her sleeping bag and into Clark's. Did he guide it? Did he ask her to put her hand inside? That part was not clear in her memory. She did remember pulling her hand away as it registered what she was holding and Clark had smiled.

Ellen and Fran were visiting Clark in Los Angeles for a week and Ellen was sleeping in Clark's bedroom at the time. No matter how much Ellen might like Clark, Fran knew that her mother would never sleep with him without being married first. Ellen was old fashioned about that sort of thing. At least that's what she told Fran. Clark had insisted that Ellen take his bed. He didn't mind sleeping on the living room floor next to Fran. It would be like when they all went camping in Zion – except her mother would be in another tent. But Fran was used to not having her mother nearby, watching over her. Fran came home to any empty house every day after school while her mother was still at work. In the summer Fran went to work with Ellen and was allowed to wander all over campus unsupervised – pretending to teach in empty classrooms, exploring unlocked closets. Ellen trusted that everything would be fine – that the universe would somehow take care of her daughter. Ellen certainly trusted Clark and Fran had been flattered that Clark was willing to share a room with her.

It was morning when it happened and soon afterwards, Ellen came out of the bedroom. She wanted Fran to take a bath so she would look nice when they went to visit Clark's family. Fran got out of her sleeping bag in her giant t-shirt and told Ellen right away about the accidental penis in her hand. Clark just lay there on the floor watching them both. Fran could not remember the telling part well, either. She wasn't sure what words she'd used. Maybe she had made it sound like the accident was her fault. She was never good at choosing the right words so she could have uttered anything. Fran only knew that when she reminded Ellen of that moment years later, Ellen denied that Fran had ever told her such a thing had happened. At the time it hadn't seemed to bother Ellen who only raised her eyebrows in Clark's direction. He shrugged his shoulders in response.

"You have to watch those actors," Ellen said. "They're so uninhibited and blasé about nudity. They have no shame." She laughed a throaty, cigarette laugh, and Clark snorted as if he agreed.

Fran wasn't sure what blasé meant but she did know about actors and nudity. How many times had she walked into the women's dressing room before a college production and seen naked women? That was nothing. No one – even the director who was usually a man – ever acted surprised. He certainly never stared at any actress's chest. Fran never stared either. Ellen was the head costume designer and had brought Fran to rehearsals and productions from the time she could walk. Fran knew not to stare.

Clark had recently graduated from the college where Ellen taught and gotten an apartment in West Hollywood while he worked as a waiter and prayed to be discovered. He had been Ellen's favorite student because he was interested in everything to do with being an actor – costume design, makeup, lighting, sound, sets. He came to their house often for dinner especially after he found out Ellen didn't have a husband who would mind Clark hanging around all the time.

Fran's father – an archeologist – had died in a car accident when she was a baby. He flipped his pickup on a dirt road on his way to one of his digs in the desert. The only thing Fran had to remind her of him was a slim album of wedding photos. Her father had a gap toothed grin, dark slicked back hair and a suit that was too big but he looked friendly. What Fran really liked about the pictures was the beautiful long gown her mother wore and the frilly bridesmaid dress her Aunt Alice had on. Fran asked Ellen if she was in love with Clark once – thinking that maybe they'd get married and Fran could be a bridesmaid too one day. Ellen just smiled and told her not to be silly. But Fran saw the way Ellen primped in front of the mirror before he came over – putting on dark red lipstick, teasing her hair. And Fran knew that Ellen wasn't that much older than Clark. Ellen wasn't even thirty yet – something she liked to remind people of often.

Clark was Ellen's only friend who brought Fran gifts – a 45 record of *She Love's You*, a stuffed dog with blue fur, a clock radio. Fran hugged him after every gift and he kissed her cheek,

which always made her neck tingle. When Clark visited, Beatle music played on the stereo and ice clinked in glasses late into the night. Fran could hear their low voices and laughter while she drifted off to sleep and wished she were old enough to stay up all night too.

Ellen cried when Clark graduated and moved back to LA. Fran missed him too and they were both excited when he called and invited them to visit for a week in July. They had been in California for three days already. The first day, they'd gone to the zoo where Clark paid for the tram ride around the park when Ellen complained she was too tired to walk very far. The next day, Clark had taken them to see Corky and Orky the killer whales at Marineland – where he held onto Fran's hand while she dangled a fish out to one of them. Just the day before he'd taken them to Grauman's Chinese Theater and Fran stood with her feet in Judy Garland's shoe prints while he took her picture.

The next day, Ellen certainly didn't dwell on the accidental penis in her daughter's hand. After her comment about blasé

actors she moved on to her own agenda. She wanted to get going to meet Clark's parents and sister who been unable to come to graduation. She clipped red rose earrings onto her lobes and repeated that Fran should get a bath *chop chop* – something she'd started saying ever since the actors at the college had put on *Teahouse of the August Moon*. In Clark's bathroom, Fran locked the door, mostly because she didn't live in an apartment with locks on any of the doors. But while she was soaking in the tub, submerged up to her chin, her mother rattled the knob and told her to unlock it. When Fran did, Ellen stormed in and told Fran that she was absolutely, positively never to take a bath with the door locked. Fran stood there naked and embarrassed and said ok. Sometimes she hated her mother.

Later, on the long drive to Glendale in bumper-to-bumper traffic with the windows wide open in the 90-degree heat, Fran was still mad at her mom and thought how stupid it had been to take a bath. She had to sit on a towel to keep from burning her legs on the tan upholstery and was getting sunburned through the

back windshield. The smog made her throat hurt and sweat was pooling under her arms. Clark shouted to them above the traffic from the front passenger seat that they should be prepared. His sister had been in an accident a few years ago and had been badly burned.

Ellen interrupted to look at Fran in the rearview mirror and shouted, "So we don't stare do we?"

Fran shook her head even though she thought her mother was treating her like a baby.

Clark went on to say that Lila had also lost her sight. Fran had never met a blind person and wondered how it made Lila's life different from her own. Fran stared out the window for a few moments thinking about this, then yelled to the back of Clark's head,

"What kind of accident?"

"Acid," Clark snapped.

Ellen shot Fran a stern look in the mirror as if questions weren't allowed. Clark seemed to realize how harsh he sounded

and when they finally got off the freeway and could speak in regular voices, his voice softened.

“Lila was a student at the community college, working in a lab with chemicals.” He cleared his throat and glanced at Ellen before he added. “She was careless.”

Ellen drove the car down a wide street with palm trees towering over them, past houses with flat roofs and carports instead of garages. They went by a turquoise colored church, a diner, a gas station and a Mexican restaurant that Clark claimed was the best in LA. Ellen finally pulled the car next to the curb when Clark instructed her and they got out in front of a squat two-story apartment complex near a busy intersection.

Clark’s father, a smiling man with a few stray hairs combed over his bald head, opened the blue door to his apartment and ushered them inside. Fran had been sweating in her plastic sandals. Her t-shirt under her arms was damp and so was the place between her legs but now inside it was like winter. The

woman who waddled toward them wore a thick wool sweater with pictures of prancing reindeer across her boobs.

Goose bumps rose on Fran’s arms and a last trickle of sweat slipped down her back. Clark introduced his parents Ralph and Monica to Ellen and Fran.

Monica patted Fran’s head and bent down toward her with breath that smelled like onions. “How would you like a nice bowl of ice cream, sweetie?”

Fran shook her head. “No thank you.” She hugged herself and rubbed her arms. She sat down on the sofa wedged between her mother and an overstuffed cushion, hoping to be protected from the icy breeze coming from the overhead vents. Clark winked at her from across the room and threw her a scratchy green afghan that smelled like cat pee. Fran left the blanket draped across her legs and covered her nose with her palm.

The conversation drifted around Fran about the thickness of the smog and the traffic and LA drivers and what the drive across the desert was like. Ellen and Fran had driven at night so that it

would be cooler but it had still been hot and boring. Ralph asked Fran what she'd done in LA so far.

She told him and then added, "We're going to Disneyland tomorrow."

"Disneyland, huh?" he said. "You going to see Mickey?"

Fran nodded and felt her cheeks get red. She was not a baby but, yes, she was interested in seeing someone dressed up like Mickey Mouse. Who wouldn't be?

"Maybe she wants to see Minnie Mouse instead? Or Pluto? Or Goofy?" a female voice said. Beneath the branches of the potted fig tree next to the hallway door, Fran saw shoes come into the room. White Keds. The kind of shoes that Fran begged for every year but her mother would never allow on account of how they showed the dirt.

"Lila," Clark said. He jumped up from his chair and hugged his sister who stood stiffly in his arms. "I wondered where you were."

Fran could see Lila from the side but Clark's head blocked her view of Lila's face. There were pale, smooth legs above the Keds, a white gauzy peasant skirt and an embroidered peasant shirt that was mostly white too. Lila had long, tangled reddish hair that looked as if she hadn't brushed it in a while.

Fran leaned forward on the couch waiting to see what acid might mean to a person. Ellen put a hand on Fran's knee to keep her daughter still and cautioned her with a look that said, *don't say anything*.

Clark released his sister and turned toward Fran and her mother with his arm around Lila's shoulders.

"Ellen and Fran," he said. "I'd like you to meet my little sister, Lila."

Fran breathed in sharply. Lila's face looked like pink and red wax mixed together in a mottled pattern with thin lines of blue and white. The wax had melted down her face in wrinkles and seared away a half circle of her red hair just above her left eye. Lila's eyes were hidden behind dark sunglasses and Fran was glad

she didn't have to look at them. Fran wanted to turn away but she couldn't. Clark and his parents were staring at her.

"Pleased to meet you," Ellen said quickly. She stood up and went to Lila and took her hand, shaking it harder than Fran thought she should have. Her mother motioned for her to come over and shake hands too but Fran just shivered where she was.

"I told you the AC was on too low," Monica said to her husband, then laughed. "We're freezing to death in LA in summer."

"Maybe we should go outside, huh Frannie?" Clark said. "We could go to the park where it doesn't feel like winter while your mom chats with my family."

"No!" Lila said.

Fran was startled like she might have been if a dog had barked in the middle of a quiet family living room.

"Lower your voice," Monica said.

"Yes, remember your inside voice," Ralph cautioned his daughter.

Idiots, Fran thought. Lila was a grown-up. Why were they talking to her like she was a kid?

"Fran, why don't you come with me to my room?" Lila said, extending her hand that looked like melted wax too. "It's not cold in there. I'll show you all my old dolls."

Fran willed Ellen to say something to get her out of this — that's what mother's were supposed to do — but Ellen didn't say a word.

"Don't be afraid," Lila continued. "I'm much nicer than I look."

It was as if Lila knew exactly what Fran was thinking — that she knew Fran thought she was hideous. Fran slid off the couch feeling ashamed. She held her breath and took Lila's hand. The hand felt waxy too and for an instant Fran thought that maybe this whole day might be one gigantic dramatic production like the ones at the college. Maybe Lila would peel off her wax scars and she would be beautiful and whole underneath.

Lila led her down the hall, running her fingers along the paneling, into a room that held all the things Fran thought that girls with perfect lives must have, including a canopy bed. The shades were drawn and the room was dark. Lila felt along the wall just inside the door and flipped on the switch.

“I don’t usually bother with the light,” Lila said. She sat down on the end of the bed.

