

# The Los Angeles Review

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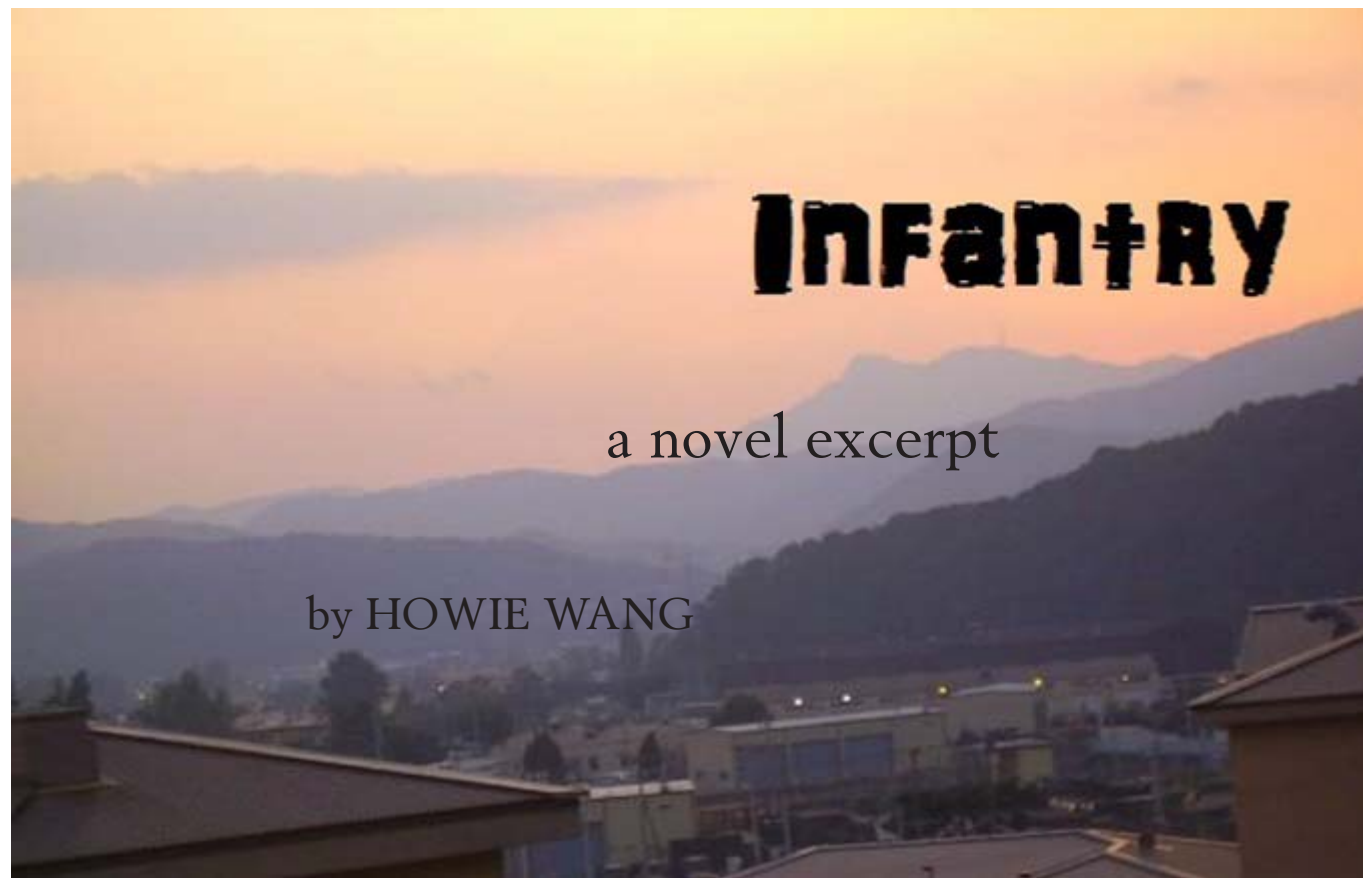
Issue Number Five

# Los Angeles

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“Spending time with this cheery group was like having to look at a happily panting golden retriever in the front seat while handcuffed in the back of some serial killers car,”

- *The Great Derangement* by Matt Taibbi.

At age 18 I was a virgin with a cough syrup addiction, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education, and schizophrenia. The doctor in the psychiatric ward had signed a document prohibiting me from ever legally

owning a firearm in the state of Pennsylvania. Two months later I signed up for the army- as a rifleman.

Part I: Before the Army:

I was living in a small apartment in western Pennsylvania above a drycleaners. It was winter and I had no source of heat besides a barbecue grill I had found in front of an abandoned house— I burnt all kinds of things, the newspapers and grocery ads that I burnt on the grill produced only a modicum of comfort and they eventually turned the ceiling black.

One evening the grill toppled over and caught the shag carpet on fire. A friend of mine had telephoned the local fire department before I had time to put out the flames and in a panic to retard the embers I stepped on my cat- snapping her neck. By the time the firemen arrived I was on the charred carpet hopelessly trying to put her spine back into place. My landlord was displeased

when she found out her carpet and walls were ruined. I blamed everything on my cat, Bruce Bowen. Bruce attained her moniker as a tribute to a National Basketball Association's Small-Forward from the 1990's; Bruce Bowen wasn't very jazzy but she had a lot of hustle and she would often skirmish with wayward strays coming in through the window— She always won.

That year the weather had dropped to a negative 14 degrees. The wind would cut my face like a razor and blew me off the sidewalk. When the wind didn't blow I could hardly walk on the iced sidewalk without slipping. The night became so cold that I couldn't sleep and I would listen to Fox News' talk radio station. I remember the lineup well- Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, some angry Jew, and Art Bell (Art Bell was the only one I really liked.) I waited out the Pennsylvanian winter, too cold to even write or draw, and ate oatmeal- this is my best excuse for joining the infantry.

(My wintertime monotony was broken only by a couple of friends- a homosexual Mexican artist named Ben Bettis and a 30

year old construction worker by the name of Mark Snapple. Ben Bettis would visit about 5 days a week to draw and drink cough syrup; he would plop down at my table and focus on a piece of paper for hours. "VIOLA," he would say when he was done. Holding the piece of paper in the air he would wait patiently for my critique- the pictures were always too tiny to see. Mark Snapple would come by in the evening and chase Ben out of the house with racist jokes. Mark and I would drink Vodka, smoke cigarettes, and talk about what we wanted to be when we grew up. Ben would come by the next morning and complete the cycle- Ben usually came in through the back door. I'd walk to the store with ben and he'd use his Social Security check to buy me a bottle of cough syrup, I'd roll cigarettes, make coffee.)

"You're the last person I thought would join the army."- I heard this line at least 10 times while preparing everything. Even my mother said it, even my recruiter. It always offended me. I would always ask why, and I would always get a smirk in return.

“I’m not in bad shape... I’ve been in at least 15 fist fights and I’ve won almost half of them,” I would say. “I don’t know, I just never thought of you as the army type,” they would respond- always with that damned little knowingly smirk on their face. People must have mistaken my quiet nature for perversion or cowardice, I was a very quiet young man, and I’m still quiet- in my opinion people, men especially, need to shut up more often.

I took my General Equivalency Diploma test, passed it, and boarded a plane to Columbus Georgia.

## PART II: Basic Training.

On the plane I listened to the Elton John album Goodbye Yellow Brick Road two times and, looking out the window, saw a man hang himself from a tree in North Carolina. I had binoculars with me and I could see that the man was African American. I wanted to ask if anyone saw him too, but I was all alone. I was the only soul that had bought binoculars from the nigger in the

trench coat- they were \$80 and the left lens was broke.

I got off the plane to see boys my age that looked like their mothers had tied a 10 pound weight to their necks and nursed them on malt liquor- (I was of average height and weight for a young Pennsylvanian male- About 5’ 11", 160 pounds.) I followed the current of strapping young lads to the U.S.O counter and sat waiting for a bus to take me to Fort Benning.

I loaded onto the bus with all the other future infantrymen and took a seat in the back. The ride from the airport took a long time because the driver, large dark man, pulled the bus off the highway at every single exit. The driver would slide into a main street, open his doors, and call back “Anybody want to get off yet?” No one ever answered him. No one got off. We were all scared mutes... or just mutes. We were all white with a light sprinkle of African American and a dash of stray Mexicans.

(I often wonder what would compel a free man to join the army. Bygones are bygones. I certainly wouldn’t have joined if I

weren't in dire straits. I often ponder the motivation behind all the African American infantry soldiers I have met- I wouldn't fight for the red white and blue if I were black. But then again I am lazy. And bygones are bygones, I suppose.)

The bus pulled up to its final destination at about midnight, and there it was- the army. Groups of 100 men stood in close quarters, erect and motionless only inches away from one another like bowling pins- for every 100 men paced one in a large cowboy hat, very large men, spitting on feet and occasionally leaning into the formation of pins to scream something. The buildings were huge and gray and boring... My heart leaped up into my chest and made my stomach feel empty. I sighed, and thought one last time before turning off my thoughts completely. I thought: *what the hell have I gotten myself into?*

When you joined the infantry you were required to withstand 2 weeks of "in-processing" before you jumped into

basic training and during this time I had my vision and hearing tested (for the 4th time since signing army papers) and I was issued my "TA-50," (body armor, shovels, ammo pouches, etc.) I slept in small bunk bed in a large warehouse with about 100 other men. My bunkmate was a portly soul from West Virginia by the name of Thomas Schmeedly. Thomas was 35, an ex-plumber, and had a severe snore that kept me up most of the night. I would poke him through the mattress to stop his snoring but he would only say a few lines- usually about soccer or some girl- and go back to snoring. Out of sheer boredom in my bunk I eventually made a game out of poking Thomas, unwillingly causing him to divulge his dreams. He and I would become friends in a different country about a year later, (the United States Army infantry is small and after time you begin to run into familiar faces.) Those 2 weeks seemed to last forever. I stood in one line for an hour, filled out a piece of paper, and then jump into another line- it seemed like an infinite purgatory at one point. By the time I was informed that basic training was about to

begin, and that I would spend a grueling 18 weeks “becoming a soldier” I didn’t much care. In processing at Fort Benning, at the time, seemed like the worst place in the world.

I had two large duffle bags full of “TA-50” (canteen cups, a parka, a helmet, etc.) each weighed about 50 lbs. a piece, and I lugged them to the bus where 50 other future soldiers were already waiting to board. I was instructed to stuff my bags in the undercarriage of the vessel amidst 100 others and climb aboard for my journey into manhood- I did as instructed. The trip took about 10 minutes. When the bus stopped the doors opened and in boarded 4 behemoth soldiers with necks the size of thighs- veiny as autumn leaves, screaming every obscenity known to God fearing earth. These soldiers, (“Drill Sergeants”) screamed, above all, “Get the hell off the bus,” and once we did get the hell off the bus we were creamed at.

We were informed, loudly, to pull out every duffle bag from the vessels undercarriage and place them in a pile. We did so. 50

future soldiers like terrified schoolchildren pulled out all of the cargo. We then were informed, directly, to find the bags that contained our personal belongings, and we did so. We were then ordered to pull out every item within the bag. We did. One of the scrawnier Drill Sergeant’s read from a piece of paper containing the name of the items within our bags, and we were informed by a much larger soldier to hold the item above our heads as to make sure that we owned it. We did. This whole process took about an hour and then we were ordered to line up in a row so that the Drill Sergeants could personally inspect each one of us, “new fish.”

I was passed by without problem- probably due to the fact that I was a plain looking white male with nothing special going on. The man to my left got verbally assaulted for about 5 minutes simply because he had a lazy eye.

“What kind of shit are they throwing us now?” one sergeant said.

Another man had a very tiny upper body and a large lower

body, he was rather lumpy, and the sergeants went on a 5 minute ramble about how he probably had too much estrogen pumping through his system. This made a young man chuckle and he was immediately face to face with three spitting, barking dogs.

Later on that day we were all asked why we had joined the infantry:

“To protect and serve, Sergeant,” one soldier said.

“I WANT TO KILL, Sergeant,” another screamed.

“My grandfather fought in world War 2,” said one.

The line was getting shorter and it would soon be my turn to give my answer. I was nervous.

The Sergeant looked me up and down,

“Why did YOU join the infantry, Private.”

I didn't know.

“Too many methamphetamines and too much Call of Duty, Sergeant,” I said (Call of Duty was a war-based videogame for televisions.) It was not untrue. Some privates snickered but the Sergeant was not laughing. He was brainwashed.

“Do you think you're a funny guy?” He asked. The man was a Native American. He was very large.

I didn't think I was being very funny. I had no other answer and I was just being honest. Should I have said, “Because I was cold and facing a year of probation?” All throughout high school I was taking speed and blowing Koreans away on the television.

“Do pushups,” he yelled.

“Motherfucker,” I whispered.

“WHAT?!”

“Nothing.” I did pushups.

“Anyone else here a drug addict,” the drill sergeant asked. No one answered. One soldier was slowly raising his hand before his buddy grabbed it and pushed it down for him.

“YOU SEE THIS MAN ON THE FLOOR?!” yelled the large Native American— “HE'S GOING TO BE A GOOD INFANTRYMAN. YOU KNOW WHY?” No one answered.

“BECAUSE HE'S UGLY. HE IS UGLY ENOUGH TO KILL.



AND THAT IS WHAT WE DO, THAT IS WHAT YOU SIGNED UP FOR, YOU ARE BEING PAID TO KILL. RIGHT NOW YOU ARE ALL MY PERSONAL SLAVES. YOUR BODY IS GOVERNMENT PROPERTY. YOU ARE ALL MY BITCHES— IF I PULL MY POCKET INSIDE OUT I EXPECT YOU TO GRAB ONTO IT AND KISS ME ON THE CHEEK. BUT I WON'T DO THAT BECAUSE I AM NOT A FAGGOT. BY THE TIME YOU ARE DONE HERE YOU WILL ALL BE TRAINED PROFESSIONAL KILLERS. HOW DOES THAT SOUND?!"

"HOOAH," everyone yelled (I hated that noise— everyone always said it— I said it also.)

"DOES ANYONE HAVE A PROBLEM WITH THAT?"

"NO DRILL SERGEANT."

(I was used to a small town in Appalachia outside of Pittsburgh where the weather was cold and it made everyone

angry- It was like Soviet Russia without the sunshine. Perhaps this upbringing helped me fair verbal abuse better. Drill Sergeants would ask future soldiers where they were raised and Southern Californians were chewed up and spit out. People from Alabama and Mississippi were made fun of. Even future soldiers from places like New Haven Connecticut and Manhattan got some abuse. No one really knew anything about Western Pennsylvania besides the football and steel companies, unless you were raised there- and even then you were a damned oddity if you knew more. The only attributes these Drill Sergeants held sacrosanct were skin color and religion- I had neither so I didn't really have anything to worry about anyway.)

We did a lot of pushups, shot a lot of guns, and went on a lot of camping trips throughout those 18 weeks. We also fought one another with boxing gloves, sat in chambers full of toxic gas, and ran constantly. We ran every morning. And I think we ran every evening. I was so busy running, failing to run, and getting

screamed at to run faster that I hardly had time to account for what was happening to me. In the beginning of training I ran 2 miles in 21 minutes and after 18 weeks of training I could run 2 miles in 14 minutes and 20 seconds. Basic training was like one giant roller coaster- I just held my breath and waited until the end so that I could go home and tell my friends "I rode the U.S. Infantry."

Camping in Northern Georgia was beautiful, the place seemed to take a piece of wildlife from every united state and roll it together into a stew -I always had a 40 pound machine gun and 30 pounds of armor on me, so I was limited- I traveled through a mile of New Mexican looking desert, made an encampment amongst a group of tall Pennsylvanian looking trees dripping with Florida looking moss, and found a Texas looking rattlesnake beside me while lying in a field of 5 foot tall Vietnam looking grass- one night I sat in my tent and sang "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay," by Otis Redding, an old song. (I had hardly talked up till this point in basic training, people didn't know what my voice

sounded like, I was like a ghost- I was just so happy to be sad in a tent that I started singing Otis Redding's hit, finished it, and when I was done 3 opposing tents clapped. One guy said loud, "encore!")

