

**THIS NEW COLLECTION OF ORIGINAL SHORT STORIES** answers the question: "What is there to fear in New York City?" – a question asked as much before 9/11 as afterwards. The contributors (Paul di Filippo, Scott Edelman, Carol Emshwiller, Lawrence Greenberg, Gay Partington Terry, Don Webb, and Barry Malzberg, among others) represent a combination of New Yorkers, ex-New Yorkers, and wannabe New Yorkers, and their tales of fear all use the city as an ominous backdrop. Blending the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and horror, the stories in this anthology showcase work from up-and-coming writers as well as veterans of fantastic fiction. Here you will meet Osama, alive and well, living in NYC and getting heavily into speed-dating; New Yorkers hiding from nebulous invaders in the 14th Street subway station; a post-9/11 golem; an alien beatnik in the Village; a taxi-driver who becomes the Wandering Dutchman of Lower Manhattan; and other unusual residents of NYC.

**Luis Ortiz** is an editor, artist and author based in New York City. He recently illustrated *Streampunk Prime*, edited by Mike Ashley, and is the author of *Outermost: The Art + Life of Jack Gaughan*. Forthcoming from him will be *The Monkey's Other Paw*.



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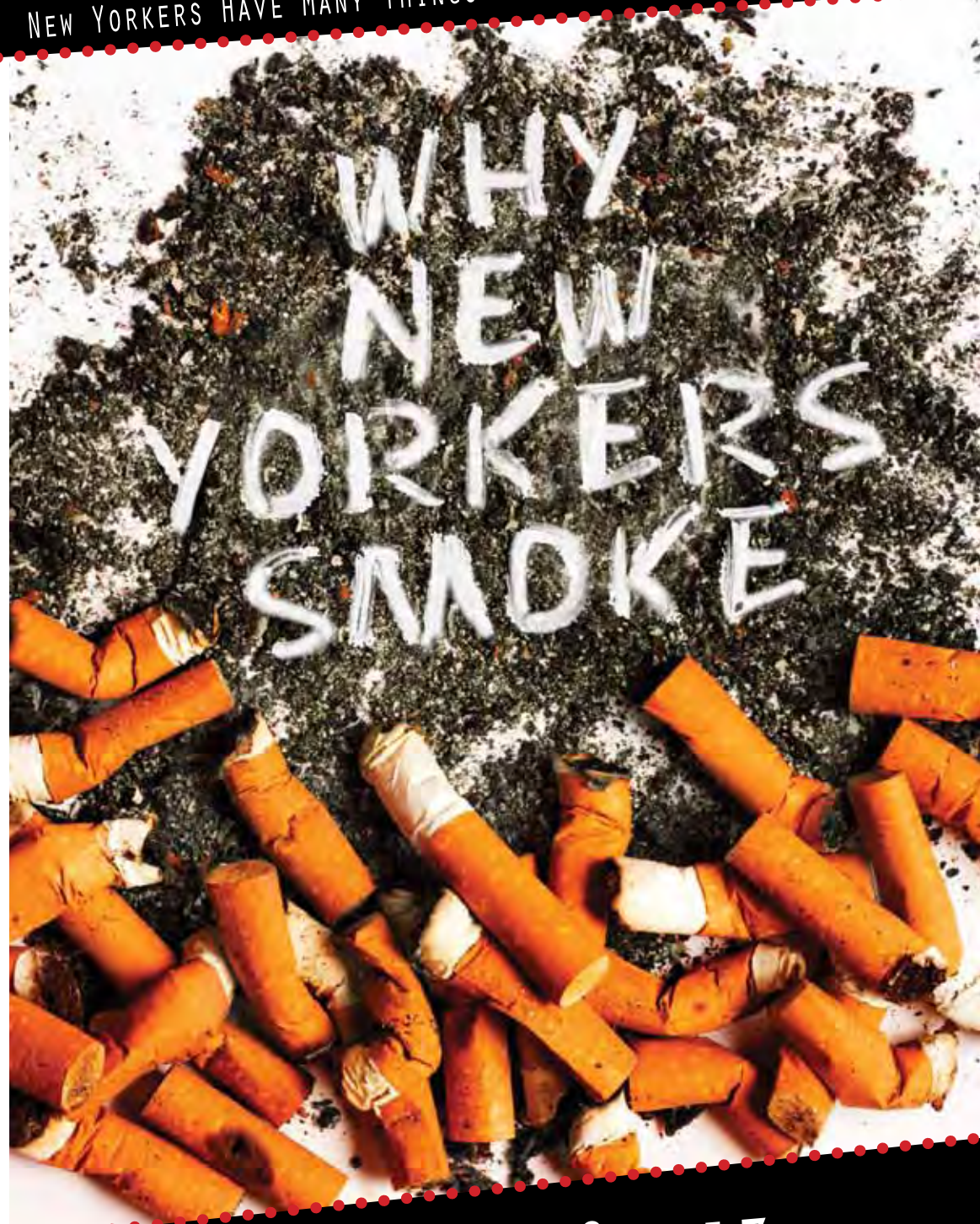