The brightness made Fran squint for a moment. In an old doll crib in one corner were four dolls with golden hair and blue glass eyes. They all wore frilly dresses and had ribbons in their hair as if they were just waiting for a ride to someone’s birthday party. They didn’t look anything like the ragtag batch of dolls on Fran’s bed at home. Fran’s dolls had been played with so much they were bruised with dirt and sported impromptu haircuts, crayon eye shadow and clothes pinned together from being ripped when Fran got impatient dressing them.

Fran tried to imagine Lila as a child – someone Fran’s own age that she could play dolls with. It was hard for her to picture Lila

in any other form than she was at that moment. Fran wondered if Lila had ever had an accidental encounter with a penis and considered asking her but couldn’t think of how she might bring up a topic like that with someone she’d only just met. So she turned back to the dolls.

“They’re so pretty,” Fran said. She reached out to touch the hair of one of the dolls but pulled her hand back before she did – afraid that her hands weren’t clean.

“You can hold them if you want,” Lila said. She didn’t turn to face Fran when she spoke; it was as if she sensed Fran’s movements.

“That’s okay,” Fran said. “I don’t want to mess them up.”

“It wouldn’t matter if you did,” Lila said. “I don’t exactly play with dolls anymore.”

A nervous giggle bubbled up in Fran but she let it stop in her throat. “They look brand new. Like you never even played with them.”

“Mom is very particular about the things in my room. She wants everything to be just right so she spends a lot of time in here.”

“She would probably be mad if I touched the dolls then,” Fran said.

Lila shrugged. She seemed to be staring at the floor. “I doubt it. She likes fixing them. Trust me they never looked spiffy back when I was playing with them. Mom only fixed them up after I threw acid on myself. She had to fix up something since she couldn’t fix me.”

“You threw acid on yourself?” Fran asked. “I thought it was an accident.”

“That’s what they say,” Lila said. She grinned a lopsided grin. “A terrible accident.”

Fran’s stomach fluttered like it did when her mom drove down a hill too fast – like a roller coaster. She turned away from Lila and looked around the room. There was a picture stuck in one corner of the mirror above the dresser showing a serious

looking young woman with Lila’s red hair. She was holding a white Persian cat close to her face. The cat’s eyes glowed red from the flash of the camera.

“Do you want to look at my jewelry?” Lila asked.

“Ok,” Fran answered, even though she wasn’t sure why she should want to.

Lila kept her hand on the bed while she navigated to the dresser and picked up a big wooden box that was on top. She brought the box to her bed and sat down again on the pink spread with her back against the headboard. She patted the mattress inviting Fran.

Fran slipped off her sandals and sat on the bed facing Lila with her feet tucked under her. When the lid of the box was lifted it began playing *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, a song that Fran had memorized when she was five or six.

Lila felt inside the box – running her fingers over the necklaces and rings that were jumbled inside. She brought out something clutched between her thumb and fingers.

“Here,” she said. “Look at this. My grandmother gave it to me when I graduated from high school. It’s an antique.” She handed Fran an oval brooch with delicate gold filigree around the edges. The surface of the pin was an off-white cameo – the profile of a young woman with flowers twisted into her hair.

Fran didn’t know what to say so she just held the cameo in her hand staring at it. Then, for some reason, Fran was reminded of a line of Shakespeare she’d also memorized after seeing a play performed about fourteen times. “But soft! What light through yonder window breaks? Tis the East and Juliet is the sun!” she said.

Lila giggled excitedly and clapped her hands. Her head moved in jerky motions. “I knew you would recognize the woman on this brooch!”

“Really?” Fran said. “This is Juliet?”

Lila shrugged again, smiling. “Who knows? But I always thought it must be her. Who else would look that beautifully romantic and innocent? Still a child really.”

Fran looked at the brooch again. “She *is* beautiful and she *did* remind me of that line.”

“Of course she did!” Lila clapped her hands together again.

“Ice cream! Ice cream! Get your ice cream!” Clark glided into the room carrying two bowls of ice cream over his head like a waiter carrying trays in a restaurant. Fran was so startled that she gasped in surprise before she could stop herself.

“You are not allowed in here,” Lila said in a voice that rumbled up from deep inside her.

Clark smirked and handed Fran a blue and white bowl of vanilla ice cream. “Is that any way to talk to your loving big brother who comes bearing such tasty gifts?”

“Out!” Lila commanded.

Clark deposited the bowl meant for Lila on the dresser then clicked his heels together and saluted. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll be in the living room if you need me.”

Lila's hand came up from the jewelry box clutching a heavy medallion as big as her fist and heaved it. It smacked against the wall as Clark ran out laughing.

Fran didn't think he was funny in the least. "Here," she said to Lila. "I'm putting your brooch back." She laid the pin on top of the other things in the open box.

Lila felt in the box and picked it up again. She held it in her hand, rubbing her thumb over the surface while she breathed heavily. Fran took a few hesitant bites of ice cream. It had a grainy texture – like it was too old – and it was hard to swallow. Fran didn't think she could eat a whole bowl of it. She tiptoed to the dresser and put her bowl beside Lila's then sat back down on the bed.

"I want you to have this," Lila said, holding out the cameo to Fran.

"Really?" Fran asked.

"Really."

"But your grandmother gave it to you. It's important."

"I'll never wear it. Someday you can wear it somewhere special."

"My mom won't let me keep it."

"So don't tell her. Moms don't need to know everything."

A queasy feeling started in the back of Fran's throat. She scrunched her eyes closed hoping that would take away the image she'd just conjured in her mind of Clark's penis in Lila's wax hand.

"Keep it to remember me," Lila said.

Fran took the brooch that Lila offered.

"Thanks," Fran said. She stuffed the brooch into the pocket of her shorts. Her stomach had the roller coaster feeling again and she edged toward the door. "I think I might have to go now."

"Don't go," Lila said. "I have a whole closet full of doll clothes you can look at."

"I – um – really have to go." Fran ran out of the door and down the hall. She dove into the corner of the sofa where she'd

been before and pressed herself close to Ellen. “Can we go now? I don’t feel so good.”

Her mother automatically felt her forehead. “You don’t have a fever.”

“I feel like I’m going to throw-up.”

“Oh, Frannie,” Ellen said. “You’re being dramatic. You never throw-up.”

“But I really think I’m going to.”

“I can take your car and drive her back to my apartment,” Clark said. “It’s not that far. You stay and keep visiting, Ellen. Dad can bring you back later. Right Dad?”

“Fran can lie down on my bed,” Lila said, coming into the room. “Just go back there and make yourself at home. None of us will bother you. Right Clark?”

Lila was facing the wrong direction. Clark was off to her left. Fran wondered what it would be like to live in the same house with Clark and never know exactly where he was.

Ellen, Fran and Clark went back to Clark’s apartment soon after that since no amount of cajoling would make Fran go back to Lila’s room and Ellen did not want to stay with Clark’s parents unless he was there too. Fran knew that her mother was mad at her for being sick – for making her change her plans – but she didn’t care. Fran slept in Clark’s bedroom with her mother the two more nights they were there. At first, Ellen said it was so she could see to Fran if she threw up. But no one suggested changing the sleeping arrangements back the way they were even after it was clear that there was nothing wrong with Fran.

Their last day in California, Clark took them to Disneyland where Fran went on all the rides with Clark and Ellen and even went on the Frontierland train ride alone with him since Ellen said it made her motion sick. Clark walked away from them once leaving them sitting on a bench while he went to get popcorn and sodas. Fran watched the easy way he talked to the woman behind the counter and how he made her laugh with a joke. When he turned around he was smiling and laughing and

hurrying back, juggling all the snacks. Fran tried to reconcile this person with the one who had put his penis in her hand and couldn't do it. Maybe she dreamed it all. Maybe.

That night they picked up Chinese food on the way home and ate it right out of the white cardboard boxes with chopsticks. Clark put a rubber band around Fran's chopsticks to make it easier for her. When they were done eating Clark put the chopsticks under his top lip and pretended to be an elephant like the one they'd seen in the zoo – trumpeting loudly all over the apartment, making Fran laugh, even though she tried to ignore him.

Ellen and Fran left early the next day and Clark waved to them from his doorway, still in his PJs. After they had been back at home for a couple of weeks a letter came in the mail for Fran with her name and address written in blue and Clark's name and address scrawled in black on the left corner. Ellen brought her the letter from the mailbox and handed it to her, pursing her lips

like she'd just tasted a lemon. Ellen had received no such letters and she was not happy about it.

“You can read it first if you want,” Fran offered.

Ellen shook her head and left the envelope lying on top of Fran's dresser next to one of her sad looking dolls. Fran waited a couple of days to open the letter and only then because her mother reminded her about it. Inside the envelope were a few pictures that Clark had taken of her in various places in Southern California, including one of her sleeping in her sleeping bag on the living room floor – a picture she had no memory he had ever taken. She crumpled that photo up along with Clark's letter that said he hoped she'd come back soon and tossed them into the trash. Later on, Fran retrieved them both and tore them into tiny pieces and flushed them down the toilet. She thought of Clark's penis again and how it felt in her hand and how he'd smiled at her and how later he had snorted when her mother made a joke about it. Fran shivered. Then she resorted to what she always did when she wanted to forget something. She gathered together a

stack of picture books, *Little Golden Books* from the grocery store; ones that Ellen used to read to her when she was very young before she knew how to read. She could read them now, of course, but they always reminded her of those comfortable moments when she sat snuggled up with her mother and was lulled into bliss by the words and pictures.

Fran turned the pages slowly through the first one – the one with poems and illustrations of round-faced children and dogs and cats. There was a small tear on the corner of one page and she handled it gently so it wouldn't rip even more. She read the words softly to herself remembering how she used to imagine she was one of those children in those perfect places where there were swings to swing on, trees to climb, gentle cats and dogs...and nice, always nice, grown-ups who tended the children. She stopped reading and sat up.

She gathered the books in her arms then picked up the other pictures Clark had sent and slipped them into the top book just behind the front cover. She walked to her dresser and put the

books down on top momentarily while she opened a drawer – the one with the socks and the underwear. She dug down to the bottom and found what she wanted – Lila's cameo. She walked with it and the stack of books and the photos to the dumpster behind her apartment building, where she didn't remember heaving the books and photos into the giant metal box. She could only now remember the hollow sound as they clanged inside, how she accidentally pricked her chest when she pinned Lila's brooch to her t-shirt and how angry she was that her mother never even noticed that she wore it.



Opposites

by JOHN GREY

She has many opportunities.

Planes fly.

Trains move on rails underground.

Automobiles glide.

And she can dress as quaint

as my dream of her.

Or doll herself out

with red rouged cheeks,

crimson lips,

dark eye-shadow,

gold round her throat.,

everything but the rose in her teeth.

And here's me,

all thumbs and inflexible,

the self, un-dyed, un-transported,

not a line, a color,

that doesn't come with the face,

bare throat.

I blast away with jackhammers

in my head.

My guts laugh and scream.

My heart has such a pulsing voice.

But I can only be

the same stolid outside.

She can take an easterly, course.

Or ripple across the lake.

She can be wide and circular,

distant and weightless,

loud, flamboyant,
giving hugs and precious metal equally.
I'm just this sediment that washed up
on my parent's sex.
The best I can do is harden,
the worst is rinse away.
This is what I must overcome:
a stone can't woo a butterfly,
a storm may rock the insides of a cloud
but it's the rainbow that makes it out alive.

Day in the Life

by JOHN GREY

Quite a body, huh.
So much meat beating,
it looks as though
the head could loosen.