Basic Training was difficult.

There was this Persian kid named Alandro that had withstood 18 weeks of basic training. Over 16 weeks he had watched 30% of our platoon fall to their knees and go home. Alandro and some other future soldier had made a see-saw out of dead trees. I helped. The strapping young lad and his fat friend got on the see-saw, the big bastard shot Alandro straight up into the air, when he landed on the Northern Georgia ground he bent his arm the complete opposite any God ever willed it to go and was sent home.

The food was good in the cafeteria but we only got 5 minutes to eat it and every Friday we had a fried catfish dinner that couldn't be eaten in that time without choking on bones.

(I promised myself that I wouldn't write this drunk- but I am. I began basic training almost 7 years ago, it lasted for 18 weeks and I haven't been sober for 18 consecutive weeks since basic training.) loathing the very kind of person I had become or was pretending to be. I wondered all the while: Am I really patriotic? I didn't want it. But after 18 weeks getting the piss scared out of me I really didn't know quite what I was anymore.) If I was not patriotic, it sure didn't help that my graduation from the Infantry landed on July 4<sup>th</sup>.

The night before graduation at Fort Benning my Drill Sergeants took a metal pin formed to look like two crossed rifles- and punched it into my chest- a bloody punctuation to a long horrible adventure and I felt tears of love well up in my eyes- was I really about to cry over a little rifle pin? Was I really patriotic now? What would I tell my friends back home? How could I ever GO back home?

Independence Day, 2008: Even after completing the arduous task of basic training I was asking myself if I really belonged in the army. I don't know if you would call it "submission" or "growing up," but something inside of me could do neither with an American flag on my arm- I felt like a clown. (I felt like a cop. I had spent all of my adolescent life in Juvenile Detention centers

My father was is a large man (about 6' 7" tall and 300 lbs. of steel and beer.) He always scared the shit out of me. With his size alone he intimidated most people. On graduation day in Georgia I saw his head above everyone else- with a big goofy smile ear to ear. I knew he was living in Florida, but I hadn't talked to him in 4 years. I was shocked to see him there.

I had made plans with 3 of my new "battle buddies" to get a nice hotel for a week, get wasted on booze, and find some women- before we left Georgia for good. My father's arrival changed everything.

After the ceremony (5 hours standing in the scorching Georgia summer heat in a dress uniform) we were released. I

had the next 30 days to myself, at least 4 thousand dollars in the bank, and nothing in the world to do besides spend all of it on booze and women before boarding a plane to Korea. I had rode the infantry roller coaster in the carnival of fascist guns and came off of it unscathed... the only person that could alter my bee-line to the cotton candy stand that was liquor and vagina was my father- and there he was.

I walked up to the towering mass of a man pensively. He said hello. I said hello.

“So where do you want to go, Joe.” He asked. I told him that I had made plans with 3 friends (2 of them were running up behind me gaily. They were ecstatic as a man right out of prison, as was I.) I told my father that I had planned to stay in Georgia for a week with some kids- unless he had a better idea. My father said he would pay for our hotel rooms and buy the booze.

“Anyone old enough to die in Korea for America is old enough to drink in America,” my father said. I agreed.

“Plus Joe, you don’t have a car,” my father said. I agreed.

The three soldiers I had made plans to stay in Georgia were now at my side. I introduced everyone, explained things, and they seemed to have no problems letting my father pay for their hotels. We all got into my father’s Jeep- He popped in a Black Sabbath CD, turned it to the song War Pigs, and turned the volume the whole way up- playing it with the windows down so everyone in Fort Benning heard.

I could see tears in my father’s eyes- I don’t know him very well. I didn’t know if they were tears of pride, shame, or what. (I remember playing with his old ammo belt as kid- I had found it in my grandparent’s attic when I was 7 or 8 years old- with awe I thought *my dad was in the army...* My mother never told me about my father. I treated the old belt like it was gold.)

My father drove us to a Holiday in, paid for 3 rooms, and drove us to the liquor store. We were all still wearing our dress uniforms- the green ones (like in movies.) My father towered above all of us wearing his sleeveless Lynyrd Skynyrd tee-shirt and ordered and asked the man behind the counter for two

bottles of Absolute Vodka and a pack of Salem Cigarettes with a case of 30 Heinekens in his hand.

“What do you guys want?” He asked, looking back at us. The oldest one amongst us wasn’t 20 yet and the clerk could tell.

“I need to see their I.D.’s,” the effeminate Arabian clerk said. My father looked over his shoulder again,

“Well don’t just stand there boys, get what you want.”

“Sir, I will need to see some I.D.’s,” the Arabian clerk said. He was shivering.

“Give me a fucking break dude,” my father said.

The effeminate clerk shook his head and stood back, defeated, while we bought cigarettes, beef jerky, 6 cases of beer and a few bottles of expensive liquor. On our way out my father looked back at the defeated Arab Clerk and said,

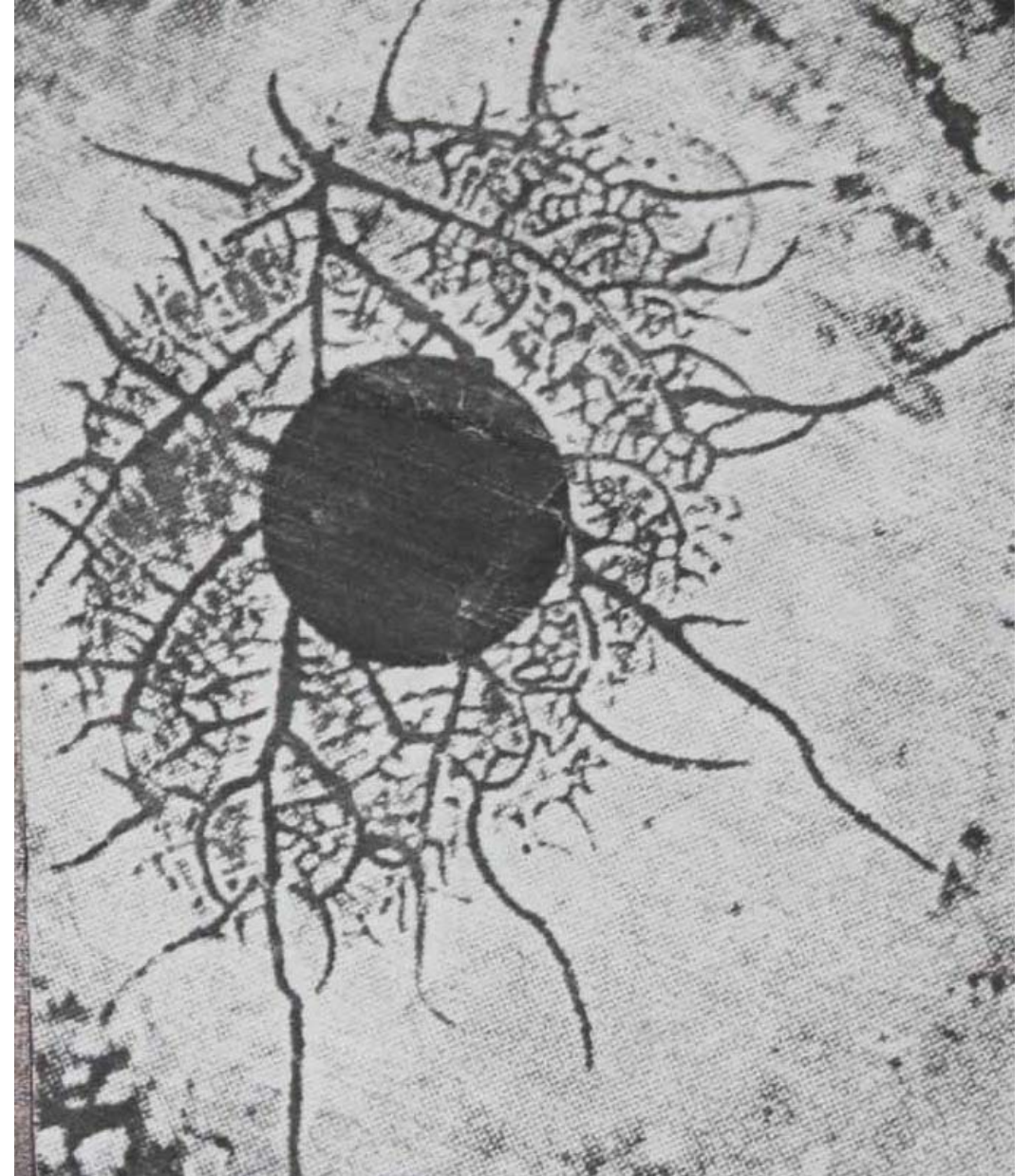
“Way to support the war, asshole!”

My father left the next morning. I went to his hotel room and found a note beside an empty bottle of Vodka- *Got sick, Joe. Gotta go. Hotel’s been paid.*

I checked with the clerk downstairs and it was true- all 3 rooms had been paid for the next week. I asked the hotel clerk if she had seen a large man in a Lynyrd Skynrd tee-shirt leave- she told me that I had just missed him.

Later that evening I was relaxing on a bed drinking and watching television with one of the soldiers I was with. The kid’s name was Slater, he was white as a cloud and about five foot nothing. (For some reason Slater woke up in the morning and saw an 8 foot tall black man in the mirror- he called everyone “nigga,” or “bitch,” and you had to be very careful not to offend him- or he would punch you. He was someone you didn’t really want to be around. You never knew what might offend him because he was insane. I’d once said “I don’t much care for Alec Baldwin’s acting, never really have,” and Slater got this crazy look in his eye- He started flaring his nostrils. He cocked back like he was ready to roundhouse me. *I could take this guy*, I thought. But Why? Why get in a fight over Alec Baldwin? I really don’t like the man- Alec- but I will probably never meet him. Why get bloody over

it? I would have to think quickly: “But I’ll be damned if *Glengarry Glen Ross* wasn’t the best movie I’ve seen,” I said. A smile arose onto Slater’s face. “Nigga, I loved *Glengarry Glen Ross*,” he said.)



# BUFFALO-HEAD NICKEL (July 4)

by BENJAMIN BLAKE

Sitting alone at my desk

With no company aside from myself and

Currency that's little use to me at this point in time

A postcard sent from Long Island

With a heart dotting the 'i' where she signed her name

Photographs of winter bare trees

And a one-armed angel taken in a cemetery in East Los Angeles

Somehow it's more pitiful that I'm not drunk

At least then I could be genuinely maudlin with nostalgia

Not just bored and down

Rosary beads that saw their fair share of sin

From where they hung on the rearview mirror of my old BMW

Cigarette ash spilled across almost everything

My scattered thoughts and dour adoration

For nobody in particular

There won't be any fireworks tonight

# Charity for the Blind

by HUSTON LOWELL

The old blind man sat in the filth of the street, holding a badly chipped clay pot, his eyes clenched to well-practiced slits, patiently waiting for the charity of strangers. As he watched the people bustle through the market square, he gritted his sparse yellow teeth every time one of them dropped something into the threadbare begging sack the little lame boy across the street held out so pitifully.

The boy was the worst kind of amateur. The blind man had studied him with contempt in the several days since he had appeared. He watched him kick his legs around to change position every few minutes, then get up and walk home at dusk each night. It amazed him that nobody else had noticed. Why should that Johnny-come-lately get all the good charity with his sloppy act, when a seasoned professional went hungry? It was downright infuriating.

The blind man had staked his claim on street begging years earlier. He had walked into town, led on a short rope by a stolen donkey, which he had almost immediately bartered to the innkeeper. The animal had been worth a meal of rancid mutton and a stinking bed that had previously served as a sort of central office for the town's inveterate harlot, until a dispute over incorrect change that day had gotten her stoned in the street for prostitution.

The next morning, when the innkeeper discovered the donkey dead in its stall, he chased the blind man into the street, beating him with a rod. The welts had been good for business. The blind man's begging had never been so fruitful.

The blind man shook his empty pot and listened to the nothingness rattling around in it. He would give his right eye for a few more welts, right about now.

He spotted a wealthy fat man in a crisp linen tunic and brightly colored robes, swaggering toward him. Finally! As his



mark approached, the blind man cocked his head a quarter turn to avoid the appearance of looking at the man.

“Help for a poor blind man?” the blind man said, holding his dirty hand out to the air just past the wealthy man. “Charity for the blind?”

“Don’t you have a family to take care of you?” The wealthy man eyed him incredulously.

“No,” said the blind man, still sizing up the fat man, “My wife and sons all died of a plague. I am alone. Alone and blind. And terribly poor. Will you help me?” His voice quivered and fairly dripped with self-pity.

He watched out of the corner of his slitted eye as the wealthy man scooped a pebble up from the ground with a malicious smirk and tossed it into the pot. Even to the untrained ears of a man who had pretended so long to be blind, the pebble sounded nothing like a coin.

“Oh,” said the blind man as another thick group of people shuffled past behind the wealthy man, “thank you, kind Sir.

Thank you, and may your kindness be rewarded a hundredfold.”

Then, addressing the passing crowd, “This generous man has offered me a great kindness, the first one of the day. And because of him, I will not starve today. Will someone please come and look at the treasure he has placed in my pot? From the sound, it must be very valuable.”

“Yes, old man,” said a deep voice behind the wealthy man, “I’ll look at your new treasure for you. If you’ll give me a share of it.”

The crowd began to gather around the blind man, murmuring about treasures and gifts for the poor. The blind man bit his lip to keep from smiling at the squirming rich man.

“Of course, young man,” the blind man said, “I will gladly give you fully half of whatever this kind man has placed into my pot.”

A young muscular man, who dwarfed the fidgety little rich man, pushed past and reached into the blind man’s pot. The chubby rich man tried to push his way through the gathering throng, but the young strongman gripped his shoulder and held him in place.

The muscle man pulled out the pebble and inspected it with a grim expression. The fat little man tried to break away from his grip, but he could not.

“This is the great treasure this generous man has given the blind man!” The young man held the pebble high in the air for all to see. “Such generosity!”

The crowd roared with laughter.

“What is it, son?” the blind man asked, focusing his slitted eyes on a spectator thirty feet to the right of the pebble. She was an attractive young woman, and he found himself quite taken with her.

“This man has tricked you,” said the young man, “tricked a poor old blind man, whose life is already filled with nothing but difficulty. I am sorry. Your treasure is nothing but a pebble from the street.” Then, to the wealthy man, “Shame on you!”

“I will die today, after all!” the blind man wailed, “Is there no kindness left in the world?”

The crowd began to murmur disapprovingly. The attractive young woman just watched with a pleasant smile and attentive eyes that made the blind man a little nervous. He waited for the noise of disapproval to reach a crescendo before beginning to weep openly.

“Stone him!” shouted a voice from the crowd.

“It was a mistake,” the rich man shouted to the crowd, “a mistake! I meant to give him this.” He held up a dull copper coin from another city.

“Not good enough,” shouted the same voice, “let’s stone him!”

“No!” the wealthy man shouted back to the crowd, “No! I’ll give him this whole bag of silver. Just let me go.” He held up a heavy silk pouch, then loosened the string on it to show its contents to the strongman whose grip was grinding a bruise into his shoulder.

“That’s pretty good,” shouted another voice in the crowd.

“Let’s stone him, anyway!” boomed the first voice.

“Yeah!” A third voice joined in. “Stone the cheap bastard!”

“But! But! Wait!” the rich man stammered, dropping the silver into the blind man’s pot, pouch and all. “I have gold, too!”

He held up another pouch. The blind man couldn’t help but smile at the sight of the sweating rich man just inside his periphery, and focusing unnoticed on the beautiful young woman’s placid smile was a rare treat, despite her unnervingly probing eyes. It was shaping up to be a good day, after all.

“What else you got?” the first crowd voice demanded.