**WHY NEW YORKERS SMOKE**

Edited by Luis Ortiz



NEW YORKERS HAVE MANY THINGS TO FEAR – REAL AND IMAGINED



**LUIS ORTIZ**

EDITED BY  
NEW STORIES BY SPECULATIVE FICTION'S FINEST WRITERS

# WHY NEW YORKERS SMOKE

Edited by Luis Ortiz



*nonstop press • new york*

**WHY NEW YORKERS SMOKE**

Stories

Edited by Luis Ortiz

For Karan

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# Contents

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INTRODUCTION.....	5
<b>WHY WE TALK TO OURSELVES</b>	
Barry N. Malzberg.....	8
<b>GRAY AREA</b>	
Aligria Luna-Luz .....	17
<b>CANDLE IN A CHIANTI BOTTLE, OR, WIGOUT AT THE CORNER OF BLEECKER AND MILKY WAY</b>	
Paul Di Filippo.....	27
<b>WHY NEW YORKERS SMOKE</b>	
Lawrence Greenberg.....	60
<b>BOUNTIFUL CITY</b>	
Carol Emshwiller .....	66
<b>CHANGE MY LUCK</b>	
Becky Roth.....	81
<b>9/11</b>	
Cora Inez Laxey .....	102
<b>SPARROW</b>	
Don Webb .....	113
<b>FIDEL'S BARBER</b>	
Paige Quayle.....	128
<b>IN A STRANGE CITY LYING ALONE</b>	
Scott Edelman .....	146
<b>INTO HOLY HANDS</b>	
Gay Partington Terry .....	154
ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS .....	171



## INTRODUCTION

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“A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers. The intimation of mortality is part of New York now; in the sound of jets overhead, in the black headlines of the latest edition.”

— E. B. White “Here is New York” 1948

**F**EAR IS AN EMOTION THAT A LOT OF NEW YORKERS live with even if they don't like to acknowledge it visibly. The city is a place where just about anything can happen at any moment. But what is it like when New Yorkers truly find themselves face to face with fear? As a New Yorker myself I live daily with artifacts and memories, the quiet panic and cold eyed encounters that can blow up at any moment and pull the ground right out from under your feet. New York City demands much from its inhabitants including involvement and aloofness. Many times New Yorkers have to be both emotionally hot and cold at the same moment. Outsiders have some trouble understanding this dual mindset but anyone who comes here — not just as a tourist — and spends any amount of time dwelling in any of the five boroughs will soon understand and



develop the right attitude to fit right in and not stand out to would-be predators.

Many New Yorkers are not born here. They are drawn here by some uncanny allure. It is as if the city has become the back streets for the country, streets full of seedy looking bars from which strange music and laughter emanated, enticing the brave, the adventurous and the foolhardy. The balance of temptation and trepidation has always existed in a place that the native Indian tribe was quick to sell to Dutch traders. This collection is a fictional attempt to present some of the terror in the hearts and minds of a few of the sundry gathering of people that have chosen to live here despite all the warnings and I-told-you-so comments from outsiders.