Given up cigarettes
on orders from my taste-buds,
exploring the Hindu valleys
and the Buddhist heights.

Tramped through the graveyard,
all these names,
sweet stalks of honey weed
and death proved so full of life.

Hang out at the smoke shop,
buy lottery tickets,
no winners, just funny little
icons that don't match up.

Like me and Joanna,
me and the army,
me and the cops.
all losing lottery tickets.

But a healthy day
in the sun's intoxicating light,
out of the wake
and drinking the survivor's beer.

Down by the river,
toes in the water,
body elongated
like an unwrapped bandage.

But hungry,
head back home,
cussing tongue
and an adolescent sneer.

Old man down on
the body's unstable elements,
not drinking enough apparently.
feels like an unfertile garden
bed.

Meal together,
smelling his breath
all the way to nausea
and back, and that doesn't even

break the surface
of his suffering.

He gives details.

I don't listen.

Need to find a job soon.

Forced smile

doesn't quite cut it

for explanation.

Need to make my own way,

get out of this

old skull of a house,

and its eye-socket windows.

But I'm drinking enough

to stay here.

Family and friends come by,

to tell me who died

in which crash

and where the babies are hidden.

I lie on the bed,

flood my eyes with sleep.

My dreams gurgle constantly,

like they're where I put

all my ideas.

They mean something, I've heard.

But, for all their fantasy,

having been me once,

that's all I'm ever going to be:

footloose, feeling good,

and emptying out the change drawer.

The Fight

by JAMES VEGA

Stephen has always been different from us. He has to be told to do things almost always. He'd never do well in school unless he was asked to study and score well on his math test - in that case, he does amazing things.

I like to remember the time we were walking along and a stray dog started to chase us. Stephen saved us from getting bit. He was the only one who could stand up to the dog, and once it was stood up to, it stopped.

Aside from times like that, he rarely seems alive. It's always Stephen following our group around, which we don't mind. We like Stephen, and we like the fact that he likes us.

Right now, I'm driving him to a tournament. He has been practicing to become better in the fight for a while now, and we haven't seen much of him. Sometimes we fight with him, but we never stick with it as long as he does.

Nobody can really beat Stephen in the fight. That is where Stephen shines. Nobody asks him to perform well in the fight, and he never asks me, "Jeremy, what should we do?" as long as the fight is involved.

The sun shines in through the windows. There is a lot of desert between Phoenix and Los Angeles. I crank up the air conditioning because Stephen looks hot.

He's looking through his notes. He wears huge glasses and button down shirts - the bland kind. He made the notes himself by watching players like *Painbreaker* and *JayBear* online. Air from the fans ruffle the pages he's trying to read, but he patiently folds them back into place.

Stephen spends at least four hours a day watching the professional, salaried players before he even turns on his Playstation. This began months ago, when we had signed in to Playstation.com to look up a problem we had. They were advertising a tournament for the game we played - The Annual

Fightfest. There was a large prize pool and they had interviews with the players competing. Stephen wanted to watch them all. And then we watched the tournament a few days later, and Stephen was hooked.

Now, we're on our way to another tournament. It's called the Open Fighters, and true to its' name, it is open to anybody to compete in. Stephen has been practicing a lot for it, and as his friend, I feel like it's my duty to help him out a bit.

So that's why I'm driving him to the Los Angeles Convention Center. My mother even paid for our hotel room. She loves Stephen, and she feels bad for him because of how quiet he is. Stephen has a way of doing that - he makes you feel bad even though nothing happened to him.

Right now, I feel bad because he has a stain on his shirt. It's just big enough to notice. It's not clear whether he knows about it or not, and I don't tell him. He is focused on his notes.

The streets of Los Angeles are confusing. Most every street is one-way, which led to us taking a lot of wrong roads. Stephen starts to shake a little bit, and I'm not sure why. Things aren't that bad. We aren't lost at all.

The convention center is to our right, now, and there are crowds all over. There is a huge line leading outside of the main entrance. There is a sign above the doors that explains the line. Today you can sign up early. Stephen tells me that he wants to get in line as soon as possible. I tell him we have to check in first and look at our room. He nods.

Our hotel is down the street from the convention center. The Hampton looks nice, but not nice enough to justify their prices. I don't worry about it too much, but Stephen does.

"It's okay, man. My Mom wants us to enjoy our trip, don't worry about it." I tell Stephen.

"It's too much." He mutters. I don't know if he's talking about the price, or the overwhelming amount of people. Stephen has always hated being in crowds. I don't ask him what he means,

cause he's in his mood. You can tell when Stephen doesn't want to talk.

A lot of people are obviously here for the tournament. Most are here to watch. They all laugh loud laughs, and I find myself in conversation with two other guys next to us. They're talking about Painbreaker - his name has been sighted on the sign-up sheet. I'm pretty happy about that because Painbreaker is my favorite player. We talk about the drive to Los Angeles and they ask Stephen about what he thought of it. He said that it was okay.

"Who's your favorite player?" They ask him.

"Don't have one." Stephen says. He doesn't look at them in the eye, but he's keeping his composure.

"Aw, man, why you here then?"

"I'm playing." Stephen said. He still doesn't look them in the eye after making that statement. Playing in this tournament, though it's open, is a big deal. It costs a lot to sign up. Stephen had to save up for a few months to get enough money.

It's hard for Stephen to get money because he can't seem to land a job. He gets allowance from his mom for good grades, which he doesn't get anymore because he's not in school.

Our group of friends used to take him out for breakfast a lot, and we'd pay for him because we knew about his situation. After he started to really practice for the fight, he didn't come out to breakfast too much.

We get to the receptionist at the desk. She smiles a lot despite how busy it is. The two other guys we talked to already had their room and had left.

"Hope you do well," they had told Stephen. At this, he finally looked up and nodded. He smiled, despite himself. Stephen knows when people mean what they say, and when they don't.

However, we never know when Stephen means what he says.

The receptionist gets us our room and hands us our little card-keys with a smile. I take the cards and hand one to Stephen. "Don't put them in with your cell phones." the receptionist says.

Our room is very high up in the building and we can see a lot of the city. Stephen doesn't sit down, he just goes to the window to look out. I'm not sure what he looks at. The bathroom sounds really nice to me and I get in there to wash up and get rid of the urine I've been holding for so long. Stephen is still standing at the window when I get out. It's been fifteen minutes.

"Let's go?" he asks me. He doesn't stand still when he's not at the window. The setting sun shines in and turns Stephen into some kind of spectre. He can't wait to go to the convention center. There is no bathroom break before the walk to the Convention Center.

It's not a long walk, and there's a lot of other people with us. The group from earlier isn't walking, and I don't feel like talking with anyone else. The drive was very long.

When we get to the Center, the line seems overwhelming. But Stephen looks around and doesn't immediately go into the big line. He knows something that I don't.

Thankfully, he finds a much smaller line halfway down the building. Above the smaller, single doorway is a small paper sign - Competitor's passes. My relief that we won't have to wait in the huge line is so big that I don't notice all of the professional players around us. Waiting along with us is *Wheeler, smevolicious*, and so many other player I had watched in awe online.

They talk and laugh like the other people waiting in the big line. These guys know each other, and still, Stephen is out of place. He keeps his hands in his pockets. That stain in his shirt seems to have gotten bigger. I get autographs from some of the pros, but there is no *Painbreaker*.

When I ask Stephen if he wants an autograph as well, he just looks at me. He gets a little shiver, and shakes his head. He looks away out of guilt, I think, but I already saw that he hated the question.

I don't blame him for trying to fit in with the group he's been working so hard to join.

The room is never quiet at night. Stephen is always restless, from fidgeting to going to the bathroom to fluffing his pillow, there is always something for him to do except sleep. I have never heard him sound so frustrated before. His monotone mood is what I'm used to, so it's scary to hear him mumble to himself about how he's a total shithead that needs to sleep or else he'll ruin everything.

I have never heard Stephen call himself anything before this.

Finally, it's morning. Stephen got a half hour of sleep, and anyone that looks at him can see the pure frustration he's feeling. His frown is much deeper than it usually is. I buy him a cup of espresso before we go to the convention center.

He keeps up during the walk. There are no signs of tiredness - in fact, he opens up to me a little about his life. "My mom doesn't want me to be here," he says.

I look at him and open my mouth, but he talks before I can. He even smiles a little. "But that's okay with me. It's my life, isn't it?"

"It is, man, it is. How about your dad?"

"He's dead," he says. His smile is still there. This shows just how much I really know about Stephen.

"Fuck, sorry, Stephen. I didn't know," I say.

"It's aight. I never told you."

"Anyway, yeah, it's your life. It's good to see you do something you want to do, Stephen. You don't have to do everything your mom wants you to do, or me, for that matter." He looks at me for a while, and then nods.

There is a very long line that I have to wait. Stephen has to go in to the convention center himself. He says he's fine, but I can feel the large amounts of anxiety washing over him. There isn't anything we can do about it, though.

Stephen goes down the way we went last night and enters through the player's door. It looks strange when I look from there to the clustered line trying to get into the main entrance.

A lot of people are talking to pass the time. Some workers pass out little fliers about the events hosted in Open Fighters. Most of it is merchandise shopping stuff. Reading them hardly takes any time at all. I text Stephen to see how he's doing, but it's only been five minutes so I feel odd when I do it.

"Good," he texts back. No other details. I am not sure why I am surprised.

It's very busy and confusing on the inside. There's all kinds of stores to buy stuff from the sponsors of the event and get autographs. I can hardly tell what they're selling because so many people are crowding the booths. There are screens all over showing what's going on in this playing room. Later the screens will show the fights going on.

I get my welcome package - a bag, a badge, a lanyard and a guide to the event - and set off to find Stephen.

I figure he's practicing in the playing room to get rid of all of his anxiety so I head there first. Since the matches haven't started

yet, it's not that crowded at all. A few people are saving seats in front of the big screen, but most of the people in the room are watching the professionals practice over in the player's area.

Stephen, however, has no-one watching him practice. There are a few others like him, but those guys are sitting at consoles closer to the professionals. Stephen seems to be in the very corner, sweating out some matches against the computer. Stephen has nothing else to do.

I walk up to talk to him. I'm about to ask him if he wants to watch the pro players practice, but I remember that look he gave me from earlier, when I asked if he wanted someone's autograph.

"Hey, Stephen," I say.

"Hi. How is it out there?" He asks me.

"You didn't see? There's all kinds of stuff out there. We should go."

"Well," Stephen says, "I gotta practice. It's been over a day."

"When do the matches start?" I ask him.

"An hour and thirty four minutes."

It's hard not to get swept away by all of the talent and skill of the people around me in the player's area. I clap Stephen on the back as he practices and take a look at the professionals. Some of their practice matches are being shown on the main screen, so I go to watch those. These professionals are having a great time screwing around, and there isn't much serious practice. I find myself laughing a few times

An hour and thirty four minutes later, Stephen's first match begins. It seems pretty close, whenever I peek away from the main screen to watch it. The opponent is a little bit older than Stephen and I, about twenty-five. Stephen gets the upper hand after some jockeying for position, the characters in the game sliding back and forth, trying to get some good footing. Nothing spectacular happens, but I feel extremely excited to watch Stephen win.

He, on the other hand, seems just the same after he wins. "It's just the first match. Nothing came out of this," Stephen says.

"But you won your first tournament match, man. Come on, enjoy it." Stephen just looks away.