A rock flew past the rich man’s head, straight toward the blind man. With an awkward twitching motion, the blind man spun his torso to get out of the way of the rock. The beautiful woman’s eyebrows almost levitated off her face. Then, she settled again into a knowing smile and winked at him.

“Wait!” said the rich man, “If you don’t kill me, I’ll give it all to you fine people!”

“That’s fair!” said the first crowd voice.

“Give over!” said another.

The rich man loosened the string on his bag of gold and cocked it back to launch it into the crowd, but at the last moment, he stopped. Instead, he jammed his hand back into the blind man’s pot and lobbed the bag of silver, creating a metallic rain of silver over the crowd.

In the frenzied melee that erupted around the falling coins, the rich man broke free of the young muscleman and darted away from the throng. As the fat man ran, looking backwards, the blind man seized an opportunity to get a little revenge. He stuck his leg out and tripped the rich man, sending him tumbling headlong into the street.

Soon, the rich man’s uncoordinated stumble-run had made good his escape, and the mob had dissipated just as quickly. The blind man returned to his vocation.

“Help a poor blind man?” he said to the first person to approach him. Looking up from her sandals, he could see that same knowing, placid smile. It was her.

“I will help you,” she said. Then, she took out a crust of bread and slowly bent forward with a sultry shimmy, exposing maximum cleavage to the blind man. He barely noticed the tink of the bread she dropped into his pot. as she continued to whisper. She gave him a quick lover’s peck on the cheek and led him by the hand back to the blind man.

The blind man caught himself staring directly at her ample bosom, but it was too late. She looked down at her own bosom, then back at him and winked again. With a shiver he jerked his head back to a convincing blind man’s quarter turn away from her.

“Thank you, dear child,” he said, “there is still goodness in the world.”

Without a word, she sauntered over to a group of a baker’s dozen beggars in filthy robes. That was all he needed. First, the lame boy, now these thirteen able-bodied men to horn in on his action. He didn’t have long to wonder what their game was.

He could see the woman whisper something to one of them, a nondescript man in his late twenties with a confident smile that burned through his unkempt beard and became an outright laugh

“Help for a poor blind man?” the blind man said nervously, as they approached.

“The power of my god will help you, brother,” the bearded man said in a gentle voice, never losing his smile. “You will see today.”

“That’s nonsense,” the blind man said with a wave of his hand, “I am blind, and that’s the end of it. Go away.”

The other twelve beggars surrounded the blind man, entirely covering him with their shadows.

“My god calls for this miracle to be done for you today to glorify Him,” the young man said in a voice intended for the crowd.

As the crowd gathered around, despite the blind man’s protestations, the young bearded beggar turned his back and dug his fingers into the ground, pulling out a chunk of dirt. He spat

into his palm and rubbed his hands together to make a loose, foamy yellowish mud.

“Hold him down,” he instructed his followers, as he walked slowly toward the blind man.

At once, the blind man’s arms and legs were in the steely grip of the twelve followers. He kicked and fought in vain. He forgot to squint and look a quarter turn away when he saw what the man intended to do with the nasty spit-mud.

“No!” the man shouted, “Please! Somebody help me!”

“Heal him!” the familiar stoning-happy voice called out.

“Then he’ll stop being such a pain in the ass!”

“Yeah!” another voice called out, “Do it!”

A moment later, the blind man had fingers in his eyes, grinding the gritty, stinging mud into them.

“Owww!” he howled in pain and fear, “My eyes! Stop! It burns! Stop it! Please!”

The crowd murmured in anticipation. The muddy fingers finally relented, and the woman brought the blind man a cup of water from the well.

“Rinse your eyes,” the would-be healer ordered him.

The blind man splashed the water into his eyes and wiped them on his sleeves. Then, he repeated it a number of times, before relaxing back into his trained squint.

“Can you see anything,” the young, smiling man asked.

“No, you crazy bastard,” the blind man shouted, “I’m blind!”

“Hold him down again.” The young beggar gathered up another plug of dirt and made a show of preparing to spit into his hands again.

“No!” the blind man said frantically, “Wait! I can see. Just a little. You all look like... Like dim shadows of trees walking around.”

The crowd murmured excitedly as the details made it from the nearest to furthest. From putting spit-mud in the blind man’s

eyes to putting the his eyes on a muddy spit, the story changed and became weirder with each retelling.

“Well,” the crazy beggar said, stroking his beard, “It’s a start.”

The healer hocked up a snot ball that made the crowd groan. He held one of the blind man’s eyes wide open and spat into it.

“Ewww!” the stoning-happy voice yelled, “That’s just wrong!” Another snot ball went into his other eye.

“All right! All right, you crazy son of a bitch!” the blind man shrieked. “You win!”

“Release him,” the crazy beggar said placidly.

The blind man took the fresh cup of water from the woman again and frantically washed the snot out of his eyes.

“What can you see, now?”

“Everything,” the blind man said bitterly. “I can see everything. You, your girlfriend, your twelve minions, the crowd. Everything! Are you satisfied, you sadistic prick? Are you?”

The crowd cheered. A healing had occurred.

“Praise the stranger!” shouted one voice above the rest.

“Praise whichever god he worships!” shouted another.

“Hey, buddy,” shouted the stoning-happy voice, “You think you could fix my hemorrhoids?”

The crazy beggar waved the crowd down.

“Maybe we could go just one more round.” He stooped and picked up another plug of dirt and turned toward the blind man. The blind man screamed in wordless terror as he approached slowly, menacingly, grinning wider than ever.

“Just kidding,” the crazy beggar said, dropping the dirt and turning back to be swallowed up by the adoring horde and crowd-surf into the inn.

The blind man watched until the inn door closed behind them. For the first time in years, he had his eyes wide open and focused straight in front of him. It was liberating. Perhaps a miracle of sorts had been worked for him today, after all.

“Get up out of the street,” a stern voice said behind him. “You’re not blind anymore. Quit your begging.”

He turned just in time to be hit squarely in the mouth with a broom wielded by the innkeeper's wife. Picking broom straw from between his teeth, he stood and walked across the street to the little lame boy.

The strongman reappeared from between the street vendors' kiosks. The blind man nodded at him as he approached.

"What do you suppose we should do, now, father?" the strongman asked.

"Well, we can't stay here," the blind man said, watching the little lame boy change the position of his legs again. "Maybe we should get into the traveling miracle business."

"Help for a little lame boy?" The filthy child put on his best sad eyes and held out his begging sack. "Please?"

"What do you mean," asked the strongman with a blank face.

"Just watch," the blind man said. Then, he turned to the little lame boy.

"Little boy," the blind man said to the little lame boy in a voice that caricatured the crazy beggar's, "I've felt the power of the stranger's god. That same power will heal you today, too."

"Oh, I'm sure it can't," said the little lame boy, "I will be like this forever."

"Well, we'll just give it a try, just the same," the blind man said, hauling back his foot.

"Heal!" the blind man yelled at the little lame boy, as he kicked him squarely in the crotch.

The little boy howled in pain and balled up into a fetal position, rocking back and forth. When the boy seemed to begin to relax again, the blind man pulled his foot back again.

"Are you fully healed?" he asked the little boy. "Or do you need another go?"

"Ohhhhh," said the strongman, "I get it, now." Then, turning to the little lame boy, "I'd just get up if I were you."

The little boy got up to his feet and began to waddle away clutching his groin. The strongman grabbed his bag as he passed by.

When their attention was away from the little lame boy, he stopped and gave them an obscene hand gesture before moving on.

“Look!” a voice called out from the inn doorway, “It’s another healing! He wasn’t even over there. This guy is good! Somebody buy him another round!”

“We could travel to Jerusalem, father,” said the strongman, “It’s a big place. I’ll bet they could use a miracle or two there.”

“You might just be right, Barabbas,” the blind man said, “You might just be right.”





# The Routine

by RYAN PRIEST

My eyes shot open. This is how I wake up. When you've been in a routine for long enough you begin to develop a certain rhythm. My routine is getting heavily shit-faced at night and then passing out until those first few sounds of the morning blow my eyes open and I'm immediately racked with terror.

Put a human being in any place, any time and his first natural reaction will be to question how he got there, whether you wake up in bed, on a plane or on the planet Mercury burning in a trace atmosphere, on a rock with surface temperatures in excess of three hundred degrees. Well, when I wake up drunk and that question springs into my mind there is an immediate block in my memory. I can always remember having *been* drunk and most of the time what I had done but in no discernable order.

You have to take a few moments to piece your night together. Those first few minutes are hellish wondering if two

neurons will come together and jog a memory of debasement or violence or any one of the thousand things alcohol helps us out with.

Having come to the conclusion that the previous night I'd been pretty tame I moved on to the next step in my routine, checking my body for wounds. Drunks stumble around, we break things, we cut ourselves, we step on nails. Most of the time we're too invested in our drunken revelry to care or consider the consequences. Consequences are things for sobriety to think about.

No wounds and I was about ready to begin my day. The last two items on my pre-getting out of bed schedule were to light a cigarette and check my phone for missed calls. Also it helps that I have a cell phone and can also check outgoing calls. It's nothing rare for people I know to get a three am call from a drunken me, wanting to talk. A very horrible and rude happenstance that I chide myself for all through the next day. No calls, incoming or outgoing.

I got out of bed and stumbled the five feet to my computer chair and sat down. I moved the mouse and my screen came back to life. Time to check my email. Except there was a problem. My computer wasn't connected to the internet. I have a dedicated connection, twenty-four, seven and three-sixty-five barring those ever present technical difficulties.

I took a drag. This had been expected. I was surprised I'd gone this long. Money is really tight for me and I hadn't made a payment in a few months. I'm bad with that sort of thing. I tend to let problems slide until they finally cause an actual stoppage to my routine.

I yawned, stretched and took another drag thinking about how I'd spend my day instead. That's when the full impact of my loss began to dawn on me.

I thought about getting some work. I don't have a job per se but I do have a profession. Though I use the term profession loosely. I am a Hollywood extra. I'm the guy you see in the background or walking by the actors. I don't speak, my name's not

in the credits, no one ever recognizes me but without us, the movies couldn't be made.

Is it degrading? Yes, it's degrading. But no more degrading than any of the other jobs I've had. You call a work-line the day before. There they list all the shows, movies and commercials that are going to be filmed. They tell you what they're looking for. An overweight Caucasian, in his thirties with a case of facial herpes, or a Hispanic woman with her own roller-blades. If the shoe fits, you call in and fight a busy signal for about fifteen minutes before getting through. It's quick, they ask for your Social Security Number and nothing more. They type that number into their computer and a picture of you pops up. A bad picture no less, that they took with some Polaroid camera one morning snapping the shutter quicker than a mugshot.

So they look at this ugly, poor, caught-by-surprise picture and decide if they'll give you the booking. The casting directors are like everyone else in Hollywood, for the most part bitter and power hungry. And in those few seconds between seeing your

picture and giving their answer they are god. They relish their ability to put you in this show or that movie. Then they say “Ok you got it.” or “No”. If it’s “no” they hang up in your face. I’m sure if you ever cornered one of them and complained about the rude dismissals they’d give you a fake L.A. smile(the only kind) and explain how they’re just so busy and so inundated with work that they can’t recognize the common courtesy of a “goodbye.” So I guess because they can’t handle their workload I have to eat shit. The older I get the more I find that when dealing with others, the brunt always has to fall on me.

But you take it and you don’t complain. You even catch yourself apologizing at times right before that phone hangs up as if it were *your* fault they didn’t want to hire you. You take it and you take a lot of shit in this business because of two words that chill the blood of any entertainment industry professional. “Black List.”

I’m not entirely sure if there is a black list. I can’t really figure out how they’d communicate through all the studios, all the

productions and all the companies. Or more to the point why they’d waste the energy. But one thing’s for certain and we all agree on it, nobody wants to find out the hard way. The words “You’ll never work in this town again.” Still have meaning out here and the ability to crush dreams.

On the other hand if that casting person, sometimes they call themselves ‘directors’ gives you a thumbs up, the much anticipated “Yes” then they give you a secret code to call in. This sends you to a recorded message telling you where to go, what to where and what time to be there. They usually throw in a few threats while they’re at it. “Don’t do this or you’ll be ‘sent home’ don’t do that or you’ll be ‘escorted off set.’ “ Those things actually do happen but not nearly enough in my opinion.

The leading job in New York or Los Angeles for a paroled felon to get is as an extra. They don’t check background, they don’t drug test and the only real job skill needed is the ability to stand around. This means that you end up being grouped with some of the most unprofessional, obnoxious, imbeciles on the

planet. They fight and scream and sing songs and grab women's breasts, which they so affectionately call "titties."

Once at set it's even worse. They sit you in a chair until they need you, the crew guys purposely bump your shoulders or tell you to move here or there just to watch you do it. On the totem pole of Hollywood extra's are at ground zero. They won't even speak to you in most cases and if they do you're not getting any eye contact. And the principals...the speaking actors, the stars. Lord help you if you are ever stupid enough to strike up conversation with one of them. They start ranting and screaming at the crew "This extra is bothering me." and like the secret service the crew guys rush you and lead you away from the actor while lecturing about how you're not supposed to do that. Sometimes you'll hear an asshole get on a megaphone and give the extras directions not to look at the actors. "Michelle G. doesn't like being looked at so don't look at her. If you make eye contact you'll be 'sent home'."

The stars and crew aren't all bad though. Sometimes you'll find one that's cool. However even when good natured they're most of the time still arrogant prima donnas who condescend. But when you're the extra you eat it up. You laugh at their jokes, you smile humbly, you stroke their inflated egos because if they happen to grace you with a line in the movie, an "excuse me" or "your bag ma'am" and BOOM you're done being an extra. You get a five hundred dollar pay bump, name in the credits and membership in the elite Screen Actors' Guild. Believe me there's not an extra on Earth who wouldn't slit your throat ear to ear for the chance to utter a "Hello" on camera.

So yeah, it's degrading at times but then again so is any job.

Well with no internet I decided to get an early jump on work and call one of my work lines. I hadn't dialed three digits before I realized it wasn't going to happen. I don't know Los Angeles at all. Like most extras I'm an transplant. A young punk moving to Hollywood to make it in the big time. At this point I hadn't been in L.A. for five months. The biggest city in America is a dangerous

place to be without a map and my maps came off of the internet. I couldn't risk getting booked on a show and not being able to find it. If you ever have to cancel a booking then that casting company's done with you for at least three months. This is something I have seen verified. So no work for me.

Without my internet I couldn't check the news either. I have a TV but no cable and I get zero reception. Basically my television is just a really big extension of my DVD player. I couldn't hang out with friends because I don't have any of those. I'm a very reserved person and on top of that a bit of a misanthrope. I was too broke to see a movie, go to a store or do whatever most people do to kill time.

This minor setback had completely derailed my routine. There was only one thing left to do, read. I made the trip to L.A. with nothing but a few clothes, a television and a car filled with my books. Most of them I'd already read and would probably never read again but I just can't bear to part with a book. For a day or a week or however long that book had been part of me. I

invested in it, I learned it, I picked up its cadence, got into its rhythm. Throwing away books to me is like cutting off an arm. That being said I had completely slacked off on my reading. Part of it had to do with laziness, other parts had to do with my financial situation. Nothing pains me more than knowing I can't buy more books once I finish the ones I have. I'm sure garage sales, book exchanges and libraries are all options but I am very specific in what I want to read. If I read a book and like it then nine times out of ten there will be other books, either by the same author or referenced by him that I'll just have to get my hands on. Reading for me is a much more involved experience than just the book itself. Most everything we do comes in cycles and when I get into a reading cycle I can't be stopped until I get it out of my system. Now with zero dollars in the old bank account and zero free spending money coming in it was as if my books were mocking me.

Still I had to do it. When I don't read I don't write and when I don't write I begin to feel dead on the inside and collapse into

myself. I knew I should be writing. I wanted to be writing. I had even come to Hollywood to be a writer not an actor. With one book completed and two shortly on their way to the end I couldn't get an agent so much to even look at my books, much less an editor back in Texas. All the books about making it in writing, subsequently those books are always written by unknown authors, say if you're serious you move to New York and sometimes even L.A. I settled on the city of angels figuring that I could write screenplays quicker than most people can read them and that skill would be in demand. I'd get my foot in the door with scripts and then I'd get an agent to push my books.