The storytellers in this book weave a spell of fear and anxiety in juxtaposition with my city. While many Americans have felt this fear over the past decade, few have lived on the frontlines. All of the authors presented have some connection to the city. Some are born here (Malzberg, Greenberg). Some have lived here in the past (Edelman). Some are emotionally bonded to it (Webb and Di Filippo). Most make their home here (Emshwiller, Luna-Luz, Laxey, Greenberg, Quayle, Terry and Roth). And, as a sidebar, this volume forces me into thinking that Brooklyn has become the present day equivalent of the Paris of Hemingway and Joyce. But these writers' Paris sojourns had little real impact on their writing. Today Brooklyn has become the Left Bank of New York City, even if that borough is on the right side of the East River. Hemingway and

Joyce went to Paris partly because it was cheaper to live there, and some of this still applies to Brooklyn writers, but there is also a creative tension generated by New York City on display in *Why New Yorkers Smoke*.

I t's not just a New Yorker thing — all Americans are now expected to live in dread 24/7. Our media has become very good at promoting spontaneous fear and loathing since 9/11. Of course they will deny it but all one has to do is pay attention to the-sky-is-falling TV weather reports, when a big storm is brewing, to see a basic scenario of how things work. Bob Dylan, like E. B. White, now appears more prescient when he said, during the 1960s, that one did not have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing. Whether media is following the piper or leading the horde still remains to be seen.

Fear has been in our bones since our ancestors first built a fire at the mouth of a cave and searched the darkness outside for glowing eyes. It is not going away any time soon. This book does not promote fear. It is not propaganda. It is not a chronicle of catastrophes. Fear can inflame ignorance, which is the opposite of our intent here. This book does show that the boogie man is a slippery character. He is not always who you would expect him to be. It would behoove us all to discriminate between real and imagined boogiemens. These stories are a start.

**Luis Ortiz**  
**New York City**



# WHY WE TALK TO OURSELVES

Barry N. Malzberg

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CARRYING THE TORCH

PART ONE:

OSAMA IN MUFTI

**T**HE TENTH YEAR SUCCEEDING THE LAMENTABLE event of the Towers is almost over, the harvest is ended, and I am not saved. The great Ground Zero project is still an unfulfilled expanse. The Taliban undefeated.

But this is nothing other than background. Zeitgeist, as they call it in the Old Country. Focus upon the particular: our dream-Osama, clutched in Afghanistan's tunnels is not the Osama of our reality. Here he is instead — having made a difficult, subterranean passage aided by bribery — on

the West Side of Manhattan, prowling, looking for a little encouragement or companionship, living pitilessly in a week-to-week hotel and patronizing Zabar's on weekends.

And, Revolution being a lonely and difficult process even in absentia, scouring Craigslist for Older Singles.

Toward that end, diversion being necessary, consider a speed-dating with Osama. He is unbearded, dressed casually, has adopted a dapper, pseudo-literary West Side persona. His English is mediocre but then his guise is that of a Mediterranean poet, a refugee on a temporary visa who is taking special courses at the City University. His eyes twinkle with interest or perhaps ferocity, the woman across from him at this moment finds herself suspended in a state somewhere between thrall and fear. Within his allotted three minutes Osama is speaking of his poetic epic in progress, a celebration of New York City. "But you," he says, interrupting himself forcefully, "Surely you must speak of yourself."

"My name is Michele. I live in Brooklyn but my friend over there lives in this neighborhood and I was visiting, we thought we'd try this. You have very nice eyes. Do you come from France? I can't tell from your accent."

"Jordan," Osama says. "Original birth. Until age of nineteen. But was in France, yes, for commerce and idealism. Now wish to fixate on poetry."