He doesn't watch the pro matches, too. Stephen can't seem to look at the main screen. Sometimes, he'll check out the people playing their matches in the consoles off to the side. Most of the time, though, Stephen is walking around the playing area and sometimes the main hall, where we came from.

The next match is just about the same, only Stephen beats some teen kid instead. Of course, Stephen isn't all that happy about it. I decide to take him out to eat for a while.

All of the food is overpriced, but that is to be expected at an event like this. Stephen's next match is in two hours, so we have a lot of time to eat. I get a hot dog, fries, chips, and a coke. Stephen gets fries and water, which he barely touches.

"You alright?" I ask him.

“Just nervous for my next match,” he says. His next match is against a sponsored player. “It’s how I’m going to have to prove myself.”

“Hasn’t it been fun, though? You’ve been waiting so long for this.”

“Yeah.”

The Stars, a famous team from China, pass by into the food court we are sitting at. I stare at them, it being my first time seeing them, but Stephen doesn’t even glance at them. He looks down at his full basket of fries.

It’s four o’clock when they have the players get ready for the next match. Stephen, who is early, sets up his controller. There are no matches going on the main screen for an hour, so Stephen has my full attention.

The opponent comes about twenty minutes later, just before disqualification time. I have never heard of the player before, and

neither has Stephen. The player does have a sponsorship from an international company, though.

With both controllers set in the game console, they warm up for a round against each other. Of course they don’t pick their main characters first, which is a strategy I didn’t even know about before the match.

Blindingly fast they go back to the main menu, nod at each other and press the “O.K.” buttons, and the match begins just like that.

The match is extremely standard, again, but up until now Stephen has always started with the upper hand. Now, the sponsored player seems to know everything Stephen is going to do before he does it. His character is pushing Stephen’s around, and eventually, into the screen’s corner.

Stephen shakes and his hands are shaking on his controller. The look on his face is normal - he hasn’t given up. He wouldn’t ever forgive himself if he gave up now.

In the game, radical things happen because of Stephen's efforts to turn the game around. It works for a while - Stephen's character jumping wildly in weird spots, but after a while, the opponent figures out Stephen's game and smashes the character back to the ground. That is the last time Stephen's character gets up.

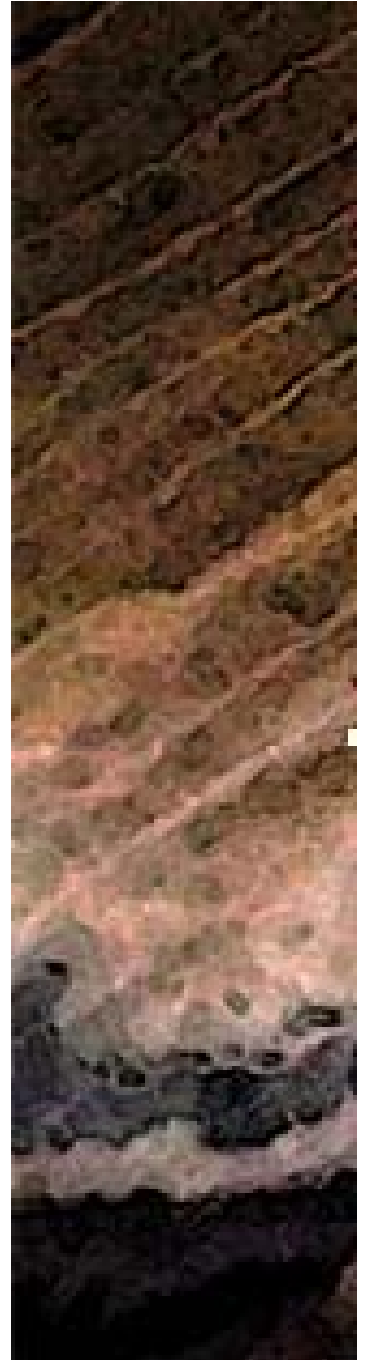
So, Stephen is out of the tournament. He nods, leans over to shake the other player's hand, and wraps up his controller.

I spend my time watching the pro matches. Some very good matches have happened. Stephen has been in the hotel room. Sometimes he'll come to look at the merchandise or watch the pros play their unbroadcasted matches, but usually he is in the hotel room.

Soon enough, the tournament is over.

At home, things go back to normal. Stephen went back to his old self, before he began to practice for the fight. Despite not

wanting to practice any more, and despite having more time to do things with us, he still doesn't come to breakfast.



Titans

by ROGER LOVELACE

The Titan Sea is full of beautiful and ugly monsters, as if a zodiac laden sky had been spilled into swirling sargasso burdened depths. Storm clouds and waves merge into a beautiful and frightening tempest.

Deadly sea wasps swarm like buzzing and whistling sparks in a fire just above the screaming white tips of churning waves of methane.

The strange silver craft did not have sails and floated in the air as well as the sea. It had come from the blue and green moon faraway in the void. The Titan priests blessed the armies before sending them to slay the foreign metal beast and the men living like demon toads in its belly.

Mariners astride dragons raise fiery tritons into the air.
Trumpeters, blowing heartily into conchs, hail the storm and

command the wasps. Wind whips the seaweed beards of oceanic demigods while deep beneath them in calmer more indigo methane their women, with iridescent scales and sparkling webs, sway gently, anchored to ancient coral and jagged benthic ledges. They wait to salvage the metal and bits of dead that would drift down.

The battle was in favor of the Titans and astronauts found themselves pulled under the waves along with pieces of the radioactive rocket. As Saturn rose above the horizon, the earthmen screamed inside shielded helmets and went mad from plutonium burns before dying on the peculiar moon.

Park Place

by WILLIAM MASTERS

After Christopher A. Davenport graduated law school in 1990, he accepted an offer from a rich, defendant law firm located in Washington D.C. (the only city that has more power and less scruples than Hollywood). The firm appreciated the favorable results from Christopher's many hours of fine work (2,877 billable hours the first year), his obeisance to the partners (whenever one called him at work to request his presence, he actually *ran* down the plushly carpeted halls to the partner's office) who recognized in him the flowering of that moral inertia so often associated with successful attorneys.

After three years the firm promoted him to senior associate and moved him to Los Angeles (the only city where one can flourish without honor, but not without a car). Los Angeles suited

his demeanor, supported his lifestyle (now suffused with a burgeoning lavishness) and mentored his maturity into attorneyhood.

Two years after his arrival, Christopher had so profitably wrestled with the angels, the firm elevated him to junior partner, then transferred him to San Francisco (the only city where culture overrules common sense) and ensconced him in a B to B+ flat on Russian Hill (an A to A+ neighborhood) with a view of Alcatraz and an underground garage with a special parking device. After a tenant used the automatic garage door opener, the car moved onto a circular wooden platform fitted, at ground level, into the garage floor. The platform lowered the car one floor below to the basement level and then made a short, counterclockwise rotation, pointing the car to the designated parking area for the building.

Although Christopher found himself immediately in the circle of power at the firm (and thus admitted to the right social circles), he couldn't enter the circle of parking because his name appeared in the number three spot on the waiting list for available tenant parking spaces. He drove to work and expensed the eighteen dollar per day parking fee while the garage manager in One Market Plaza entered his name on the waiting list for a permanent monthly parking place.

After a week of vertical street parking in his neighborhood, he stood one morning, after his daily jog, glaring at the horizontal line of nicks along the passenger side of both car doors on his 1995 racing green 9000 Aero turbo, 4 door hatchback Saab, the last pre General Motors model.

"Those nicks are the results of all the forced, vertical parking in the City. Such damage always shocks new residents. How do you do, I'm Allan Cushman, one of your neighbors from Park

Place," he said, introducing himself and pulling in his dog leash. "This is Max." Max, a frisky two year old beagle sat obediently, sniffing Christopher's running shoes. At sixty-nine, Allan was a happily retired stockbroker who drove a creamy white, refurbished 1987 Oldsmobile Cutlass.

"You must have a parking place. I'll bet you don't have any scratches on your car."

"I had them rubbed out after I got a parking place."

"How long did you wait?"

"Less than two years. Be patient, young man. This city is an over-regulated parking maze in which 400,000 registered cars compete for a resting place in the 286,000 spaces each night."

Christopher A. Davenport decided he wouldn't wait two years, two months or two weeks. After formulating a plan, Christopher approached the manager and his dog one misty Saturday morning as they returned from their walk and he from

his jog and asked if he could speak to him on a delicate matter.

The dog, a cocker spaniel named Hubert, sniffed vigorously at the runner's feet.

“Certainly, you can speak to me after you take a shower.”

Twenty minutes later Christopher knocked on the door of apartment 2 with Plan A on the tip of his tongue and Plan B snugly tucked in his right trouser pocket. A young man, still carrying a violin bow, opened the door.

“Come in. Mr. Tyler will be right here.” The young man walked over to the fireplace and lighted the contents. Crackling sounds accompanied the fire's glow soon followed by warmth.

Sixty-three year-old Zachary Tyler had lived at Park Place (in front of which hung an awning the same color as its namesake property on a certain, famous board game) for twenty-three years

as manager for its owner, Delilah Tutin. Briefly, thirty years ago (after Delilah was widowed from her longshoreman magnate husband George Tutin), they had been an item known as T&T. But their tastes changed. Delilah preferred blond Nordic types, often ski instructors, while Zachary developed a tactful penchant for young men, usually classical musicians. Still, their loyalty to each other remained intact through friendship and before Delilah left the country for her chateau in Switzerland, she appointed Zachary manager of 1100 Union Street, the Park Place building (one of her many San Francisco properties), bought him a pair of season symphony tickets at Davies Hall (for life), signed him on to her corporate medical plan (rated A to A- and with a zero deductible) and paid him a generous monthly salary (B to B+ and confidential). This then was the person who entered his living room and to whom Christopher aimed his pitch.

“I'd like to discuss something in confidence,” began the young attorney.

“Geoffrey, Mr. Davenport is about to reveal something confidential. You better leave the room.”

Left alone, facing each other seated in a pair of love seats separated by a small glass table, the two men faced each other back-lighted by the flames from the fireplace.

“Is there something I can do to shepherd my name to the top of the list and obtain a parking place for my car?”

“Like what, Mr. Davenport?”

“Perhaps if you advised me who the two persons ahead of me are, I could negotiate with them.”

“Shepherd. Advise. Negotiate. It’s so sad to hear attorney-speak from one so young.”

“Isn’t there something we can do to accommodate my request without harming the others ahead of me on the list?”

“Like what?”

Mr. Tyler sat at attention in his chair. “You don’t have a pregnant wife or partner moving in with you, do you?”

The attorney signaled with a mock gesture of supplication while shaking his head no.

“Do you have a physical handicap, unrevealed to me, which might push your name to the top of the list?”

“Oh, no.”

“Do you work for a government agency which would force me, for *security reasons* (he laughed out loud), to give you a parking place for your car ahead of the other two tenants on the waiting list?”

“I only wish I did.”

“Is there anyone in your family to whom I am beholden, owe money or might be subject to blackmail?”

“I’ve never heard anyone in my family ever mention your name,” he lied, having no family whatsoever.

“Then Mr. Davenport, unless you buy this building, you will have to wait your turn for a parking place.”

Zachary moved forward in the chair, as a gesture indicating the meeting had concluded, but the attorney pushed his heels against the carpet.

“The contract says the building maintains three empty parking places for guests and delivery vehicles. Couldn’t you temporarily revise that to include the three of us on the list?”