Even as I write this I wonder how I could have been so stupid. Five scripts, letters going out every day to every agent in the book and not so much as a nibble. They always say don't let poor criticism or results deter you. Things like that are much easier said than done. Every rejection letter I received from some idiot agent sent back with my un-read letter made me feel hopeless. It's not that I can't take negative criticism. If I send my

work off and it gets rejected I'm fine. What kills me is that it's not my work that goes out to these would-be makers and breakers of dreams. It's a god damned query letter, and dollars to pesos, they weren't even reading those.

Agents and editors in the literary world get hundreds if not thousands of submissions and pleas every month. No one reasonably expects them to read that many hundred page books or screenplays. So you play the game and you send them a query letter asking for their permission to send in your real piece. Then, in my case, they don't even unfold the query letter and they send it back to you saying "Sorry, we're not accepting new writers at this time." It's a defeating and degrading process.

So it's the booze and it's the cigarettes and it's the internet and it's not leaving my house very often for me. It's my routine and it keeps me from showing up at some agent's office with a shotgun in one hand and a script in another. "Either your eyes or brains are gonna be on that script!"

Now the routine had derailed. Luckily I didn't have enough money for a shotgun. If I did I could have paid my internet bill and therefore wouldn't need the shotgun. Life paints you into these corners sometimes. It cuts the legs right out from under you and forces your hand.

So I thumbed through my unread books, found one and went into my bathroom to read it. My studio apartment is small. The only chair is at my computer and it's a folding metal chair. The light's bad by my computer anyway so the only real place I have to read is my bathroom. Sitting on the edge of my bathtub with a book in hand and I let my eyes go. One page, two pages, so on. I read like a demon.

Then something inside me began to loosen up. It was as if a hand had been on my throat so long that I'd forgotten it was there and all of a sudden it was gone, freeing me. I realized that outside was the rest of the world, inside was me completely cut off from it. Planes could be dropping bombs on Louisiana, world peace

could have been declared and there I was gone from it all. Just me and my book.

Every word reminded me of why I wanted to be a writer. Every page I turned made the entire move out here make sense. It made being an extra tolerable. It made the rejections tolerable too. Someone, somewhere on some day long in the future might read my words. He or she might be able to immerse themselves with what I had to say. It is a sort of vanity but it is also immortality. More important than that was that it was my hope. I don't really want a lot of money or fame. I don't have to marry a supermodel and the idea of partying with those dipshit actors who can't stand being looked at by extras makes me sick. I just want to reach someone in the way that only a writer can. I want to make them smile or laugh in a way that's only shared between the reader and his book. The bond between the two from page one until the end. I want to give someone that gift.

And my arm began to get hot. It does this when I feel words coming on. I put my book down and walked over to my

computer. I had to work fast there was no telling when my check might post and my internet account get paid dragging me back into the deadening routine. So I laid my fingers on the keyboard and began typing. I shot a few lines down and didn't like the tense so I changed it. I had no idea what I'd write or how it'd turn out. I only knew that finally I had something to say again.





# LA LA Land

by VERONICA AN

I wear  
my city  
in teardrop tattoos,  
diamond crusted lips  
in velvet handbags  
and grass-stained aprons  
  
it smells like lettuce  
gold foil lattes  
tomatoes, beer  
and lust

in metro stops  
and silent places  
where  
cupcakes  
are not sold

the city sleeps  
it sighs and breathes  
a creature  
of the neon  
in the  
habit of  
the night

# The Grocery

by VERONICA AN

I feel like  
broken eggs  
and shiny cabbages  
coated in wax  
sitting on display  
Waiting  
for passers-by  
who prefer  
salty, sweet, and bitter

yeasty, lemony, cream

they stop

to ponder

and to compare

But always

Always

return home

to their

goose-down sheets

# Thirty Two Going on Bukowski

by BRETT STOUT

## “Thirty Two Going on Bukowski”

I finished pounding on her. She was laying on her back. I layed on top of her with my shriveled limp dick, now being surrounded by my own cum that I had just deposited inside of her. I was sweating profusely and couldn't move; I'm fat, old and tired now. She wanted to cuddle. I asked her if me laying on top of her like a beached dolphin counted? She said no. A few minutes later I said that I had to get up and take a shit. I lied, of course. I closed the door to her bathroom and just sat there on the toilet, alone and in silence, minus the fake flushing I did every few minutes.

XOXO

## “Baking Cookies with Whores”

We eat breakfast in the early morning hours of some local shitbox late night omelet house. The name escapes me, but it's not important anyways. There's usually nothing but gay guys in here eating breakfast after the gay bars that are down the street close at 5 a.m. Today, there's no entertainment though, just me and her, and a trucker looking guy on the other side of the restaurant. I think we were in the smoking section, but I wasn't sure. I smoked anyways and made an ashtray out of the green carpet underneath the booth we were sitting in. I ordered three eggs, bacon and toast. I knew I shouldn't have ordered the bacon, but I did, well really, the booze from earlier ordered them. We talked about nothing really, chit-chat as you normal fucking people call it. Now and then we talked about something, but you don't get to know what. Mainly, because I can't remember what the fuck we talked about I guess. The redneck waitress, lets call her Doris, she was our shitty waitress and never refilled my sweet tea, not even

once. She showed up once and brought me my food. I poured salt over everything. I couldn't find any pepper though. I put ketchup on my eggs, all over my eggs, there was more ketchup than eggs really now that I think back on it. I scarfed it down like I was from Ethiopia and hadn't eaten in a week. I smoked while I ate and ashed on the crappy green carpet floor. I put a piece of bacon up my nose, I don't know why. I might have mental problems I guess, or I just wanted to impress her with my acts of jackass bravado. Oh yes, her. I don't remember her name, but she was there. There staring at me and eating tomatoes. She only ordered tomatoes, I thought that was weird, but who am I to judge anyone at that hour. Her loss, well not really, the food was shitty but tolerable because of the volume of booze that I drank. She asked for a cigarette and I gave her one. She didn't smoke, but she did tonight she said.

"Why don't you come over?" I ask her.

"Come over and what?" She says.

"Play Monopoly." I say.

"Monopoly?" She says in confusion.

"Yeah, who doesn't like playing board games drunk and late at night?"

"Well, when that's usually said, other things are meant."

"Oh, really? Well, I just wanted to play Monopoly with you. If you want to fuck though, we can do that afterwards."

"I'm not that kind of girl. I don't fuck someone just because they take me to breakfast. You got the wrong impression." She says. She stares at me and puts the cigarette I gave her out in my ketchup laden eggs.

"I'm just fucking around baby, you know me."

"No, not really, but thanks for breakfast."

She waves at me and gets up and leaves the restaurant.

I stare at my empty tea and light another cigarette from an almost empty pack. Fuck, that bitch stuck me with the goddamn check!

XOXO

## “From Point A to Plan B”

After I came inside of her for the second time that night I didn't want to look at her anymore. I was driving her back to her car in the morning and the site of her repulsed me. I knew I was never going to talk or see her again after today. The only evidence that we had ever known each other was that my cum was probably now dripping out of her shaved pussy and running down her leg.

XOXO

## “Freak Eater Zombie Pills”

Finding out that you have an STD on Christmas is a fucked up thing. As a kid I used to go to bed early on Christmas Eve and wake up and find a new bike or a skateboard, but now I wake up and find white shit coming out of my dick instead. I already

disliked Christmas for the most part, but today it's the worst day of the year. I'm out in the middle of damn nowhere at my parent's house for the holidays, and walking into my Mom's room and waking her up at seven in the morning and telling her that I might have an STD would fucking suck. Of course, nothing is open today so I guess I will have to just deal with it until I can make it to some random and cheap quick care place. I don't have insurance because I'm fucking poor, and going to the emergency room and whipping out my dick and asking “what's this stuff coming out of it?” is out of the question. It feels like razor blades are trying to come out of my dick every time I have to take a piss. Having sex with that Italian prostitute in Amsterdam was probably a mistake thinking back on it now. This might be the last straw. Maybe a little life change is in order. As always, with me it takes the absolute worst possible situation to happen for me to learn any lesson. The only thing is that I like getting drunk and fucking sluts, it's the only thing I'm any good at really. I must have been bad, Merry Christmas!

# The Night Before Her Birthday

by C.E. COVEY

Three days after Ethan moved to Baltimore—and a week before his girlfriend joined him with their cat and most of their furniture from LA—Tom Henry decided he didn't want to live any longer. He was ready to kill himself.

Ethan was sitting at a table on the sidewalk below Tom Henry's apartment, outside a bar on Eastern Avenue called The Wayward Lighthouse, and he did not know Tom or about his decision to commit suicide. Ethan sat with three people, two of whom he also didn't know.

He knew Madeleine; he went to high school with her, and she was told by her mother to introduce Ethan to some friends. Ian, Madeleine's coworker, had bought the bowl of sangria for everyone and Ian's girlfriend sat between he and Ethan, smoking a cigarette and talking quite a bit.

\*

But Tom Henry didn't know all of these people were below his apartment. He was sixty-one years old and in pain all of the time. He had thought of killing himself before, but he had decided that now it was finally time. He felt worn and that the world was too much. He wanted to shoot himself, but he did not own a gun. He decided he would hang himself; that's how he would do it. He had lived for years with chronic pain in his ear and jaw and the right side of his head that ran down his neck and into his right shoulder. It felt like a constant cork screw being driven and twisted into his head all of the time with jolts of electricity running through his nerves. He had been told by his doctors that it was a dental problem, so he had been given eight root canals and eventually had all the teeth on his lower right side pulled. He had been told that pain killers would help, but they didn't really. Tom Henry was tired of this pain and tired of living. It was time.

\*

“What do you think?” said Ian.

“I don’t know,” said Ethan.

“That’s probably the best answer to that silly question, Ian,” said Hanna, laughing and waving her cigarette around. Madeleine had told Ethan, on the way to the bar, that the only reason they were going to this place was because Hanna worked there, and she could get free drinks for herself. According to Madeleine, Hanna was a drunk and cheap. Ethan was pretty sure that Madeleine didn’t much care for Hanna, though he wasn’t sure why. Ethan reached forward to fill his glass with another ladle full of sangria, and his short-sleeve shirt crept up his bicep showing the bottom of the tattoos he had there.

“Whoa! Those look all right,” said Hanna. “Can I see?”

Ethan didn’t really want to talk about it. He set the glass on the table and lifted up his right sleeve a little, showing the bottom half of the quarter-sleeve that filled his upper bicep and shoulder with images of trains and windmills and water-wheels, all in black and white.

“Did they hurt? The ones on the bone, especially?” said Madeleine.

“A little.”

“How long did it take?”

“I got them over a few years.”

“I never would have thought,” said Madeleine, “that you would have that many tattoos. Does your mom know? I’m sure mine doesn’t.”

Before he could answer, Hanna said, “I love them. I just have a couple.” She showed him the key on her wrist and the sparrow on her inner bicep. “This one hurt a lot,” pointing to the sparrow. “I also have another key on my hip and one on my ankle. Ian has a lovely poem on his forearms.”

“What poem?” said Ethan.

Ian sighed and bent his arms at the elbow showing Ethan the bottoms of his forearms. On his right arm was, *The World is Too Much With Us*; and on the left arm, *A Sordid Boon*.

“I don’t know that poem,” said Ethan.

“Really?” said Ian. “You should read it; it’s a great poem.”

“It really is quite lovely,” said Hanna while Madeleine nodded.

“Do you have any tattoos?” said Hanna.

Madeleine shook her head. “No. I keep trying to decide what I want to get. I know I want one.” She looked over to Ian and then back to the group. “I just can’t make up my mind about one. Plus they can look bad to volunteers on site, so I need to get it in a good spot.”

“Oh,” said Hanna. “I didn’t know you worked on site.”

Madeleine nodded. “Do you work at the same site as Ian?”

“Well,” said Madeleine. “We actually both just got reassigned to lead two houses up in McElderry Park. I’m surprised you didn’t know about that.”

“No,” said Hanna. She lit another cigarette and blew smoke out the side of her mouth. “Must have forgot, Ian.” He nodded and looked down. Madeleine looked to her empty glass. She leaned forward for the sangria, but when she couldn’t reach the ladle, Ian helped her by ladling some into her cup. She smiled at

him and nodded. Hanna said, “God, it’s just such a beautiful night.

I love the lights out here.”

\*

Tom Henry took a bottle of gin and drank as much as he could stand before sputtering and spilling some on himself. Then he took another sip, and the pain in his jaw and side of his head started to subside; he felt a little dizzy and a little nauseous. He opened his little tool bag from under his bed and looked around but he couldn’t find his rope. He searched through the rest of his apartment, knocking over the stacks of books and records that filled the shelves and walls. His vision blurred, and he felt pressure on his temples.

\*

Ethan didn’t know this, but Madeleine didn’t like Hanna because she thought herself completely in love with Ian. She really like Ian’s dirty-blond hair and the way he wore western shirts with three snaps undone. He had lots of chest hair, which Madeleine also liked. She liked that he had strong opinions on



important issues; and she liked that he was apathetic toward things that didn't have much importance; and he was able to tell the difference with a lot of confidence. Madeleine liked him for all these reasons, and because she liked him so much, she thought herself in love.

\*

Tom sat back down at his desk and took another swig of gin. He looked out his window that overlooked the Harbor. The window. He could hear people outside, a chatter of background noise. He wormed his way out of the southward window onto the fire escape. His veiny hands clutched the railing that appeared to be more rust than iron.

\*

Hanna wore a black dress with white dots the size of baseballs. She had blood-red lipstick and dark eyeshadow. Her shoes were simple and flat bottomed. Her chest was small, as was her whole body. She was twenty-two but her skin looked older—a little wrinkled around her mouth and eyes, and quite

pale. When she wasn't reacting to a funny or sad anecdote, her face naturally returned to a very grave expression.

"I never knew that about you," said Ian.

"You never knew that I loved lampposts?" said Hanna.

"No," he said. "You've never said that to me.

"I'm sure I said that at some point. I love them—they're like a bit of the past."

"No. You never told me."

"Okay. But it must have been beautiful when the city was just lit by lampposts."

"I guess," said Madeleine.

"I can't believe you didn't know that about me."

"You never told me."

"Maybe you're right. That's a bit odd," said Hanna.

\*

Tom looked down and saw the people eating outside the restaurant below. He remembered when it was empty, a path full of syringes and empty bottles beside his apartment. It would have

been easier then. Now look at it. Full of twenty-something-olds smoking and talking about God-knows-what. Ugh. He felt very sick.

\*

After a little while, Madeleine brought up work, and she and Ian spoke about the volunteers on site and the poor communication that existed between the on-site crew-leaders and the office coordinators. Ethan was quiet and looked around the sidewalk and up at the sky. Hanna lit another cigarette, her face returning to her sad demeanor. Ethan saw her look at her phone, which she did very intensely.

“It’s midnight,” she said, looking up at Ethan. It was; he nodded. “That means it’s the twenty-third,” Hanna said. Ethan nodded again. Hanna’s face returned to her phone, a little sadder than before.

“Here’s the thing,” said Ian. “It’s this: I don’t see how we can ever feel comfortable at work with Matt as our boss.” Madeleine nodded, her straw in her mouth. She had a couple of simple,

wooden bracelets on and her eyelashes were very straight and long. “You know how they always say ‘your happiness is the most important thing?’ and that they ‘want your suggestions?’”

Madeleine nodded, smiling without showing her teeth. Hanna then looked to Ian and the rest of the group, coming out of her daze and nodding with the rest.

“Yeah,” Ian continued. “If that was the most important thing, we wouldn’t be forced to be there sixty hours a week and take on way more volunteers than we can actually use. It isn’t safe.”

“The benefits are good,” said Hanna. “And you get free lunches there.”

Madeleine rolled her eyes and Ian said, “The benefits are good. But they force you to be there all the time. It’s what it’s like working for a non-profit: You’re supposed to care about the cause so much that you put up with shitty working conditions.”

Madeleine nodded.

“Well, at least you have insurance. And you have a ping-pong table in the warehouse for God’s sake,” said Hanna. “What do you do?” she said to Ethan.

“I’m a writer. But I need to find a job where I actually get paid.”

“You should work here,” said Ian.

“Yeah?”

Then Hanna looked to Ian. “I mean—have you ever waited tables before?” she said.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “I waited tables all through college.”

“Well, we might have an opening. I work tomorrow. I’ll give the manager your phone number and have him call you, if you’d like. One of our bartenders just got fired for stealing a case of beer, so they want to hire someone who can serve and be trained behind the bar. And someone who won’t steal shit.”

“I can do all those things.”

\*

Tom Henry gripped the iron railing and moved his right leg over the side—then his left. He pivoted on his left foot so he faced outward, he faced the world, holding onto the railing on either side of his body, his weight on his heels, his arms stretched out to either side. He felt unsteady. He looked up to the skyline—a view he’d seen change over the last three decades—and felt weak. He stood there for a long time, trying to hear what was being said below. He thought it odd that they all lived their lives down there with no idea what was happening five stories up. Then he thought of what might be happening a few floors above him.

He could see them below but they did not know he existed. He began to feel powerful up there above them, his arms wide to either side, looking down, judging. Then he laughed—because it was all so ridiculous. Time passed as he stood there.

Then he let go with his right hand and pivoted back on on his left foot so he faced the fire escape again, grabbing back onto the railing with his right hand, looking into his window. He breathed

deeply and sadly and raised his right leg back over the railing. But as he tried to shift his weight back onto the fire escape, his left foot slipped, he lost his grip and his balance; and he had no thoughts as he teetered on the railing, only a panic and pain running through his limbs, a frantic attempt to grab on, to clutch something, to hold on to anything he possibly could.

\*

Afterward, Ethan could have sworn that he heard a whistling as Tom Henry fell. But what they all certainly did hear was a crash, a snapping and cracking as a metal table gave way to the body that had just landed on it after falling five stories. No one had been sitting at the table. Metal pieces flew all over the sidewalk. A group of passersby screamed, and Madeleine covered her ears, hunching her head down in her lap. Ian leapt up and Ethan held the edge of the table, elevated off the seat but not standing all the way. Hanna froze, her cigarette still smoking in her mouth.

And after he landed, there was a silence that came over the whole street. Each of their hearts beat loudly, in their chests and in their heads. Each one listened to their own heart beating so loudly and heavily, they were certain that everyone else could hear them. But outside of the internal beating of hearts, coursing of blood, there was no sound. No sound that anyone could process, anyway. Everything was quiet in a way no one could ever remember experiencing.

Ethan was the one who ran inside to tell the bar owner. He grabbed the first person he found, a busboy who couldn't have been more than sixteen; he told the owner and they called 9-1-1 and told everyone it was time to leave. After they were down the block, everything became very real.

Madeleine cried into her palms and Ian rubbed her back. He was angry, his face red and tense, his arm muscles flexing.

“Why the fuck would someone do—” he started.

Hanna cried too, but not with Madeleine's fervor. Hanna's tears were subdued and ran quietly down her cheeks. She lit

another cigarette, and Ethan was still quiet, a tremor aching his joints.

Ian looked to Ethan and motioned him toward Madeleine. Ethan went to Madeleine and hugged her, and she cried into him. Ian went to Hanna and asked if she was okay.

“I’m okay,” she said.

“What is wrong with people like that,” he said. “Fucking crazy.”

Then Hanna said, “I feel so bad for him.”

“Bad for him?” he said. “He almost killed you—almost killed all of us.”

“I just feel so bad for him,” and more tears ran down her face.

They stood outside, no one making a decision as to where to go next or what to do. Ethan held Madeleine, and Ian looked at Hanna as she cried. After a few minutes, Madeline pushed herself off of Ethan and spoke.

“I need to go home,” she said. “I don’t want to be out any longer.”

“We can walk you home,” said Ian, putting his arm around Hanna and pulling her close to him; she pulled away.

“I’m not ready to go home,” she said.

“What is wrong with you?” he said, still angry. Then he took a deep breath; and in a forced, calm way, he said, “I’m sorry. Everything has been a little crazy tonight. I know we’ve all had a crazy time which is why you’re acting this way. But let me walk you home.”

“I’m not going home.”

“You’re not going home?”

“Not yet. I don’t want to go yet.”

He grabbed her left elbow with his right hand and tugged a little bit, but she didn’t move. Then he let her go.

“Fine. Let’s go, Maddie.”

\*

Ian and Madeline left, walking west on Eastern toward Madeline’s apartment. Ian breathed audibly and heavily out of his

nose; he looked down and walked with a wide gait. Madeline almost had to jog to keep up with him.

Once they turned onto Washington, Ian stopped. He tightened his fists and stood very straight, locking his knees and elbows.

“I just can’t believe her sometimes,” he said through a tightened jaw.

“It’s okay”, said Madeline, tucking her hand between his locked elbow and the side of his torso. He released some of the tension in his body and looked down at her; she was already looking up at him. “It’ll be all right.”

Holding onto Ian’s arm for support, they continued toward her apartment. He smoked a couple of cigarettes, and she took a few drags from each.

They turned the corner of Gough Street and walked toward her building, halfway down the block. Before arriving at her front door, they stalled in front of an alley. Madeleine slowed her steps, pulling Ian back, slightly. As she slowed down, he swung around,

pivoting on the hinge of their linked arms, and faced her. She looked up at him, breathing in his smokey breath. He took in a deep sigh.

“Come on,” he said, guiding her into the alley. “Let’s go.”

She thought she would have felt happier—but she still felt pretty good, being moved into the alley with her love.

They hid behind a dumpster, invisible to the sidewalk. He kissed her hard. She held him close, her arms around his lower back pulling him in. Ian reached behind himself, removed one of her arms from his back, and stuffed it down the front of his pants. She backed up, bringing her other arm in front and using it to unbuckle his belt and tug his pants half-way down his thighs. She squatted down—careful not to place her knees on the concrete ground, saturated with the garbage water runoff from the dumpster—and placed him in her mouth. Once he was ready, he tugged up on her shoulders; she let him fall out of her mouth and stood up. Ian spun her around and reached up under her dress; then he tugged her underwear down to her calfs. It stretched and

tore. He placed his hand in between her shoulders pushing her toward the dumpster; she held onto the steel handle, supporting her weight, and she dropped her hips. He pushed himself inside of her.

“Oh. Fuck,” she let out, and he stopped.

“I thought this is what you wanted.”

“No. It is,” she said. “Keep going,” she said.

\*

Madeleine and Ian finished in the alley, pulled up their underwear, and didn't say anything to each other for a few moments. Ian said that they should leave separately so no one saw them together. Madeleine nodded. Then she left while he lit a cigarette.

\*

Ethan and Hanna entered Alibi and each ordered whiskey. Ethan sipped his drink; Hanna shot hers down and ordered another.

The bar was dim with flickered lighting; a wagon wheel chandelier hung in the center of the bar, fake candles sitting on spokes; a juke box played Cherie Cherie and then Don't Stop Believing. Two groups of regulars sat three stools down from Ethan and Hanna—one made up of two old, balding men discussing Dunbar basketball. Next to them were three twentysomethings wearing studded belts and leather jackets, each with an asymmetrical hair cut with various amounts of dye and gel. PBS, with subtitles, was on the television. Hanna turned to Ethan.

“It's the twenty-third,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “You told me earlier.”

“It's my daughter's birthday.” She smiled with her mouth, not with her eyes, and they watered a little. “She's four.”

“Oh. Congratulations.”

“I really miss her.”

“I bet. How long has it been since you've seen her?”

“Almost a year.”

“Where is she?”

“In Missouri—with my mom.”

Ethan nodded.

“Do you think it’s pathetic?”

“What?”

“Me? Do you think I’m pathetic, a twenty-two year old with a four-year old daughter.”

“I didn’t realize you were twenty-two. But no, it’s not pathetic.”

“I’m sure I look a lot older than that,” turning to her glass and looking down.

Unsure of what to say, he said, “Do you have any pictures of your daughter?” He was done with his drink so he ordered another; she ordered another too and shot down the remainder of the drink in front of her.

She looked back to him with her eyes wide. She wore a thick coat of foundation and little pimples were visible beneath it on her forehead. Her black hair was pulled tightly in a bun. She had a

boney nose. In that light, with waves of orange dancing on her face, Ethan thought her beautiful.

She took her phone out of her purse. She scrolled through photos of her daughter, Emma. Hanna was only in the photos of Emma as a very young girl. This struck Ethan, and he liked Hanna a little more now, though he wasn’t sure why.

“He doesn’t know.”

“Really?” said Ethan.

She nodded.

“How long have you been together?”

“Bout a year and a half.”

“It’d probably be good to tell him.”

“I’m just so scared. What if he doesn’t love me any more? What if he’s angry I didn’t tell him a long while ago? I don’t think I can tell him. I don’t know what to do. I’m so so so so so worried.”

More time passed. They looked at each other in silence.



“Do you want to know what I think?” said Ethan. She nodded. “I think you’re worried because you know why you haven’t told him—that’s what I think is scaring you.”

“But I love him so much,” she said, rubbing her right wrist with her left thumb.

Ethan said, “Do you?” She nodded, biting her lower lip. “Then why have you told me and still haven’t told him.”

When he said this she squeezed her eyes together, and tears came out from under her eyelashes. She squeezed her mouth shut too, her bright red lips full and wet. She nodded. Ethan asked if she wanted to go home, and she nodded again. Ethan paid with a credit card. He helped her out of her seat, and she led them to her house. She was very drunk so he wouldn’t let her walk home alone. They linked arms as they stepped down the street. When she reached her apartment, she had stopped crying and ascended the steps to her row house and turned to Ethan.

“Thank you for walking me home,” she said. “Do you know how to get home from here?”

“I think so,” he said. He told her where his apartment was, and she briefly explained the direction he was to walk. She asked for his phone number, and he told her.

“It was really nice to meet you,” she said.

“It was nice to meet you, too.”

“I’m glad you moved to the city.”

He thought for a moment, and said, “Me too.”

“If your still interested, I’ll talk to the manager tomorrow.”

“That’d be great. That’d be such a help.”

They hugged each other. When he started to loosen his embrace, she squeezed him hard, knowing that she would have to do something. When he felt her hugging harder, he held her tight again. They stood like that for a long time and it felt very comforting for both of them.

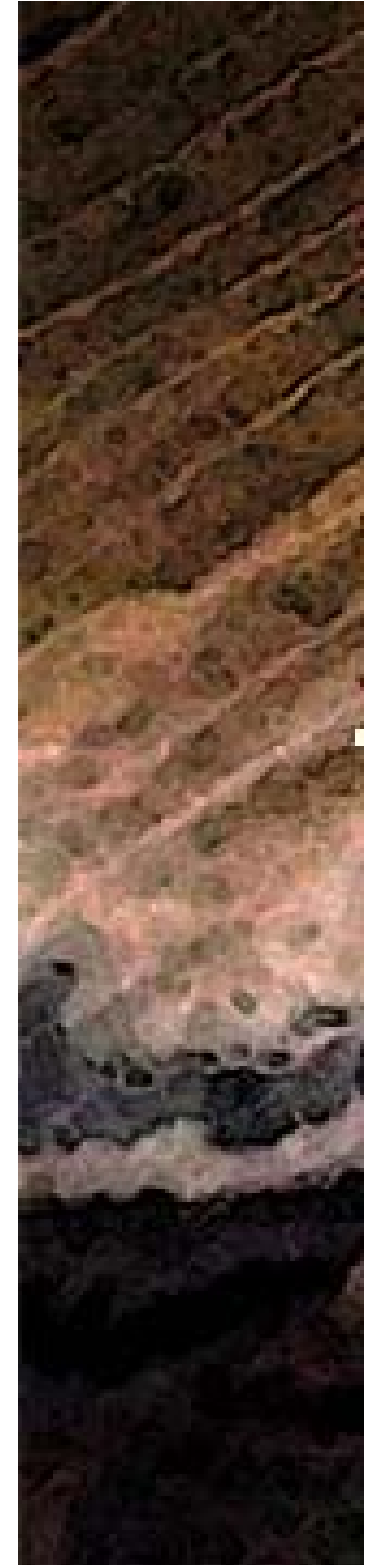
Then he turned and left, eventually finding his home.

\*

A half-hour after Ethan returns home to his unfurnished, lonely apartment, Hanna sits on her bathroom floor, steadying

herself on the toilet against the spinning room; and Ian sits on a rolling chair in his kitchen, hunched over with his eyes buried in his palms, the bottoms of his forearms facing away from his body; and Madeline stands in her shower, scouring herself with a bar of soap, her skin raw and red; and Ethan, a little happy, lays in his sleeping bag, his room full of boxes lit up from the lights on the sidewalk, looking at his bedroom window, thinking that he could never jump out of it like that man had.

His window is painted shut.



# The Sleeping Boy

by TIM FRANK

Annie drifted across the floorboards to her son's bedroom when her nightgown snagged on a nail and the fabric stretched out like a wedding train. She grabbed the back of her gown and tugged at it, causing a tear. Then she pressed her ear against her son's door and heard the oscillating tones of him snoring - it was nine in the evening and he'd been asleep all day.

Opposite their fifth floor flat was 'The Strip', a giant cube of a shopping centre with large windows on each floor like cinema screens that poured light into their kitchen. Cars chugged around the car park by day and at night drunken teenagers collapsed in the shrubbery, screaming abuse at the night.

Annie's son's snoring got louder as his chest became restricted. Phlegm stuck in his throat and his body seemed to shudder and

she wanted to burst through the door and shake him awake. But he cleared his throat and his breathing returned to an easy rhythm again.

Gilbert, Annie's husband, leaning against their bedroom door, gave a jolting motion with his head to his wife along the hall, signalling for her to come back. She muttered, shook her head and then raised her fist to knock. But after a second she let her hand fall to her side. She walked back into Gilbert's shadow with a forced grin. He grabbed the back of her thin neck as she passed him into their room. In the locked bathroom she sat on the loo with the seat down and played with a new bar of soap.

Gilbert put the night light on for Annie that projected a cloudy fuzz, then shook the last couple of sleeping pills free from a chalky brown bottle. He had taken the tablets from Cover's, the pharmacy where he worked, which was buried in the basement floor of The Strip. They were so powerful Annie's doctor refused

to prescribe them for her, but Gilbert insisted she take them and she didn't bother to protest.

They punched their pillows, straightened the duvet and then fell into bed, yet they were unable to sleep for long. Their son's snoring reverberated through the walls. Annie pulled her pillow over her head and Gilbert fidgeted. As they turned back and forth, they caught each other's eye.

'I can't take it,' Annie said.

The next night, Gilbert and Annie returned home from a friend's Tupperware party opposite The Strip, giggling and dizzy from bottle after bottle of dry white wine. They tiptoed past their son's bedroom, both pressing a finger to their lips. Gilbert tripped and fell into the kitchen. They suffocated their laughter, their faces contorting as if inhaling toxic fumes.

'You know, we should drink more often,' Gilbert said, as the hysterics subsided and tiredness set in.

The kettle smothered Annie's reply. Strewn across the kitchen table were crumpled notes of money. The kettle screeched, as their eyes roved around the room for other signs hidden in the room. Gilbert took a seat and drew the money towards him, flattening every note and then slipping them into his wallet, then pushed out a smile for his wife.

'What does it mean?' she said, wrapping her arms around her chest. Gilbert stood and pushed off his shoes – digging one foot into the other, and padded out of the kitchen in his socks.

'I'm having a shower,' he said. 'I've got dirt under my nails.'