“No. The tenants unanimously voted for that clause over ten years ago. After the yearly review of the building’s conditions of residence, the residents voted to maintain that choice.”

“Look, Mr. Tyler. I need a parking place. My car already bears a line of nicks and scratches from the vertical street parking. The weather will ruin the paint job. I have an *expensive* car. Won’t you please make an exception for me? What about a three month emergency usage permit from you for me to park in one of the visitor’s spots? I’ll even contribute to a parking ticket fund targeted to anyone’s visitor who thinks he got ticketed because I am using one of those three spaces.”

“The only alternative I can see for you is to speak to each tenant for permission to change the building’s regulations.”

Christopher, annoyed and impatient, reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out Plan B, a money clip from which he took fifteen one hundred dollar bills and laid them on the glass table, now reflecting the fire’s glow.

Zachary picked up the money, counting out loud each bill from one to fifteen.

“You are a person utterly without gentlemanly instincts, Davenport.”

Pushing the glass table forward, just a bit, Zachary rose from his chair, still holding the fifteen one hundred dollar bills in his left hand. He took two steps toward the fireplace and with his right hand pulled the screen slightly back. Then he threw the bills into the fire.

As Plan B burned to ashes, Christopher rose in alarm. “You fucking old queen! You owe me fifteen hundred dollars or a parking space.”

“Since when has crassness replaced wit and good manners? No. No, I don’t owe you anything more,” he said, turning the face of his wristwatch around so it faced away from normal view, “not

even the time of day. If you ever mention this incident, I’ll swear that you tried to bribe me. Which is, of course, what you did. I’ll sign a declaration written by some other old queen, who happens to be a famous San Francisco attorney, to that effect and he will move to have your license suspended for unethical action: bribery. It’s just the kind of story that the *San Francisco Span* likes to run. After a sensational hearing (with the result going viral on U Tube), your firm will terminate you (to save their faces) and your career will move into the toilet. You will commit suicide before you reach your thirtieth birthday.

If you wish to break the year’s lease your firm purchased for you in this building, I will approve it. Good by Mr. Davenport. Please use the epistolary method for any future communication with me.” He opened the front door through which Christopher left in a huff.

As soon as Christopher returned to his apartment, he drafted, and then e-mailed an ad to all three San Francisco dailies for a garage within a block and a half of his address. By the next day, he had received three responses.

The first response (rated C-) arrived via E-mail: “You can have my garage for \$925 per month. As you see from my address, I live less than a block away. Signed Roger Sobreski.” Mrs. Sobreski, who had seen Christopher driving his car around the neighborhood looking for a parking place each evening as she walked her dog, told her husband about the ad,

“He may live in the neighborhood and he’s probably loaded. So it can’t hurt to ask. For a lot.”

The second response (see box 142) offered use of a garage on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays for \$350 per month (plus a

\$350 security deposit and a first and last month’s rent). That was a D+ offer, if Christopher had ever heard one.

The third response, (an F) was a brochure, and came from the manager of a new, five story parking garage on the corner of Polk and Bush streets, about seven blocks away. The manager had seen the ad and needed to document his proactive efforts to solicit monthly spaces for the new business to support his request for a raise.

Frustrated after reviewing these responses, he sent an e-mail to his firm (the L.A. branch, AKA, the mother house) for permission to expense the C- offer. Half an hour later, his cellular phone rang.

“Chris?”

“Yes.”

“This is Richard.” Richard Anthony Thorpinski was the firm’s managing attorney. “I’m at work today and just opened your e-mail.”

“It’s my lucky day?”

“Maybe not. Although I deeply sympathize with you,” he began, using the same mocking tone he applied to the snotty, first year Harvard associates. “San Francisco is a city of 49 square miles surrounded on three sides by water and on four sides by traffic control officers. If you think I will authorize that amount, your ego has grown too large for your accomplishments. Make another request like that and I’ll do a memo to the file. *And you know what that means.* I will authorize reimbursement for daily parking fees of \$18 and, whenever the office garage at 1 Market Plaza has a vacancy, payment of the monthly \$346 parking fee. James Hoo, the comptroller of our San Francisco office, who lives in your neighborhood, rides the 41 Union bus to work each day. Sit with

him and chat about some case and bill that time to the client. It’s only a ten minute ride from your digs and costs seventy-five cents. Or you can buy a monthly fast pass for \$55 for which you can claim reimbursement.”

Christopher would not ride the bus to work. Nor would he walk or take a cab.

However, such stubbornness translated successfully to Christopher’s work ethic. Christopher had a secret: in order to sustain the deep level of concentration necessary to solve his client’s complex tax problems, he developed the habit of using his index finger to push the stainless steel replica of a rocking horse which ornamented the top of a fancy paperweight on his desk, a graduation present from his law school roommate, Darryl H. Lawrence. As Christopher watched the rocking horse move back and forth, the movement induced a kind of trance during which he always developed a solution to his client’s tax problems. After

he moved to Los Angeles, Christopher discovered, to his dismay, this method no longer worked. Deeply worried that he had lost his problem solving, rocking horse knack, he began to sit behind the wheel of his car, foot to the pedal and take long drives out of frustration. And it was during one of these drives that Christopher discovered he could attain the same deep level of concentration and find the solutions for his client's most complex tax problems. However, he seemed to lose consciousness during such drives and would wake up, so to speak, an hour or more later in some faraway location. Christopher hoped this new phenomenon would continue to work.

He tested this new theory while working in the L.A. office, where he often left at midday to take his car out of the city to Highway 1. He just drove up the coast. Only while driving, foot to the pedal, and probably at speeds exceeding legal limits, did Christopher find the solution to the most complicated tax problems of his clients. Once, while trying to reach the solution

to a tax dilemma for a major client, he drove north as far as San Luis Obispo before he awakened from his trancelike state, only then fully conscious of his geographical location or what time it was, unsure of how this special gift worked, but nevertheless grateful. He didn't remember the actual drive from L.A., after he reached Hwy 1, or how he avoided crashing into other cars or stopping at red lights and stop signs. Somehow, part of his brain functioned as driver while another part functioned as a database searching for the right query to seek and find the answer.

Remaining in San Luis, he took a hotel room. Using his laptop, he wrote the first draft of his brief, including all the formulas and tax code references he needed. On another occasion, after experiencing a tax solution block for a client whose business meant two million dollars a year in business to the firm, Christopher left the office and drove his car south and finally solved the tax problem, but not before he awakened from his trance, and found himself parked at the San Diego Zoo. Of

course, by the time he returned home, other cars occupied all the regular parking spots anywhere near his apartment building.

Christopher had tried to work from his San Francisco office on the fortieth floor of the Spear Street Tower overlooking the Bay Bridge. Once again, whenever he could not produce the answers he needed for his client, he got behind the wheel of his Saab 9000, crossed the Golden Gate Bridge and the next time he was fully conscious, various street signs indicated to him that he was in Santa Rosa, about an hour later, but he had the answer to his current tax problem. Still early in the day, he found an internet café and in an hour and a half produced the first draft of his brief and e-mailed it to one of the transactional paralegals to pull and copy the codes and regulations cited in his brief. Finished, he located a pleasant outdoor café and ate lunch, then returned to the office.

And so, several times per week, Christopher returned home from such drives, circling his apartment building in vain to find a parking place. He parked in yellow zones and green zones. He parked too close to fire hydrants and sometimes blocked the handicapped areas with dropped curbs to allow wheel chair access. On the few occasions he found a legitimate parking place, he often failed to rise before six a.m. to move his car before the meter maids, riding in their back & white golf carts, began ticketing cars for street cleaning (on the south side of his street *No Parking 6-8 a.m. Monday, Wednesday and Friday* while on the other side *No Parking on Tuesday or Thursdays 6-8 a.m.*).

Christopher often forgot when to move his car. Once, he even tasted the panic of not remembering where he had parked his car.

“This would never happen in L.A.,” he said to himself after he received a written notice from the Department of Parking and Traffic (“DPT”) warning him that it would boot his car unless he paid his parking fines within three days. In his first month of

residency in San Francisco, Christopher had accumulated \$1,445 in parking fines.

He personally drove to the DPT to pay his fines (afraid to depend on the U.S. mail for even this local delivery), parking at a meter only a half block from DPT building. After receiving a number for service, he waited so long before someone called his number, that after he paid for his violations (and complained to the anonymous person sitting behind the bulletproof payment window), he returned to his car to find a \$50 ticket snugly fitted beneath his left windshield wiper. The parking meter displayed a little red flag inside which now stood vertical and said *expired*.

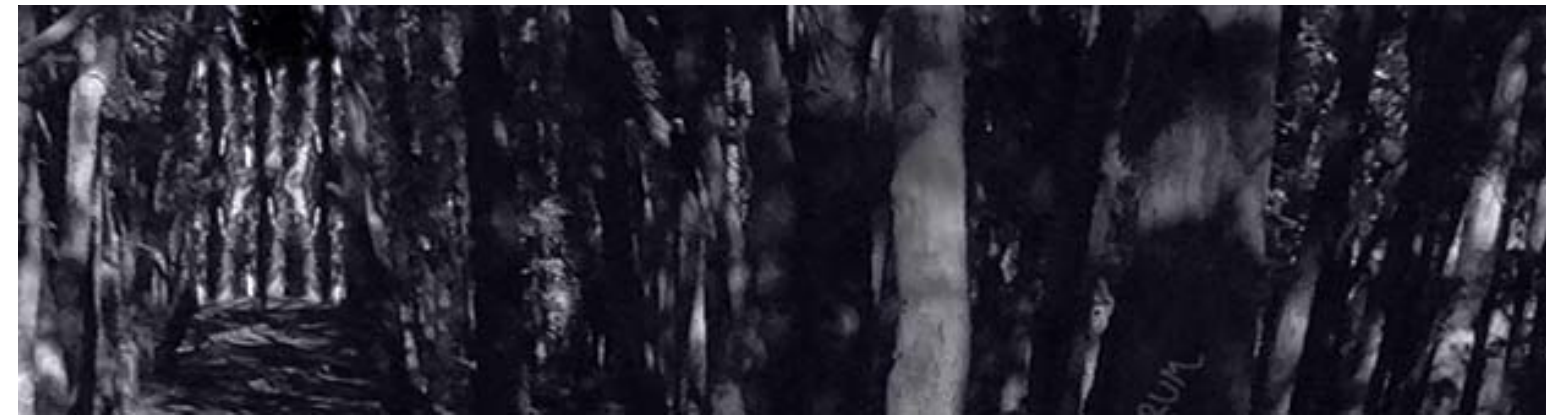
Christopher decided to buy a counterfeit disabled parking placard, but while driving to work the following morning and talking on his cell phone, he drove right through the red light at the Hyde & California intersection (*must turn right or left*). A fire truck responding to a 5 alarm fire in the financial district

broadsided his car which flipped, then flopped just below California St., before it exploded into flames blocking the exit to the Cala Market.

The emergency medical technician (“EMT”) pronounced Christopher dead on arrival at San Francisco General and the case manager assigned to the accident determined the name of his employer. After notification, the law firms immediately assigned two first year associates to research and determine ways to mitigate any possible liability to the firm for the accident even though Christopher was in conference re firm business on his cell phone at the time of the accident.

Christopher had no family members or friends to attend the funeral. Cynthia, a pretty, second year associate who had recently begun sleeping with Christopher, declined to attend the funeral service since she was too busy monitoring a huge document production in San Jose, happily billing 15 hour days to the client.