Annie blasted hot water onto a stack of washing up which clogged the sink and splashed over the work surface in a mess of

dry bones, crusty bread, mouldy fruit and hardened ketchup. She squeezed washing up liquid into it, creating peaks of frothy bubbles.

Suddenly Annie found herself on a side street beside a factory she used to live opposite during the time her son was born. It made the little known 'Cleanse' cleaning products. She was lured by the great muffled noise that emanated from its bowels and then rose to the surface with the clamour of steam engine pistons. In the car park, a guard smoked by his post balancing his backside awkwardly on a bollard. No one else was around and the sky was black without stars or moon, and the concrete vibrated beneath her feet. In front of her was a metal door bashed with dents and stripped of paint except for red scratches around the handle. She stood before the door for a while, but she didn't dare knock, and then behind the door metal crashed into metal creating high-pitched electrical sounds. Annie screamed and dropped to her

knees and dug her nails into the flesh behind her ears and blocked out the sound. Then she jolted out of her trance - her hands had slipped into the burning dish water. She held in a howl and fell to the ground on one knee. Outside, The Strip buzzed with early morning traffic and tall trolleys rattling up curbs into the supermarket.

In the living room the next day Gilbert flicked through the TV channels on the remote control. Annie gave him a sudden glance and he turned the volume down. Suddenly, as if a call with an unknown message rang out in the distance, the couple sat up straight. Their son's door had opened and footsteps cracked off the floorboards like a skipping pebble. The front door opened, and then closed. Gilbert dropped his paper onto the coffee table, and without looking at his wife marched towards his son's bedroom.

'Gilbert,' Annie murmured, but he ignored her. Then she placed her spectacles onto the side table, balanced on some shopping catalogues and followed him. Annie peered over Gilbert's shoulder as he eased the door open. Shades of black were stacked throughout the room. Light slid through the edges of the closed curtains like frayed cotton. The couple kept an ear out for their son, knowing he could return at any moment. And yet they felt as if he was still in the room, perhaps hidden in a far corner or crouching in the shadows. As they moved into the centre of the bedroom they sensed the deep weight of his sleep, as if his dreams and his long breaths still pressed against the walls.

Gilbert ripped the curtains open. The grey sky rushed forward into the room and then retreated. The boy's duvet was in a bundle on the futon and five or six sagging pillows lay in awkward angles and as the light's glare softened, the dirt in the room became visible. Grime lined the edges of the wooden boards; the skirting boards were striped with dust and sticky globs of dead spiders. On the headboard of the bed an oily patch

indicated their son's unwashed hair. The wastebasket was full to the brim with balled up tissue paper, and cigarettes had been stubbed out on cigarette packets. A beetle struggled across their son's pillow. A computer game was muted on the TV, playing the opening sequence of a war computer game. The sequence repeated and repeated until Annie switched it off as she wandered around the room. It was then that Annie noticed the back of the telly was unhinged.

Annie whispered to Gilbert and pointed at the TV. Finally he understood and pulled off the casing of the TV and found a plastic bag full of white pills. Gilbert and Annie stood slowly and stared at each other open-mouthed. Annie could hear the building's front door crash shut and sound bundle its way around the five floors and into their flat. They quickly jammed the bag of pills into the back of the TV and replaced the casing. Annie and Gilbert crouched behind their bedroom door, Gilbert on his knees peering through the keyhole and Annie stood with her back to the wall, deep in thought.

‘He’s a drug addict, Gilbert,’ said Annie.

Gilbert shushed his wife. ‘We don’t know that.’

‘What other explanation is there?’

‘I don’t know,’ Gilbert said, after a moment’s thought. ‘There could be thousands for all we know.’

The couple remained behind their door for five minutes, but their son didn’t show until late that night when Annie and Gilbert had already gone to bed.

The next day, after she had seen Gilbert at the pharmacy for some more sleeping pills, Annie slipped into her flat - a subdued smile playing on her lips that quickly transformed into a grimace.

Another pile of notes were left on an antique straw bound chair, piled up with pillows. She pushed the cash deep into her bag and then stood on tiptoes to peer through a small window. People ducked their heads into the wind and scurried into the automatic revolving doors of The Strip. Women with packed trolleys rushed for their cars as the rain pinged off the swivelling wheels. Annie decided she needed to act; clear the air and face her son.

She gave three firm knocks on her son’s door. There was no answer. She waited and looked at the gap beneath the door for light or movement. She knocked again but just heard the soft sound of her son snoring. She pushed the door wide open and stepped into the room, the darkness watering her eyes. Stale sweat. Smoke. She felt her way forward, one step after the other, towards the bed. Annie’s eyes began to adjust and vague outlines of objects were revealed; the curtains, the desk, the bookshelf.

She knelt down beside his futon mattress, able to see clearly now as the light from the hallway illuminated the back of her son's head. His face was buried into his pillow as if he were in tears. She whispered once, then again, but gained no reaction. Annie reached to grab his shoulder and rolled him over. His features were exposed like a car's headlights unveiling a night time country road. Finally she saw his eyes. They were shut. A moth fluttered across his face. With hidden eyes, his face formed a mournful grin. Annie withdrew her hand quickly and pushed herself to her feet.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered, and hurried out.

The day dissolved into evening. Annie sat up in bed with her yellow negligee spread out in concentric circles, pushing streaks of cream across her arms, and flattening baby hairs. Gilbert brushed his teeth in the en suite bathroom, and rinsed away the blood from his gums and the scum that lined the plug.

'...and what if he - he has an overdose?' Annie said.

'Now, let's wait till all the facts are in, Annie dear,' said Gilbert, wiping his face with a flannel.

'He's got enough pills,' Annie said, 'to give two men an overdose. And in his *TV* for goodness sake.'

The couple became silent and carried out their nightly routine that ended with Gilbert handing Annie two sleeping pills and a cup full of murky water.

'What if you're wrong,' Annie said, lying on a plumped up pillow away from Gilbert, 'and I'm right. That he is a dealer or an addict, or both. We can't keep taking his money without questioning it. Not only that – we never see him. He's either asleep, or out and-'



‘- we have to give him the benefit of the doubt I believe. It’s only fair not to judge him too soon. But do you want to know something? What we are describing is a normal teenager.’

‘But who is he, Gilbert? And what is he becoming? There comes a point where normal things become sick. I should know.’

‘What does that mean?’ Gilbert said, lifting his head from the pillow.

‘What I did to the poor boy,’ Annie said, her voice breaking with suppressed tears, ‘it’s me who made him like this. It’s not school, not his friends, not the city, or whatever. I know it was me that’s causing all his problems.’

‘Nonsense,’ Gilbert said angrily, ‘absolute *rubbish*, Annie. I won’t have this kind of talk. You are a loving, kind and generous

mother, who has given nothing but joy to this family. Our son maybe involved into something rotten, and we need to deal with it. But he’s a good boy and you’re a great mother.’

With those final words they were sucked into a deep and motionless sleep. Annie returned to her dream of the Cleanse factory and pulled open the weathered metal front door. Conveyer belts rose and fell like roller-coasters, carrying products out of Annie’s sight. She threaded her way through the steel structures into the far corner of the factory where there was an open patch of concrete floor with barred windows allowing drab light in from up high. Beneath the windows were a row of open showers with water spraying down. Crouched beneath a shadow in the showers, a group of men and women held their bony arms across their chests and crotches, their mouths wide open with fear. They were so thin Annie could see their hearts beat in their wrists and blood pumping around their necks. They looked at her, almost peering with their heads pushed forward and eyes

tightly closed. A man appeared through the walls and out of the fog of the shower. He grabbed a young boy, covered his mouth with his hand and dragged him back into the walls. The writhing boy was unable to make a sound. The others screamed for him.

\* \* \*

Gilbert counted out five pound notes, licking his thumb with each note, and then pushed the pile over the counter to Annie. She shook her head in frustration, but her husband was oblivious. They were in Gilbert's pharmacy 'Cover's' in the basement of The Strip. It was so bright and so clean that people walked around the shop tentatively whispering to their companions and pointing so as to avoid speaking.

Annie slipped the money into her wallet but before she could go Gilbert caught her eye and he waved her over to him. He handed her a large white bottle of sleeping pills which she

pocketed swiftly, and then went shopping. Annie wanted to buy a present for her son. She realised what mattered was to communicate to him how much she loved him, and who knows, maybe it would help him to snap out of his sleep-filled days.

Teenager's pointed and laughed at strangers, walked with fake limps, sat sipping iced cokes and ate chips, checking their mobiles every other minute and covering their heads with hoods, all reminding Annie, as she passed them by along the aisles and escalators, what her son wasn't and that she would give anything to see him so alive. Yet she knew these teenagers must sleep for hours and hide in the shadows too, covering their faces and speak with grunting words. What was normal?

Annie continued along and walked past the naked mannequins angled forward with their heads cocked as if listening, their arms and legs as thin as bars. The moving light reflected on the shop window forced their mouths open in awe

reminding her of her vision of the tormented souls in her dreams of the factory. Towards the end of the shopping centre were the exits for the car park to the West where there was road works, opening up the road with pneumatic drills and a frenzy of dust. And in the corner of the store holding the street workers' noise at bay was the Body Generation store.

She traced the edge of the tables with her finger, along the stacks of creams, shampoos, scented oils, make-up and baskets of perfumes, candles, deodorant and bubble bath. She picked up the odd plastic wrapped moisturiser and some bath oils and scrunched up her nose as if she'd smelt dirt. There was a baby in a pram who had thrown his pillow onto the floor and her mother bent down and picked it up. She put the pillow back behind his head and he screeched, hitting his tiny fists on the safety bar of the pram. Annie turned and wanted to shout at the mother to control her child. She took a packet of three soaps, paid for it to

the girl at the counter who nodded at the mother and child and whispered, 'Jews.'

Annie bustled into the kitchen with bags of shopping ready to snap and dropped them onto the floor in the middle of the room. As Annie fell into her seat and Gilbert began to unpack, the toilet along the hall flushed. The toilet door swung open and there was the sound of languid steps walking into the kitchen. Annie swallowed a couple of gulps of water, full of plumes of copper dust, that Gilbert had placed in front of her, and pulled an index finger across her lips. She rifled through her shopping and pulled out the soaps.

Their son took a seat at the kitchen table. He was eating some leftover pizza from the greasy cardboard packaging. He wore a navy blue shirt unbuttoned at the collar, and black jeans. He had stubby fingers and a rounded almost feminine jaw line. His pale

hands and neck and cheeks clashed with the deep black rings surrounding his eyes.

The boy considered each slice of pizza before he ate it and then chewed with his mouth closed. He didn't acknowledge his parents' presence. Gilbert stood by the doorway and Annie was facing her son, leaning against the washing machine.

There was a slight smirk on the boy's face, which was playful and aggressive in equal measure. He seemed to be challenging his parents to express the grave fears that, despite their attempts to appear casual, were etched upon their faces.

'How are you?' Annie finally said. 'We haven't seen you in a long time.'

Their son shrugged and continued eating, taking a sip of his drink. The couple remained still, looking at the boy's clothes, his shoes and short hair. They were entranced by his chewing and the grease gathering at the side of his mouth. His neatness and unflustered confidence was almost horrifying to the couple.

The boy finished eating, stood up and made to go; leaving pizza crusts and a coke can spread across the table. And, as if an afterthought, he pulled out a roll of notes and flicked a few of them onto the kitchen counter. He brushed past his father by the door and went back to his room.

'Say something,' Annie said to her husband.

His eyes searched for something to focus on.

'Say something,' she repeated. Blank.

She grabbed up some of the boy's junk and tried to force the rubbish into an already full bin. The rubbish pushed back and tipped over the sides. A Coke can crashed onto the floor. Annie left the bin in disarray and rushed into the hall. Gilbert grabbed hold of his wife, trying to pull her back by the arm. She struggled against him.

'Let go.'

She tugged herself free of her husband and started knocking on her son's door. There was no response, so she kept knocking, gradually getting faster and harder. And yet she could have

entered the bedroom and confronted her boy, as there was no lock.

She knocked again and then she heard, what she thought was a groan. She knocked again and her son groaned louder. She went in. Again the room was shrouded in darkness, seemingly more now, despite the light from The Strip reflecting through the kitchen and into her son's room. Annie could just about make out her son's outline - sitting up in bed with his head and back against the wall. His eyes and face were black and blurred.

'Can I come in,' Annie asked.

Her son lifted and then dropped his shoulders.

'Are you tired? Shall I come back when you're awake?'

'No,' he grunted. 'Now.'

'Ok. Are you ok?'

No reply.

'I don't - Look I want to talk to you, because I'm worried.' Annie said, and waited. 'We don't see you anymore and we know you're a young man and need to live your own life and do what you want to do, but there are limits. We are your parents and this is our flat. We have a right to know what you are up to and know that you're safe.'

'I'm fine,' the boy said. 'I'm good.'

'I don't think you are, though,' Annie said.

'I am,' her son said.

‘Well. For example...Ok, we found your pills, in the TV.’

‘You came into my room?’

‘Yes. I’m sorry. It was wrong. So, what’s done is done and all that - but now we have a problem.’

Annie’s son gave a spluttering cough that spiralled out of control, his chest shaking violently. Annie reached out to touch her son and he pushed her arm away. Gradually his body relaxed and silence resumed. But then Annie could hear the creak of a floorboard outside where Gilbert was hiding.

‘We won’t allow drugs in our home,’ Annie said.

‘They help me sleep,’ Annie’s son said. ‘I need them.’

‘Why,’ Annie began to sob, ‘why do you want to sleep?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said.

‘Is there something wrong – maybe with your friends?’ said Annie.

‘No.’

‘Is it something me or your father have done?’ Annie said, without reply. ‘Is it me?’

‘No,’ her son said.

There was a long silence. Their breathing became louder and louder and intertwined as the darkness faded and Annie’s son’s face – straggly sideburns, twisted ears, thin lips and long soft stubble covering his chin - came into focus. But not enough. His eyes were still covered by bruised black shade.

‘Gilbert, will you come in here, please,’ Annie called. Gilbert turned into the room, looking at his feet, wearing a guilty schoolboy face. He sat at the foot of the bed and stared into his lap. He waved away a moth that kept charging towards him. He batted his own nose and then puffed air into his nostrils.

‘I want us all to be here when I say this,’ Annie said.

‘Please don’t, Annie,’ Gilbert said, ‘please.’

‘I know why you’re acting like this. I know because I live with it every day. Every day I’m aware of what I’ve done. When you were born, as soon as you came out, there was something deeply wrong. I held you in my arms for the first time, and you didn’t even look human, your face was so red and dirty and disgusting, everything scrunched up and moving like a bag of maggots. God, god forgive me because it’s true, that’s what I thought. From that

moment, the world went blank, I felt nothing, everything drained of colour, I didn’t recognise family or friends, and when they made cute noises to you I wanted to scream and get rid of you and throw you away and I dreamt you were gone forever, and buried my head under the pillow.

‘Annie, please...’ Gilbert said.

‘Of course I didn’t. A part of me was strong enough to know all this would pass. But it didn’t. We put you in a little room in our last flat in North London and you began to cry. And you didn’t stop. You cried and cried and cried and it drove me crazy. In no way was it surprising. We lived across from a factory that made the noise of boulders being smashed or trees being sawed. And I went mad, I mean literally. I began to talk to myself. Your father knows what I mean.’

Gilbert hung his head and fiddled with a shoelace, not acknowledging his wife.

‘And finally it was too much. Gilbert was at work and you were crying. The factory was unbearable that day, more than usual, but who knows, maybe it was quiet, you know? I went into your room and looked into your fingernail eyes and took a pillow from behind you head and I pressed it on to your face. And you became quiet and you wriggled then gradually you slowed down. Until, Gilbert came in and saw what I was doing and threw me off. Things were ok, you were healthy. But you never cried again. Ever.’

The boy seemed to sit back further into the darkness. There was no way of gauging his reaction.