The only person at the funeral service was Christopher's mentor, Gabriel Clemencer, who had originally hired him for the D.C. office and had forgotten that he had agreed to act as the executor to Christopher's estate. The San Francisco office sent a medium sized flower arrangement.



Letter from the Body Corporate

by STEPHANIE CAMPISI

Dear tenant:

This is to inform you that

late last night the stuffing

fell out of your house and

left a mars-dust mound of

brick packing peanuts by

your front door - and the

neighbourhood cats

wearing tuxedo bibs and

carrying top hats and canes

danced their way on jolly toes

up the cement-jumble stairway

to leap from the windowsills

and see whether they could

backflip their way down on to

the wadding of your backyard

trees - but some in their hubris

fell like buttered toast:

I am pleased to say that I did

the neighbourly thing and wiped

them up with my dishcloth and

paper towels - although some

crumbs and stains remain -

I have inclosed an invoice for

recompense and also note

that it is your turn to take

out the bins.



The Long Paddock, a novel excerpt

by DAVID STUDDERT

You never see the truck that hits ya.

Never.

And you never see it, maybe 'cause you're dreamin'.

There's a world full of dreamin' in the magic land of Oz!

Certainly is, oh yeah!

There's 'Black fella's dreaming', that's the original one. 'White-Oz-fella's-dreaming'; 'migrant-Oz-dreaming' that's a bit of a subsection; 'Ozzie-red-ants'-dreaming'; 'blue-surfers'-dreaming'; 'sporting-Oz-heroes'-dreaming', 'home-buyers-dreaming', and so on and so forth, on and on.

Yeah, there's a truckload!

Curves, distractions, little scenes over here, down there! A ton of it.

And because this city here in our story, Wy-Wy, is in this magic land of Oz – it's an average Ozzie city – it's got them dreamings as

well, right up to the brim, just like it should have: Red-Oz-Ants'-dreaming, surfers'-dreaming, all of that. So much in fact, sometimes you might reckon this whole wide land ain't nothing but that, nothing but dreamin'.

'The-truck-that-hits-you-dreaming'. There's another one.

'Big-Blokes'-dreaming' – there'll be plenty of that soon enough!

Yeah, white-Ozzie-dreaming in all its shapes and sizes; that's the go here. It's behind all that stuff went on in Wy-Wy; all that thieving, rioting, looting, all them murders, all that strife and grief. Course according to white fellas, only abos got a dreamtime, but there you go – 'nonsense- dreaming', that's another.

“Now all in all, the great city of Wy-Wy has very little distinguishing it from any other great Ozzie city. Of course it's not what your average westerner would call a city, but in this magic land of Oz if there's twenty buildings, a school and a cop shop, it's a city. So there you go. And like almost everyone of 'em, Wy-Wy sits by the water, in this case the world famous Ozzie inland sea; and again, like mostly

every other city there ever was or is in Oz, the houses fronting the water are all expensive and modern with five garages, six toilets and so on, while them lot barely two mile inland, well.... they spread across the hot dry plain stretching back forever and no one cares how many toilets they got, or garages neither; cause out there, land's almost free and any shack'll do ya".

Russ the cop don't give a shit what guide books like the one above say, especially right now, cutting his toe nails. Why should he? Russ' been king Wy-Wy copper going on 17 years and he don't have to care about nothing.

After all he knows Wy-Wy like he knows the hand that slaps ya.

Least he's out of bed though. That's what matters right now.

Down the cop station working as a matter of fact, right this second; sock off, one fat foot on his desk, a big silver toe clipper in his paw, indulging in some male grooming. Yeah, clipping them hard to reach places. The ones with a twinge of green.

Lucky for Russ the cop, it's early morning, round 4am; utterly no one's about, it's not even light, and while of course it's stinking hot, the air con's good in here, and it's totally dark and quiet outside in the streets of Wy-Wy (so much so they're almost invisible) and he's getting paid, and furthermore – like he's said it before - he's not at home. Who wants that? Not Russ the cop, no way.

After all being at home in Wy-Wy tonight, the night before and tomorrow night as well, means trying-to-sleep-not-being-able-to; staring at the ceiling, tangled in them tangled sheets, muttering and cursing, fidgeting and sweating.

Night after night it's always the same. Trying to sleep in Wy-Wy, what a mugs game! Russ don't even try anymore.

For a start it's stinking hot, even at night. Then there's the smoke – the day-white, night-black, 24 hour, all-mixed-up grey smoke; that's the topper right there. Sitting on Wy-Wy stinking hot and dusty, never shifting an inch, night or day.

So, in the matter of not being able to sleep a wink, Russ's not on his own; not by a long shot. Where he is on his own though, is the fact he don't have to put up with it.

Which means in Russ' case he's getting paid to be down here, and he's got somewhere to go as well.

Otherwise, apart from him, all the rest of Wy-Wy is flat out on their backs, in their dark suburban bedrooms panting and gasping all on their own. Right this minute. Trying to sleep.

Yeah, it's that 24 hour smoke, it's fuckin' us all up. Hanging over all our heads and really knocking old Wy-Wy for six; no risk.

The sun's 36 degrees most days as it is; trust me, being under that smoke, it's like lying under your car all day with the engine running.

That smoke, gees – ten, eleven weeks it's been right on top of us. Rolling every night off the Inland Sea, stinking of mud.

Poor old Wy-Wy! You walk down the main street and mums are eye-balling their kids' inhaler. The mall's jammed with people only there for the air con.

Russ's had to drive 'em out once or twice already.

Everyone in Wy-Wy's got these little specks of grey mud on their face, specks that they can't get off. What's that about?

All shapes and sizes. Just sticking on your skin from the smoke and the mud in the smoke.

Whole thing'd drive you absolutely spare.

In the whole joint, ain't one Wy-Wy person had a good night's kip for ages.

Most days, hell, you can't even see your own car in the driveway, that's how crook the smoke is.

On real bad days, you walk down the street, you can't even see your own bloody hand; let alone the other bloke's.

It's a right old stuff up.

Every night Wy-Wy studies the weather on the telly, talks about nothing else. It's 'smoke', 'smoke', 'smoke', morning noon and night; 'weather', 'weather', 'weather'; 'smoke', 'smoke', 'heat and 'smoke – twenty four hours a day.

Mind you there's the other thing as well.

And this other thing; they talk about that alright. In between the weather. Course they do, the smoke and this other thing go hand in hand.

But we'll come to that in a tick (this other thing).

Anyhow, Russ' dark morning right here, is exactly like every other Wy-Wy dark morning before or since; or any other dark morning matter of fact anywhere at all in the magic land of Oz. It's the start of the day, the end of the night and every day and night in between.

Not a breath of air, not a whisper; stinking hot; limp gums lining every street; burnt nature-strips fronting every house; maybe some cat taking its time, crossing the wide, dark, smoky streets of Wy-Wy.

Wy-Wy early, before the sun; this is it. Just like everywhere else.

Not forgetting of course, in the Wy-Wy cop shop, like a single rose in a cardboard box, Russ the Wy-Wy cop; trimming his toenails, click, click, click.

He's big bloke Russ; big and fat.

Carts a bit of load about!

Anyhow, Russ's been there an hour or two in deep first morning darkness, sweating like a pig, one shoe off, one shoe on, kicking the air-con etc, and then the phone rings.

Which is where this whole, what's-about-to-happen-dreaming-deal really kicks off: with a shrill insistent ringing in the parched heart of Wy-Wy.

Russ almost does his back in fallin' out of his chair, Russell Brass, the big Wy-Wy cop.

When he straightens up, mmm...there's a funny old feeling in his guts, like maybe he shouldn't be here. Like maybe he should be somewhere else. Like maybe somewhere else should be anywhere but here.

Could be the dark smoke of course, pressing round the spread out bare corner block and the low stone cop shop sitting like a cherry on top; could be that, what comes over Russ, right now, the hollowness of it all; all of a sudden, right here; who knows.

The way the phone's bouncing but, you can hear it all over Wy-Wy in any case.

Round them highway motels, across them railway tracks and playing fields, cross them empty school yards, up them suburban crescents with no trees, past the art gallery, the hospital, the new town hall – all over Wy-Wy.

You hear it and he hears it too, Big Russ does, and after a bit he puts out his fat hand and picks it up.

What a mug!

Cursing himself, sailing his nail clippings at the air con, Big Russ hops outside towards the cop car, doing his shirt up on the run, making big strides, dropping his gun, effing this, effing that, effing bloody non-stop.

Outside the night is heavy as pitch, and stinking hot.

'Mr money bags' Lonnie Pope, that's what that call was about; that's who's waiting for Russ.

No wonder he's crook on 'imself.

Gunning the cop Holden along the sea road, his air con kicking on ten, he wants to give the siren a burst, wake himself up – decides better not.

Shifting in his seat right now, pulling and tugging his seatbelt.

This Lonnie Pope fellow see, he's a big talking Yank from California with a crumbed veal tan.

Abides in Wy-Wy Lonnie does. This particular Lonnie Pope; he's an 'Investor'.

Or was, or is, or maybe was. So they say.

And right now he's an investor who owes a bucket of cash, and who by the way has been gone-gone-absent for a long, long time.

With the town's cash!

And this is the other thing Wy-Wy's been chewing over, talking non-stop about; other than the smoke and the heat I mean.

Where Lonnie's at.

How much he owes them.

Whether they'll ever see it again?

I mean that's a mountain for Wy-Wy to chew on right there.

Lonnie Pope; he don't owe just one or two or three see. No, no, no, he owes the whole bloody town, Lonnie. Every blinking sod!

Yeah, Wy-Wy: second in the 'Blooming Oz' award four years back, population who knows! And they're all owed by Lonnie, everyone of 'em; and they're all talking about it too.

In fact they never stop!

In their backyards, by their chlorinated magic waterholes, mouths full of sacred Barbie smoke, 'Lonnie this' 'Lonnie that'. That's it! The whole yackity-yack of Wy-Wy right there - Lonnie and the smoke.

Giving out a big humungous sigh, copper Russ pulls over into this little picnic area they got out there along the sea road - the VC John Jackson Reserve.

Kills his engine and sits a bit, staring where the Inland Sea's meant to be; at the high wall of smoke sitting there instead.

Tiny waves going flop, flop, flop on the beach below his front bumper.

Last night - bless her - Granny Grimson tossed a brick through the Workers Club window. Shat in the van on the way back to base. Big mug Russ had to hose it out.

He'd rather be doing that right now but – no risk.

Main reason being that, way out there in the middle of the Inland Sea, behind that wall of smoke, old Lonnie - Mister Possible Murder – is/was building a world class mega-hotel just like a good Lonnie should; and furthermore this hotel is flat out the hope, pride and joy of every man, women and child in Wy-Wy (population who knows); who all see this hotel like they claim to see Jesus.

125 rooms, four or five pools, every room done like a palace, worth a fortune; ten screen multi plexus, tennis courts, gold taps, heli-pads; just about the flat-out latest in everything. Meant for rich Japs and Yanks naturally, and well.....anyone else very rich besides.

Lonnie's gift to Wy-Wy.

Oh yeah, putting Wy-Wy back on the map, that's what Wy-Wy reckons. The latest of everything floating in the Inland Sea, right out there in front of Russ. And in front of the town.

Primus Corporation, that's the mob, official label anyhow; the blokes building the hotel; but its Lonnie alright, Lonnie Pope. Mr mover and shaker. 'Investor'.

Which is why right this instant, Russ's staring at the Inland Sea and the eyes of Wy-Wy are wide with sleepless fear.

Fear going with sleeplessness, fear going with smoke; fear going with nothing.

On account of what Lonnie owes 'em, owes everyone of 'em; and more to the point, on account of Lonnie being 'on rest-leave', AWOL, on an extended honeymoon, flown the coop, gone to Thailand and so on. There's a hundred and thirty countries in the world and most of 'em been mentioned.

All the same, there's only so many ways to say it.

For eleven big long weeks and counting.

And also on account of how for that whole time, hotel construction's been temporarily suspended on the got-everything, modern Jesus, floating hotel. In the middle of the Inland Sea. Which Lonnie's supposedly funding.

What a turn-out this turn-outs turned out to be! No risk.

Every day someone's got some new story about what's the go, 'bout where Lonnie's at: emerging finance, bail-out funds, Russian investors, Arab cash, Thai jails, Swiss clinics.

The whole town's swallowed 'em whole, every damn stupid story. Till half the blokes in Wy-Wy are talking slick economist smartie talk all day long; bloke's who've never put the second Wy on Wy-Wy ever in their lives – sounding like some stock exchange thief all of a sudden: dear oh dear!

Big Russ stumbles down to the edge of the Inland Sea, washing his hands in the dark tiny waves.

Turned up out of the blue Lonnie did, bringing Primus Corp with him.

First they got the mine, then some big out-of-town spread; then they cooked up this floating hotel idea.

Every dollar round Wy-Wy's come from them. There's no one's not entangled.

And there's no one in Wy-Wy either who don't know that right now, out at Lonnie's big out-of-town spread "Bright Tomorrow", it's all closed and dusty, or, come to that, who don't know either, that at the mine there's just this little Asian fella, who speakee no English and waves a big shottie.

Russ straightens up wiping his hands down his blue copper trousers.

Truth is Wy-Wy's crazy over this Lonnie caper: the banker, the butcher, even the hardware and the servo bloke; school teachers, shop-keepers, cross-eyed footballers; everyone's flat-out crazy as two cut snakes about it. All over what they're owed, one and all, by Lonnie.

Especially since, for eleven long weeks not a sign of the very same Lonnie has been sighted.

All of which means Russ' been twitchy long before this mornin'.

Now with the phone call and this possible, maybe, phone-call body - if the body is the body - for sure things are going get a whole lot more something; that's a fact.

And all entirely on account of Lonnie's big no-show, big gaping absence; on account of his low visibility profile, on account of him, flat out, having in fact, totally – snap - disappeared. With people's money!

Except he hasn't has he, totally – snap – disappeared? That's not the go at all.

Little waves flip flop on the muddy beach and the big copper boots.

Russ the king Wy-Wy cop, rubs his hand slowly down his shirt; stares blank and fat into the dark smoke standing right there in front of him.

The smoky space of the Inland Sea.

King

by MANDY BROWN

I sent that text you're not supposed to send—the one that makes her your ex—and completely forgot she was pet-sitting King. I had been on a business trip and had just gotten back when I remembered him and sent another awkward asking where I could get him back. She said she'd meet me at Rainbow Ridge Cemetery, a place I'd never heard of.

“She better give him back easy,” Rick said as we walked toward the cemetery. “Think she'll be late?”

I nodded. “Thanks for coming.”

Rick waved his hand. “Candice is crazy.”

“I was just sick of her skipping meds and psychiatrist appointments. You know?” Street lights flickered on as we turned the corner and faced an entrance with benches on both sides. I touched the gate, peering into darkness. “Ick, smells like gasoline in there. Let's wait here.”

I checked my phone. Nothing.

“You don't think she's planning anything, do you?” Rick asked.

I shrugged. Candice burned a hole in the world with each of her episodes; she might not be well tonight. Last time she called from jail after cutting a cop with a piece of glass. I picked her up, her arms patched in bruises. Asking about what happened resulted in her setting fire to the curtains and shattering our dishes. I didn't care about my stuff anymore. I just wanted out.

Hadn't thought about King though. What a terrific owner I am.

“It'll be okay,” Rick said. “She just wants to get to you.”

I sighed and sat on one of the benches, leaning on its armrest. *Where are you?* I texted Candice.

A knob in the bench metalwork dug into my back.

Coming, asshole, she replied.

“She's coming,” I said. I turned to examine the knob, us-

ing my phone for light. Digging into my back from the armrest was a miniature Labrador with a tennis ball in its mouth. I swung to the other side of the bench and illuminated a feline with yarn. I stood up and raced through the gate.

“What is it?” Rick called out.

I found the first grave marker, dropped to my knees, and put my phone next to the words. Lit in an electric blue glow and etched with a dachshund, the tombstone’s read “Lady, woman’s best friend.”

What the hell happened to King? I texted Candice, crawling to the next marker: “Mr. Pitts, a loyal companion.”

Rick’s footsteps crunched behind me. “Ah, man... we’re in a pet cemetery.”

My phone buzzed: *How did you find out?*

What happened? I typed.

I asked you to put him in a kennel! You know I’m terrible with dogs.

You’re unbelievable!

Maybe if you hadn’t broken up with me, he’d still be a happy, healthy dog.

“Psycho,” I whispered, shaking. “She’s killed my dog.”

Rick pulled out his phone. “What? We need to call the cops!”

“No, we need to find him.” I pointed. “You take that side.”

We crawled through markers: *Blanco*. I picked King because he climbed on top of his litter—king of the mountain—to get to me. *Wallie*. Why had I thought it was a good idea to let her watch him? “Please, give her one more chance,” Mom had said. *Pepper*. King chewed the plastic off her sewing machine, so Candice shaved him bald. *Buddy*. One night I found King in a box. “He’s a Jack Russell terror!” she had screamed. “I’m going to strangle him!” *Pee Wee*. *Sweetie*. *Killer*. *Twitch*. I clenched my jaw, surrounded by names.

“This section has Jack Russells!” Rick called out.

I stumbled to my feet and hurried over. “We’re never going to find him,” I said, hand running through my hair.

“Look!”

A light bounced from the entrance. Silent, I watched it moved closer, listening for the jingle of King’s collar that never came, just the crunch of sneakers on gravel.

“This is dangerous. We need to call the cops,” Rick hissed.

My hands tightened into fists. “Don’t worry. I’m gonna get her,” I said, creeping forward.

“Be careful.”

I stood behind a tree along the path. King played rough, pure muscle. He would have fought hard for his life. Just a few more steps and she’d pay.

Candice spoke into the darkness. “Rick? Where’s Chad?”

I jumped out, fist swinging for her chest but landing in fur. There was a yip, and she dropped what she was hold-

ing.

“Damn it, Chad! You scared the shit out of me.”

I felt a muzzle sniff my jeans as Rick came up to us, his phone ready. Candice pointed the flashlight down so I could see King. Patched in paper sack brown spots, he looked up at me. “King, I’m so sorry!” I said, picking him up. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” Candice said, pointing the flashlight in my face. “But you’re a dick.”

“You’re the one who brought us here,” Rick said.

Licking my face, King smelled of freshly cut grass, and he wiggled in my arms. One arm couldn’t hold him anymore he was so round. “He’s kind of heavy,” I said.

Candice sighed. “Look, I overfed him. Said I don’t know dogs. Told you, he’s not healthy anymore.”

“You made him think his dog was dead!”

She snorted and popped open an umbrella as it started to rain. “No, I did one better.” She pointed with the light

to a few patches of grass. “That’s King’s plot. And four more for the next ones. Rainbow Ridge Cemetery thanks you for your \$3000 check.” She turned and began walking away.

“You spent my money?” I said, pushing King’s nose out of my face, rain sprinkling my head and shoulders.

“Enjoy your lonely life!” she called back. “I have the feeling only dogs can love you. Bet you’ll bury a lot of ‘em. It would be cheaper to cremate, but that’s gross.”

We watched her flashlight bounce down the path. King licked my neck as I pulled out my phone to change Candice's contact name: *Never Answer Again*.



Taking Grandma to the Movies

by DAVID RUTTER

My grandmother loved French things. All French things. French wine and French food. French cheese and French literature. French music and French art. You name it. If you wanted to get a nice Christmas or birthday present for my grandmother, you could not go wrong with anything that was from France, looked French or had either France or French written on it somewhere. She was the original Francophile and wanted everyone to know it.

Now me, personally, what I love is movies. Old movies and new movies. Comedies, dramas and adventure movies. Horror and science fiction movies. Italian and Japanese and Swedish movies. Estonian movies and Tanzanian movies and movies filmed in Esperanto. And yes, when push comes to shove, French movies too. I love Godard and Truffaut and Robert Bresson and Jean-Pierre Melville. Jeez, when I think about it now, there must be 20 French directors I can name off the top of my head whose

films I'd go out of my way to see.

Given my love of movies and Grandma's love of all things French, it had been suggested to me, on more than one occasion by several members of my family, that the next time I went to see a double feature of French films at the Vista or New Beverly or the Nuart, I should take my grandmother with me. "She'd love it," they'd always say.

Famous last fucking words.

So when I saw an advertisement in the film section of the Times, promising a double feature of Gerard Depardieu films, I thought it might finally be the time to give my grandmother a call. "She'll love it," I said to myself.

The night of the show, I picked my grandmother up at her place in San Pedro, where she lived with my aunt and set off for the Rialto Theater in Pasadena, one of the great revival theaters that peppered Los Angeles, showing a different double feature every night. It wasn't long before home video would make it very easy for movie buffs to see classic and foreign films in the comfort

of their own homes and put places like the Rialto out of business. On this night, however, that was still in the future and we were excited to see the bill of “The Last Woman” directed by Marco Ferreri, followed by Barbet Schroeder’s “Maitresse.”

There was quite a bit of lively conversation in the car. My grandmother was a fiercely intelligent woman and advancing age had done nothing to dull her wits. She could hold her own in a debate with anyone. We were both smiling and laughing, enjoying each others’ company. Since I had become an adult, I had spent very little time in the company of my grandmother. We had been very close when I was a child but since about the age of 13 we had been very distant.

The vast majority of my time was spent in some form of inebriation and that was not the way I wanted her to see me. She seriously disapproved of any kind of illegal drug use. In preparation for this night I had deliberately gone the entire day substance free so I could make the best possible impression.

We arrived at the theater about ten minutes before showtime.

This is the perfect timing, as far as I am concerned. It gives you just enough time to buy your tickets, pick up whatever popcorn and candy you might need and find your seat right in time for the previews to start. I helped my grandma into her chair and sat down next to her just as the lights went out and the show began.

The previews went by uneventfully. Truth be told, I don’t even remember what they were. With the wild cluster fuck that came afterwards, some of the incidentals have been wiped from my memory.

I turned to my grandmother as the opening credits for the first feature began to roll and said, “I think you’re going to like this, Grandma. Gerard Depardieu is a big star.”

Now, I meant big as in number of fans and amount of acclaim, not in length, width and girth but, as my grandmother was very soon to find out, my comment would have worked either way. Until it’s surprise ending, “The Last Woman” is distinguished primarily as, by far, the most extensive collection currently known to man of footage of a fat, naked and fully erect Gerard

Depardieu. He appears in this condition so often in the film that you have the feeling they must have fired his costume designer early on and couldn't afford to hire a replacement.