‘I have nothing left to say,’ Annie said after some minutes. ‘I don’t know how I can say sorry, or do you anything that can

express how truly...there’s just no words.’ Annie stood slowly, using every tired muscle. ‘I bought these,’ Annie pulled out the soaps she’d bought from Cleanse. ‘I don’t know why. I can’t do anything that can change things so... and even if I had a reason I don’t remember. Maybe when you were young you liked to play with soap, I don’t know.’

Annie pulled the soap aligned in a pack of three in a cardboard and plastic wrapping, from her jacket pocket. Her son reached out and his spidery hand grabbed the soap. Gilbert and Annie got to the door when their son leant into the shaft of diagonal light and opened his eyes.

‘Thanks,’ he said.

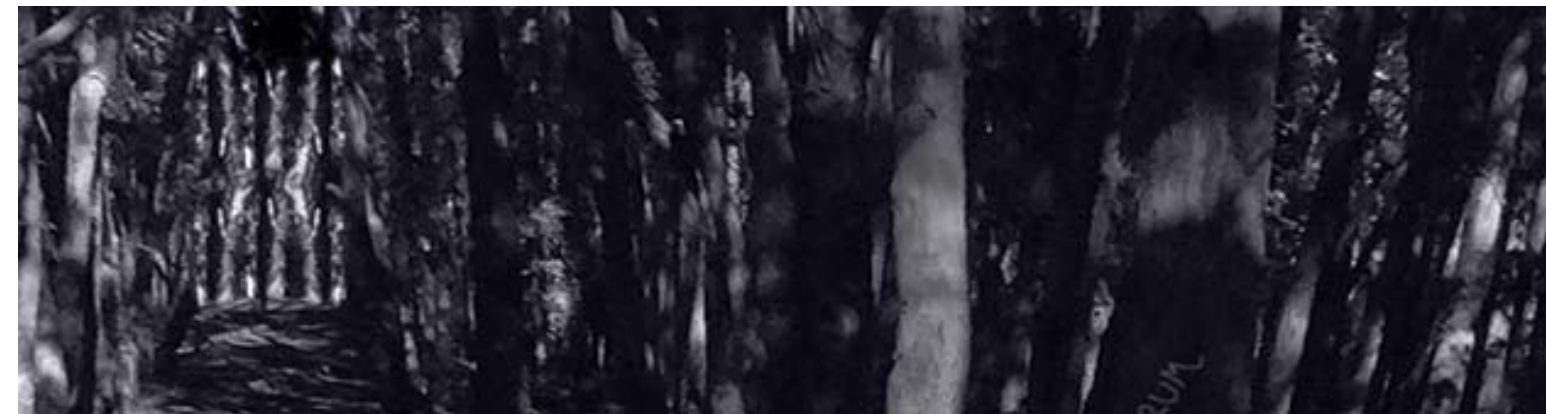
His parents separated. Annie went to the kitchen and started scrubbing glasses and pans, while Gilbert foraged around in the bathroom cabinet, poking at bottles to decipher their labels,



finally finding two sleeping pills that he swallowed from a cupped hand of water.

Standing on the threshold of his room the boy peeled off the soap's sticky labels and plastic covering and threw the rubbish behind him in to his bedroom and felt the smooth contours of one of the bars of soap and its cherry scent. He turned the soap in his hand and slid his thumb along the back of the soap and felt the indentation of the letters like brail. He read the words that said, 'Cleanse.'

The boy placed the soaps on top of the TV. He walked into the light that became more blinding as he approached the kitchen. He could hear the quiet tones of his parent's inside and he went through the kitchen door. The light blasted his eyes and he wiped his arms across his eyelids, causing dried sleep to crumble into his sleeve. He began to clear up his mess, silent and raw.



# BARBARELLA versus ANNE FRANK

by ERICK WILLIAM MERTZ

One afternoon, as Morris Finklestein entered the boy's locker room, he discovered he was in a great deal of trouble. He glanced back and forth between the stern faces of his persecutors, Mr. Rubenstein, school principal and Alan Klein, his eighth grade composition teacher. Both men loomed, wearing the type of menacing expression normally reserved for his institution's most egregious miscreants. Morris spread his arms in a wide, questioning gesture, as if to ask, on what grounds am I being detained? Apparently, neither man regarded a reply to his entreaty as necessary; instead, they led the bewildered student down the crowded first floor corridors as his peers prepared for lunch, toward the ominous hall of disciplinary offices where he was abruptly tossed into a chair directly across from the

administrative secretary. Then together they vanished into Mr. Rubenstein's office where and slammed the door behind them.

Morris tried to maintain an optimistic outlook but he could not suppress the doomed feeling that began to press hard against his chest. Although he had never been in trouble before, he was aware of what trouble looked like. The shadow of Mr. Rubenstein paced back and forth behind a pane of frosted glass; the placid countenance normally displayed on Ms. Rabinowitz's had shriveled into something terribly unpleasant. After an agonizing moment, the principal cracked the door and leered out at his subordinate.

“Are they on their way?”

Ms. Rabinowitz glared at Morris before turning to respond: “Yes.”

Morris wondered. Who is coming? The doomed feeling spread down into his stomach as moments later Mr. Klein emerged from the office.

“Mr. Klein, Mr. Klein,” he said, knowing instinctively that his easygoing writing instructor must be an integral part of this ordeal. “What’s happening?”

“Were you given permission to speak?” Ms. Rabinowitz hissed.

Mr. Klein halted in his tracks. He ran a trembling hand through his thick, curly black hair as he shot a calming glance toward the secretary.

“Am I failing, Mr. Klein?”

The teacher’s expression softened further. He could not allow his student who was an excellent writer with fine penmanship, to believe failure was the subject of their interrogation. Instead of allowing the charade to continue, he opted to kneel before Morris, a posture he made certain no one else could see.

“No, Morris,” he said. “You are not failing, but this *is* about your last classroom submission.”

Somewhere beyond the disciplinary offices, a door slammed, followed by a loud cacophony of familiar voices. Klein snapped to attention and took a file from the secretary’s desk.

“I don’t understand,” Morris pleaded. “What do you mean?”

Mr. Klein pulled back the cover on the folder and took one contemptuous glance at what was contained inside before handing it to his student.

“Oh, I believe you do, son,” Mr. Klein whispered.

Morris looked down at the folder in his hand where he was confronted by a copy of his essay: *Barbarella versus Anne Frank*.

Morris Finklestein lived in a small, two-bedroom apartment overlooking a vast municipal reservoir, the distant concrete edge of which appeared to be the beginning of a new, green world. The tenement building was clean and surprisingly cheap, making it a natural fit for his family as they relocated from New York amid an unseasonably hot stretch of June weather. Elderly residents surrounded their apartment on all sides. The dank

hallways were lined with quiet doors that his father proclaimed sealed in the building's many recluses. There were no other children, so the young man was left without any choice but to befriend his new neighbors. Every morning, Mr. Burke sat in a folding chair at the top of the fourth floor stairs and hummed an endless medley of show tunes from memory; each afternoon, Ms. Sniderman would knock on the door to check in and see if they wanted her three-day old copy of the local paper, a favor Morris' father always politely refused. They comprised an odd peer group but he enjoyed their company. The old man would time Morris on his watch as he ran laps around the hall, barking out encouragement. As a lifelong resident of this strange, new city, Ms. Sniderman regaled the curious boy with historical stories that seemed to stretch all the way back to its bygone days as a logging camp.

Morris' parents had both been liberated from Buchenwald as children in those confusing days at the close of World War II. Having met at a very young age under the watchful eye of their

adopted orthodox community, they sought to build their own family under the same observant principles that gave their lives a semblance of hope. Morris' father possessed no stomach for strict adherence though; he enjoyed cheap cigars and played pinochle for coins with the other men at the shoe warehouse, habits that drove his mother to distraction. Often his parents argued, especially when money was tight, which was the reason Morris believed they had abruptly left their home. His mother provided a tragic air of mystery to her only son; the woman who had bore and fed him, and raised him up each day of his thirteen years was like a ghost. The woman had lost something crucial in her formative ordeal and Morris was visited with an uneasy impression that more often than seeing her, he was seeing *through* her.

The orthodox principles his parents managed to rigidly uphold were those around outside influences. They owned no radio and no television; only a hi-fi record player that sat atop the antique sideboard, on which Morris' father would frequently spin

from a collection of crackly old klezmer records. As a new wave of videocassette recorders swept through American homes, giving television viewers a new opportunity to watch from a personalized selection of movies at their discretion, his parents dug their prohibitive heels in even deeper. They spoke outwardly about their distaste for new technology, extolling a belief that choice was the gateway to an empty life, a habit Morris knew was for his benefit. They were keenly aware of what damage the manipulated truth through image could do to a person and a people. The defining moment of their young lives, it was said by many, came as a result of lies and propaganda; so, they remained steadfast that this rash of unclean influences had no place in their home.

Any greater societal influences Morris encountered came on Tuesday and Thursday nights, after his father returned home from a particularly tough day at work and sent him down to the corner store. His mother worked part time as a nanny those two days, freeing Morris to explore the neighborhood while his father

soaked painful bunions and napped in his easy chair. There was a corner newsstand two blocks from their apartment but Morris soon discovered a small bodega on the other side of the reservoir that sold both copies of *The New York Times* and the brand of inexpensive Dominican cigars his father coveted. The tiny convenience shop was called The Astro and it simultaneously reeked of medicinal body ointment and day old bakery goods. The store shelves lined with an array of vivid, foreign delights: comic books, baseball and basketball magazines, and science fiction paperbacks. The hodgepodge collection drove Morris' imagination wild. The most intriguing element though was the small television set perched on a riser above the main counter. Morris would dawdle while shopping, one eye on the rack of magazines and the other on a washed out stream of black and white animated images; the division of attention was something he could neither comprehend nor resist. Morris sought any opportunity to run family errands in order to find his way into The Astro. The young man was keenly aware that he needed to

be careful. He never lingered too obviously, as to either draw the old merchant's ire for shoplifters or arrive egregiously late back at home. So, through his first summer in a strange, new place, Morris' worldliness grew in slow and surreptitious ways.

The only book that his parents allowed in their home was, *The Diary of Anne Frank*. The book was, they believed, the only text of value for a young person in search of a purposed path through adolescent life. They debated with his English teachers on the merits of other books, useless allegories about rabbits and farm animals, and ultimately drew what they saw as a diplomatic line: those other books would not enter the house, and for every one that he was assigned, the story of a young girl must be revisited in his private time. As a consequence of their diplomacy, Morris had read the sacred diary more than forty times from cover to cover and could recite many of the key passages by memory.

Whether it was a product of his emergent age, or being the new kid in school, Morris not only began to see the limitations of his upbringing but to feel them gnaw under his skin as well. The ever-changing cycle of cheap books and magazines that appeared on the Astro shelves comprised a collective, pulpy intellect that his peers traded freely on. They rode their bikes and pretended to be heroes from non-Holocaust related narratives, something Morris recognized as missing from his experience. The characters he identified with were reclusive, living in secret, traits he was beginning to understand, perhaps too well.

Early in his 8<sup>th</sup> grade year was also the time Morris felt a rush of urges of a sexual nature. His body became gangly and restless. His regard for Ms. Sniderman shifted uneasily from respectful to want; the women on the magazine covers behind The Astro's counter, his view of their bodies mostly obstructed by black boxes, seemed to beckon his attention in a way he wanted to understand intimately. Those rustling fall days saw the onset of yearning, and yet again, Morris was overwrought with a doomed

feeling similar to his heroine. Anne had been thirteen, an age identical to his, but history's cruel blade severed her anticipated womanhood mere moments before its blossom. Morris wondered if the same thing was fated to happen to him.

It was early in November when Morris' classmate Brent Jones first brought the bootleg, VHS copy of *Barbarella* to school in a paper bag. Every male student gravitated immediately toward his locker, huddling around as the skinny, blond boy with an endless font of cultural intelligence described the lurid story he had witnessed the night before. Morris had already ascertained that Brent's parents were avant-garde artists. They were different than his parents, spending days creating, and nights ingesting chancy media from every corner of the globe and Brent boasted that he was permitted to watch whatever he wanted.

Morris could not be certain whether the cassette he had was authorized for distribution; nor did he care. Morris was red with jealousy. He hung around on the fringe of that group, an unlikely grantee of the video; he was also without any means of playing

had he gotten hold of it, so infiltration was doubly futile. As black clouds and rain socked in for the winter, a supple feast of science fiction influenced flesh made its rounds around the school and Morris Finklestein's myriad of frustration compounded. As a result, he withdrew further into a shell. Most troubling though was that no one else seemed to recognize his despair.

Early the following year, Morris had overheard enough retelling of *Barbarella* to assemble what he believed was a plausible plot. The forbidden story was tempting enough to drive his 13-year old senses crazy, but the lascivious looks exchanged as the tape passed around put him over the edge. Brent's friends watched and re-watched the bawdy tribute to female sexuality. They rewound back and forth over her bare, mid-drift as it graced their screens in brilliant Technicolor. Her blond hair bounced; her lips pursed with taunting concern; every descriptor came across as more vivid than the black and white, pre-pubescent image of Anne Frank that Morris was reduced to fantasizing about. Rage festered. He wondered sometimes if he was forming hatred

toward the girl whose story of hope inspired millions in his community. He confronted this confusion by covering his head and ears as he passed the boys, resisting further indoctrination. As first term final exams ended, everything was turning to a confusing mess. Morris was not sure what he coveted or despised. What he recognized though was that during the bleak, winter days, he was never sadder.

Relief often comes at unexpected moments. Morris had heard his father recite this axiom as a cool breeze blew through their apartment while moving furniture over the summer, and he applied it on a February morning when Mr. Klein put the new composition writing assignment on the board: *open subject*. The polite teacher cleared his throat and addressed his students in his soft, mellifluous voice as he dusted his hands off on a pair of brown corduroy pants. While he reminded them that this particular essay would be included in their high school placement portfolio, he urged them to utilize the open topic to explore their personal feelings honestly. Mr. Klein confessed that he felt as

though he had confined their imaginations to prescribed subjects for long enough, and now was their time to express themselves without inhibition.

Morris listened with rapt interest while his other classmates around him groaned. The tangle of frustrated ideas that had, for months, been percolating in his imagination began taking literary form. He went directly to his room when he got home and he began writing. All of his pent up rage spilled onto the page through his pencil, and whenever he was at a loss, he glanced up at the slender, maroon book spine on his shelf and found the words he struggled for.

As Morris reached his essay's completion, he realized that his hatred was not focused on the young victim of atrocity; instead, his grievance lay with the restrictions on his world. His parents had forced him to hold Anne Frank's suffering up to the light without another context. He wrote long past his bedtime, noting, scribbling passages and re-writing until everything was perfect. The next morning, Morris dropped his essay onto Mr. Klein's desk



and sat down at his desk, having rediscovered his long dormant sense of fulfillment.

Morris was led into the office and seated between teacher and principal, who he faced, and his parents who sat behind him, one over each shoulder. They did not speak; neither could look at him as he was led into the room like a perpetrator. Morris could see the clock, and so this was where he focused his attention as the adults in the room spoke back and forth over his head. Morris wondered whether this was how disciplinary actions were normally arranged, persecutors on one side and the aggrieved parents on the other. Their conversation was steeped in concepts; they spoke a great deal about ideas like alienation, frustration and identification in abstract terms. Rarely throughout that hour though did anyone identify Morris as the one experiencing those feelings.

At the end of the meeting, school officials released Morris to his parents. They drove him home in silence. He waited for their

ire as they climbed the stairs, but nothing ever sparked. His mother kept her head lowered in deference to his father whose affect appeared curiously upbeat. Perhaps it is because he got to leave work early today, Morris thought. As they entered the house, he expected the series of reprimands to begin, but once again, they remained quiet. He watched his mother retreat to the kitchen, fill a water glass and hold it in her hands, lingering in the hall; his father, exhausted from the four flight climb, removed his hat and wiped his brow with the back of his rolled up shirt sleeve.

“Why don’t you run out and fetch me two cigars,” he said finally.