The first time that he shows up in the buff with his disco stick in full military salute I looked over at my grandma to see if I could gauge her mood at all. My grandma came from that old school that believes sex is best left in the privacy of the bedroom and even then, only in the case of procreative necessity. Looking over, her face was stony and impassive, like she was trying to block the image with sheer force of will.

"This isn't good," I thought. My only hope, at this point, was that it was a one time occurrence and could be explained away, on the drive home, as an example of charming, French liberality. Unfortunately, it was just the beginning.

Depardieu's pudgy piss whistle makes such a notable appearance in the movie it should have received separate billing. Half an hour into the film I was already rehearsing excuses that I might be able to use on my grandmother on the way home. Two

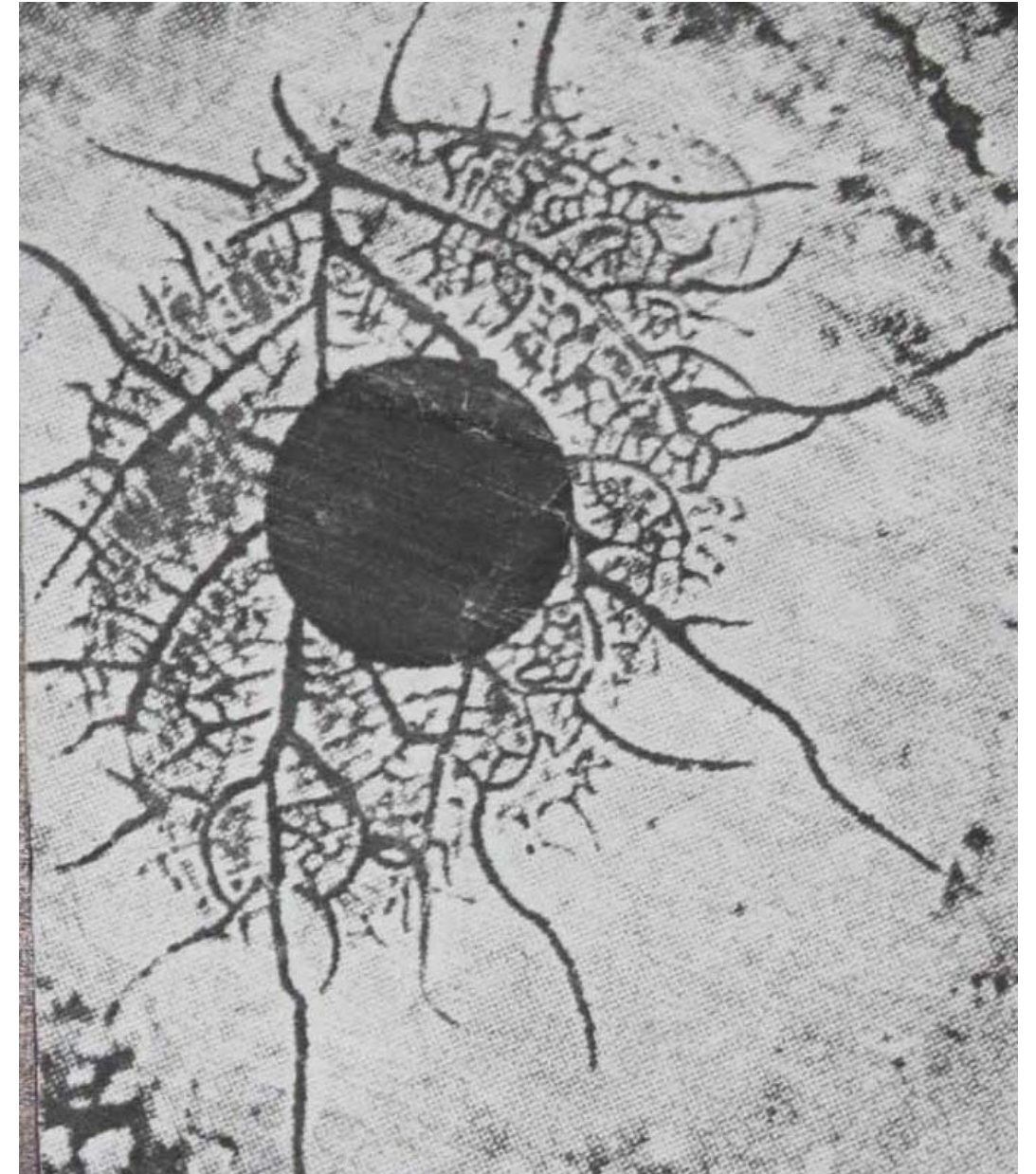
thirds of the way through, I thought I was going to need to plead temporary insanity as my only hope of escaping her indignation.

The worst, however, had been saved for last. The movie was a study of obsessive love and is called "The Last Woman" because the woman, played by the beautiful Ornella Muti, dumps Depardieu at the end and he responds by taking an electric meat carver and, fully naked as usual, proceeds to castrate himself with it. On camera. He then holds the fleshy stump high in the air and, with blood pouring down his arm, screams at the top of his lungs for what seems an eternity.

It probably goes without saying but, during the intermission, when I suggested it might be best if we decided to skip the second feature, my grandmother silently accepted. Too silently, to my way of thinking. I would have felt much better if she had, at least, started yelling at me. Without a word, she just got up, pushed past the outstretched legs of the other patrons in our aisle and headed for the exit. Nor did she make the slightest peep the entire dead man's march to the car.

On the way home, in the car, I tried to make desperate small talk and one or two extremely lame attempts to pass the entire thing off as a joke. My grandmother may as well have been Mt. Rushmore for all the emotion she showed. Her face remained a perfectly still mask for the whole length of the ride. She didn't speak, nor did she look at me or even turn her head at all. When I pulled up at her house she stepped out of the car and, without a word, walked up to the door, turned the knob and slipped inside.

Now alone in the car, I let my troubled mind wonder just how long my grandmother was going to be able to go without speaking a word to me. I could not know it at the time but the answer would prove to be, every single second of the remainder of her life.



A Review of *Obscure Signs of Progress* by Howie Good

by ROBIN WYATT DUNN

micro chapbook *Obscure Signs of Progress*, published online, 2013.

the chapbook is available here:

http://www.origamipoems.com/files/Books%20/2013/2013%202nd%20Half/Howie_Good_-_Obscure_Signs_of_Progress.pdf

Here in this season (is it winter, or spring?) of our discontent, Howie Good continues to make good on his delicious instinct to shove his thumb up under our neck to check our pulse.

“Every day is a heart hooked up to a monitor, another cat shot with an arrow” concludes one of the six poems in Good’s new “micro chapbook” titled *Obscure Signs of Progress*.

And the signs are very obscure: they are the logical dividends we are being paid by our labor saving devices.

Writing is a growth industry; people got time on their hands.

“I call the Emergency number. I’m the emergency” concludes “Ambient Noise.” Good is warning, of course, and he’s got a healthy dose of Whitman’s blood in him, insisting we’re him, and him us; but Good doesn’t know what to do; what do we do about the robots? About the telephone. About the corporation. He doesn’t know.

Neither do I.

“Winged skulls hunting insects in the dark” is the sound Good’s thoughts make. I’ve felt that way too.

“You’re either a victim or a suspect. There’s always a choice.”

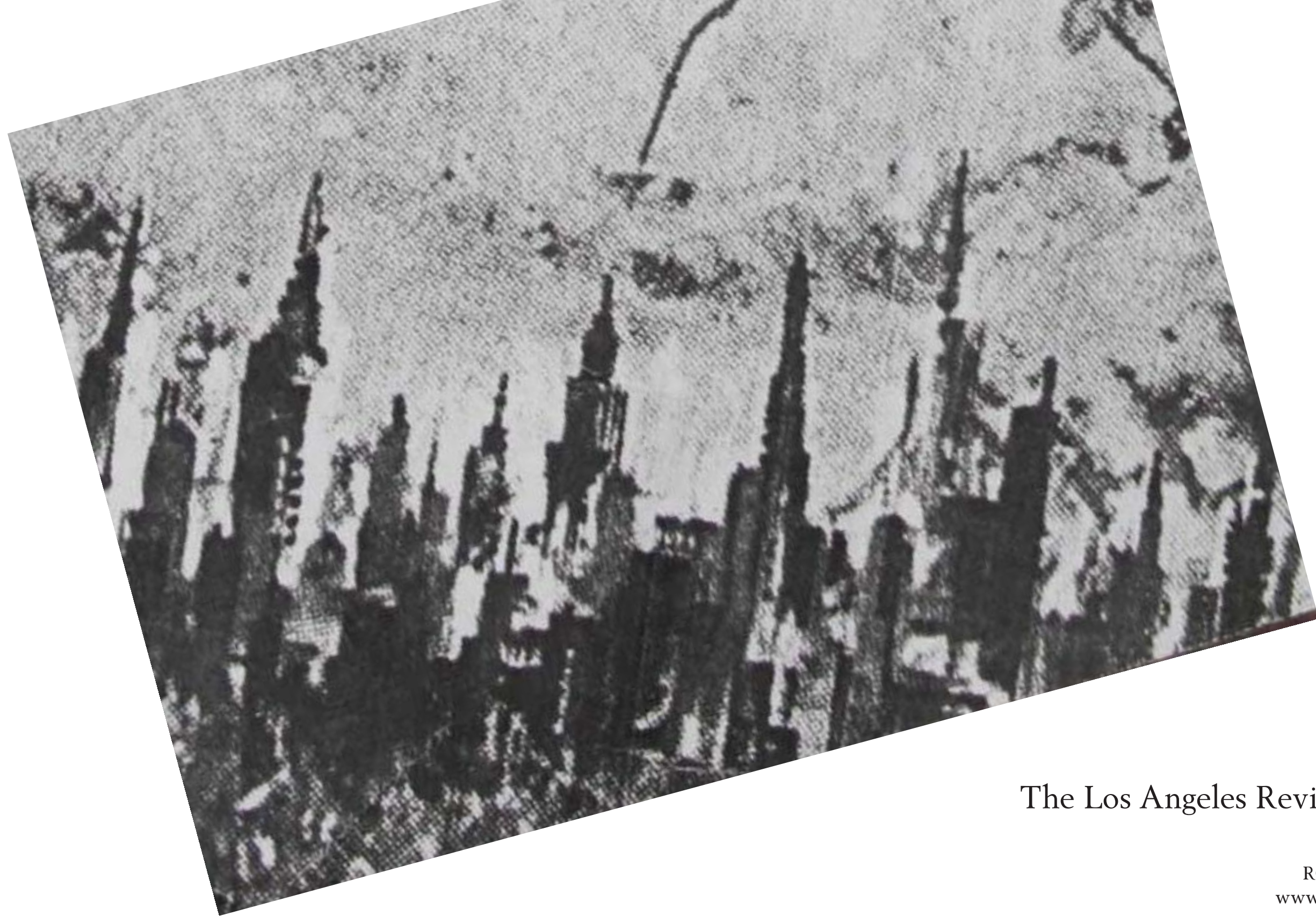
Why should Good be so good at saying all these horrible things, the same things I’ve been feeling?

Why is his Golgotha so beautiful?

Why is the zeitgeist like this, to insist that we experience things the same, we just didn't know it? We just didn't know it soon enough.

Is irony the solution to this existential rage and despair? What does irony do? Does it soften the blow? Does it make it hurt more? Yes.





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