His mother set the water glass on the counter before stepping out into the living room. “You reward him?” she asked, voice surprisingly calm considering how long she had kept her response bottled up.

“It’s an errand,” his father replied. “Not a reward.”

“Where do you think he gets audacious ideas such as these?” she asked. “Places like your news stand.”

Morris’ father rolled his eyes and held out a dollar bill, begging the boy, take it and run. Morris pocketed the money and made for the door, knowing that they were set to argue. He stood outside, hoping to overhear a brief snippet of their conversation but everything behind the door turned to an eerie silence.

The Astro market felt different as Morris entered. As he turned in circles, he determined that this was because he had never been to the store on a Wednesday night before. Instead of an old man, the clerk tonight was quite young, wearing a tattered white tank top with a collection of gold chains. Gone was the medicinal reek of body ointments, replaced by a sickly sweet musk. The new clerk smirked at Morris as he entered before returning his attention to a magazine spread out on the counter.

Morris knew he had to be careful. He recognized his parents would need their space, but he was also in no position to extend his time out of the house. The leash he had been given could

quickly turn into a noose. After a brief glance over the magazine rack, he approached the counter and laid out a dollar bill.

“What do you want?” the clerk asked, flashing a mouth filled with as much gold as his neck.

“El Dominico,” Morris said, pointing to the red and gold box locked behind thick plexiglas. “Two please.”

The clerk scowled, never having seen the boy before. “You old enough?”

Morris had never been questioned in the months he had been coming to the Astro, but that did not mean he was unprepared. He had rehearsed the proper response: “These cigars,” he said with confidence. “Are for my father.”

Apparently satisfied, the clerk shot a stern expression and stepped away from his post to open the showcase. Morris breathed a sigh of relief.

As it turned out, the clerk questioning Morris’ age was a fortuitous act of fate. Everything would have certainly turned out differently had Morris not been inclined to keep an eye on the

transaction. He was aware that purchasing tobacco put him in a vulnerable position; the clerk, whose sense of morality could not be verified, could pocket the dollar with no threat of punishment.

What could Morris do? Go to the police?

So, Morris watched to be sure that he wasn't cheated, and in closely observing the clerk's every move, he was able to catch a glimpse of the broad headline splashed on the page of the movie tabloid left open on the counter:

“BARBARELLA SEQUEL IN PROGRESS?”

Morris was struck dumb. He took the cigars and change without counting and walked out, hardly able to control his faculties. Taking a hold of the front door, the by now familiar feeling of irreverence came flooding back into his guts.

“We spoke to Mr. Rubenstein,” his father said as Morris entered.

“Did he call?” Morris was surprised at the strength in his own voice.

“He did,” his father said. “He and Mr. Klein wanted to offer us something as an alternative to, you know...”

“An alternative to punishment?”

His mother nodded. She fidgeted with the rings on her fingers, unable to speak up or make eye contact.

“We believe that it is fair,” his father continued. “Considering what...”

Then his father stammered, his voice dissipating as he lost focus.

“Considering what, Dad?”

“Rewrite the essay,” his mother blurted out.

“Excuse me?”

Morris' father stepped toward him. “It was your teacher's idea, and I think it was a fairly good one. Tone down the essay a little bit and, I don't know, this whole thing will go away.”

Morris set the change and two cigars on the counter. Without looking at either parent, he walked to his bedroom and closed the door behind him.

His stomach had been churning since reading the rumor of a sequel to *Barbarella*. Before he may have agreed to tone down his work but now, he thought, is definitely not the right time to retreat. Morris opened the file where he kept the original essay and began marking places for improvement and continued doing so for the remainder of the evening and into the following morning. His indignation was even more focused and erudite. Before school on Friday, he made a photocopy of the essay to be certain he retained a copy. After class, he dropped the essay copy on Mr. Klein's desk, waited and left. His teacher was nowhere to be found, probably already gone away for the weekend. Morris sighed as he stepped into the cold, recognizing that this was his best work yet.

The telephone rang as the family shared Sunday dinner. Morris' father got up to answer and listened for a brief moment to a voice on the other line before he finally hung up. Morris

watched his expression turn red with fury as he steadied himself against the wall and returned to his seat at the table head.

"That was Mr. Rubenstein," he said after a moment's pause. "The administration has come to a decision."

Morris watched as his mother clutched her napkin, hopeful to hear some good news. What a fool my mother is, he thought.

"You have been suspended from school for a week," his father continued. "And you will receive an F on your essay."

The young man folded his arms with satisfaction. He deemed this to be a good outcome. Not only was the newest version of his essay more provocative, he had also chosen to attack a school administration that had made feeble attempt at sanitizing what he believed was an honest cultural conversation.

"What next?" he said, surprised that the call had not come much earlier.

His mother's head had already sunk so low that it touched the table. She could not offer any response. Meanwhile, his father

mustered all of the courage he could and extended his arm, finger pointing down toward Morris' bedroom.

"Your room," he uttered. "Until we think of something else."

Morris rose from the table and happily obliged him.

Morris laid on his bed the rest of Sunday night into Monday morning. At just after dawn, his father parted for work, leaving him alone with his mother who lingered far from his room, never once approaching the end of the hall of the room where he lay.

Morris could feel a dull hunger gnawing at his stomach but decided that nothing short of death by starvation would compromise his desire to fulfill this punishment precisely as it had been handed down.

That night his father returned home and retired to the bedroom. Now they will really decide what they want to do with me, Morris thought, becoming more curious with each passing moment. They'll send me to work with father, he speculated, a Tuesday filled with hard labor at the warehouse seemed apt. The thought of taking the long, awkward car ride with his father was

soon dashed by a phone call and the sound of footsteps approaching down the hall.

"For you," his father said, opening the bedroom door a crack.

Morris sat up. "Me?" he asked.

"A Mr. Strand?" his father continued. "He's calling from the local paper." Morris held his breath. "He says he wants to interview you."

"OK," Morris replied, uncertain whether there was anything else he could say to an official interview request. "When?"

"Tomorrow morning," he said. "Around nine?"

Ms. Sniderman came over at ten past eight, shortly after his mother left for work. After a well-appreciated breakfast, she brought Morris to the living room.

"Where do you want to sit?" she asked.

Morris looked at the plain room and then slowly recognized the importance of what she was asking.

"By the window," he replied.

“Good idea,” Ms. Sniderman said. “They’ll want to get a picture.”

At a few ticks past nine, Mr. Burke knocked on the door. “There is a Mr. Strand here to see you,” he said.

Ms. Sniderman showed the nervous young scribe into the living room where Morris sat in his father’s love seat, pushed back against the open window.

“Good to meet you, Mr. Finklestein,” the writer said, voice aquiver.

Morris motioned for him to sit down. Mr. Strand obliged then removed his pad and pencil and began asking questions, which he continued for an hour. Each time Morris answered it was in a strong and steady voice. The writer wanted to know about the essay, his punishment, and whether he recognized that the defiant re-write constituted a bold statement of generational manifesto.

“I don’t know,” Morris said. “Perhaps ‘manifesto’ is too strong a word.”

Mr. Strand furrowed his brow and leaned in. “Too strong?”

“I was simply advocating for a change.”

When their hour was done, Ms. Sniderman allowed the grateful writer to snap a few pictures before showing him to the door where they shared a few brief words before parting.

“How was that?” she asked.

Morris shrugged. “Fine, I guess.”

The young man returned to his room. As the sun began to set, his father returned from work, followed closely by his mother. They met silently in the bedroom with the door closed, and remained there until Morris fell asleep.

The next morning, Morris woke up and wandered drowsily into the kitchen where he found Ms. Sniderman preparing a spread of food large enough to feed a small army.

“What is this?” he asked.

She smiled. “Eat up, Morris. You need your energy today.”

A steady stream of interviews ran from nine o’clock in the morning until just before noon when Morris rose from the love seat and took his lunch. More newspaper writers, a radio crew

did an on-site news program, photographers wanted a series of shots for the soon-to-be voracious Associated Press; everyone passed, one at a time, through the small apartment, asking him mostly the same questions. Morris found subtly different ways to phrase answer; this became a mild form of amusement, born of tedious repetition.

Toward the end of the day, as a local TV crew set up lights and Morris sucked on fresh, cold cantaloupe, one of the workers asked him a question.

“Can we move this?”

The man was holding his mother’s antique sideboard. Morris glanced at Ms. Sniderman who was nodding emphatically.

“Sure,” he replied. “Go ahead.”

That night, Mr. Burke stayed out on the fourth floor landing, turning fans away that wanted their picture taken with Morris. As expected, the AP had picked up the local story and already people were showing up in droves from surrounding towns. With Morris demanding privacy, Mr. Burke became a quasi celebrity,

posing with young people initially disappointed at being turned away.

On Thursday morning, the national news Producer arrived. Ms. Sniderman had opted to keep the early portion of his schedule clear, recognizing that this would be a significant meeting. The Producer was young, quite attractive, with red hair that spilled onto her slender shoulders. She strutted through the apartment, gathering information. Morris nodded and allowed Ms. Sniderman to do her job answering questions; in truth though, he was really seducing the young woman, removing layers, first her sweater and then her belt, tugging on the buttons of her black jeans. His sexual fantasies had never been so meticulous and after a few moments, he recognized that the Producer could read his mind. She shot Morris a few teasing glances, creating suggestive secret moments they kept hidden from Ms. Sniderman who was all business. After a long conversation, the Producer demanded Morris’ attention.

“Tomorrow then?”

He nodded, imagining the proposition was for sex.

“Good,” she replied. “This is going to be big for your career.”

Morris was unclear; his mind had been pre-occupied, so he asked her to repeat. The Producer explained how it had been her inspiration to stage a VCR/TV in the apartment on which, for the first time, live and on-air, Morris would experience *Barbarella*. He liked the idea, especially that it came from her.

The next morning crews entered at first light. Gear filled the halls and professional caterers set up shop in the cramped kitchen. Ms. Sniderman had her hair done up for the special occasion and flew around the house, accommodating everyone. The Producer arrived some time later with a cup of hot coffee and her game face on. She directed the crew for another hour until the VCR/TV arrived. Ms. Sniderman gasped. During all their preparation, they had not discussed where the viewing would be staged. The Producer, thinking on her feet as was her

job, surveyed the apartment before turning toward a closed door behind her.

“What is this?” she asked.

Morris offered a sheepish smile. “My parent’s bedroom.”

The Producer’s eyes lit up. “We’ll get them on the air too,” she said. “We’ll get footage of their reaction to all of this.”

Morris cringed. “You’ll have to ask them.”

The Producer nodded and handed her coffee to an assistant.

She knocked on the bedroom door and, all in a single motion, pushed her way inside.

The room was empty. All three poked heads in, finding only a made bed, a bureau and a few odds and ends. Morris’ parents were nowhere to be found.

The young man held his breath as the Producer walked around the tiny, modest room with a glint of fevered inspiration.

“This is perfect,” she whispered. “We’ll stage the viewing in here.”



Morris gave his approval, and before he knew it, the crew invaded, turning his parent's bedroom became a television set.

Then, as he watched in awe of all that he had created, Morris recognized that this transformation was one that could never be undone.



# ritual

by CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

the grand session all bowed heads pious raise a hymn of thanksgiving  
for thy bounty a rich feast the state  
and all things appertaining thereto  
let it die and nourish the maggots they sing

# shakedown

by CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

the bill at the office just an estimate  
a wacko guess out of deep left field  
a way admire the birds shitting on the fly  
untoward adventure of a wild fling at this  
just the tropes in the English Department Creative Writing class

# fleur du mal

by CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

strained by calisthenics with the needle eye

the pale blonde meager as all get-out

sings as rapturous sings the wood block in the *batterie*

a sharp report a quick retort

# light of day

by CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

the worms crawling out of buildings where they were comfortable

now seem blinded caricatures of some old pioneers

in stock repertory Lincoln's beard Bermuda shorts

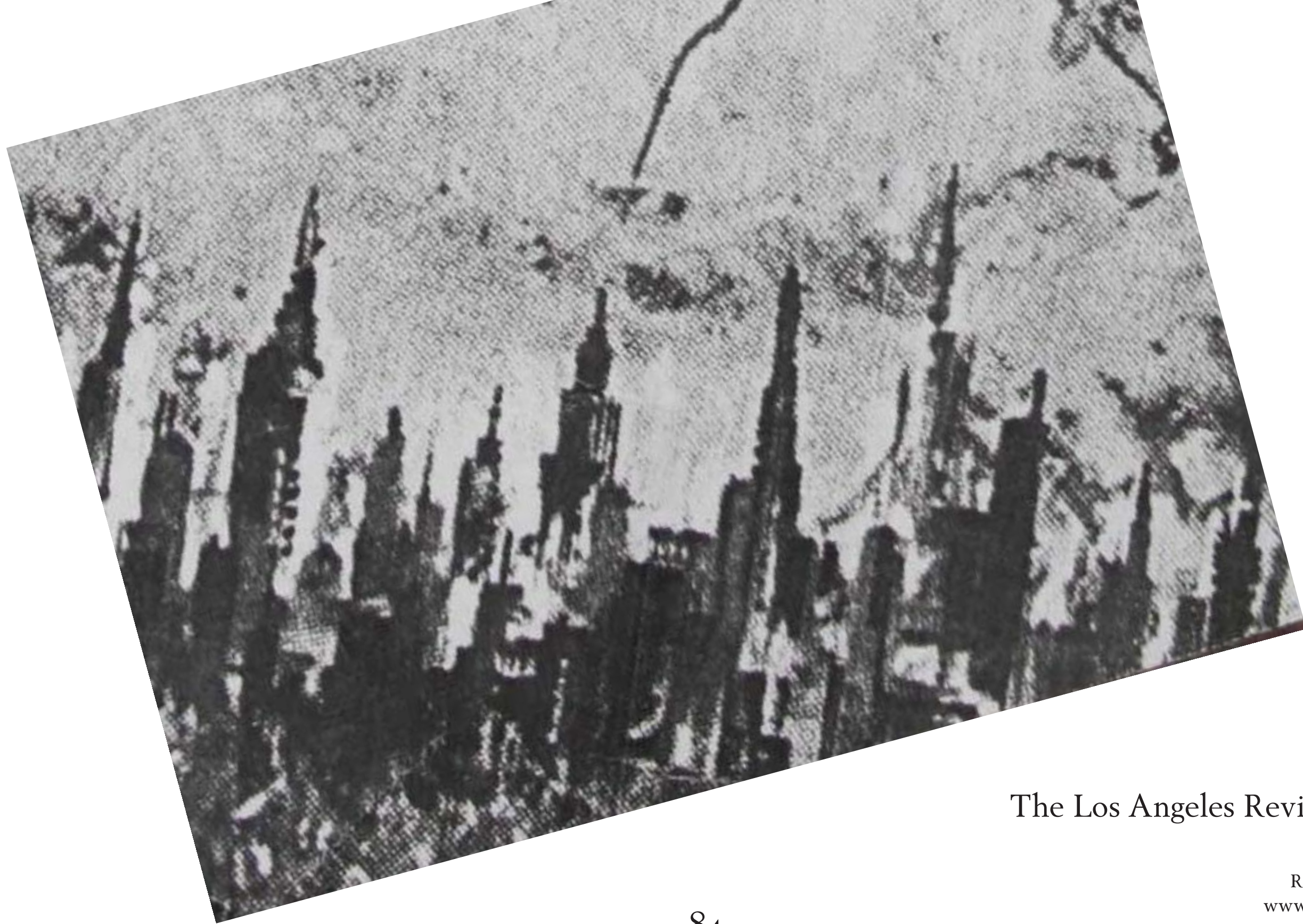
a whole panoply of props and costumes strangely off

yet peopling the thoroughfare

# the seat of power

by CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

His Excellency the potent fraud  
can write a law that says your uncle's queer  
as the money he prints henceforth Uncle you're a pansy  
you have to kiss a lot of babies though  
before you eat them that's the trouble says His Excellency  
with politics no trouble at all



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