Michele feels the pressure of his foot against her ankle. It is presumptuous of him but not unpleasant. Michele's sister, a young broker, was lost in the Towers but Michele never talks of her with strangers and certainly not on

something as perfunctory as a speed date. “Well,” she says, “It has been a pleasure — “

“Not over yet,” Osama says. “Our time is not yet completed. The bell has not rung. Stay with me. Tell me some of your secrets.” He tries a fetching smile to demonstrate that all of this is in fun, that he does not really mean to probe.

Michele looks at him perhaps for the first time intently. She wonders if he might be a prospect. She is 37 years old. She has no time to waste. He is somewhat strange, but he seems sensitive and his eyes are peculiarly piercing, filled with pain.

She wonders what secrets she might divulge. She knows she will not be ready to speak to him of Michele for a long time and only if matters work out in a certain way.

We leave them there. Time will determine whether or not there can be a relationship. Time will also determine if Osama is truly there or if he is in a cave in Afghanistan and this scene merely the construction of a man driven quietly insane by the pressure of unassimilable circumstance.

## PART TWO:

### MEDITATION IN CONCRETE

**M**eanwhile, the form, the meaning, the accessibility for the new Towers — if they are ever truly built — remain unresolved. What else could we have expected? Who, after all, could plan Resurrection from the catastrophe? It certainly never occurred to any of us. It did not

occur to me. Even if I were the Boss Tweed of this era, even if oldstyle politics were still in account, I would be stunned by this situation. Who could have planned for this? We all dwell in its penumbra. Consider some famous New Yorkers of the last century: William Shawn, George S. Kaufman, Moss Hart, Bernstein, James J. Walker, Impelliteri, Lehman. Could these ghosts have made any better plans?

Isaac Stern died a week after the planes hit. Isn't that interesting? How much of a coincidence might that be? "The event was a repudiation of everything in which he supposedly believed," I say with heavy portent. "So he returned the gesture."

Oh, "that unfortunate incident of the Towers." Euphemism will be our salvation. "The Final Solution." "Resettlement." *Arbeit machen frei*. Everyone has reasons: the nineteen hijackers who appeared for their four missions, the twentieth hijacker who did not. Reason underlies our most unreasonable acts. The King of the Jews had a plan: send off the weak and functionless and preserve the strong. *Arbeit machen frei*. Of course at the end they shipped off the King of the Jews too. Then Lodz was empty. New York is not empty, but there are places and people who have been carved away.

I try to keep all of this before me. Procedure may save us where prayer could not possibly. I would not say that I am the conscience of the Towers but then again, who else could be? The widows and orphans are too deeply invest-

ed, the politicians and contractors too compromised, the memory hole too deep, the task too hard. What is needed is a dry acuity, a kind of remorselessness of memory which will synchronously preserve and expunge those terrible events. That has been assigned to me. I am remorseless. My acuity is dry. The twentieth hijacker missed a cab or a bus or an alarm clock or a moment of resolve and never showed at the airport. The planes hit with terrific force. There must have been a moment — a glittering instant — when Windows on the World shuddered from disbelief to terror with no pause at astonishment and then that one terrific intersection. I was not at Windows of the World but then no one who was is in a position to testify.

Witness is a bitch. Witness is even more of a bitch than payback. There is nothing to witness but infinite recursion.

Job himself finally lost his temper. Chased the Comforters from his tent. Turned his back on the sensible advice of his wife.

PART THREE:  
GETTING AROUND THE CLINICIAN

**J**ob was stubborn. Job held to one explanation. Iron decree, however, can take one only so far, no further. “Over and over again I see them,” I tell the indifferent Social Worker, Joblike inside a room at the sprawling Clinic. Rooms like boxes, boxes like fists, ratcheted one behind the other in an enclosure whose distant ceiling

looks like that of an aviary. "The crowds coming north on Second Avenue, fleeing the smoke and dust of the Towers; hundreds, maybe thousands, silent, stricken, pouring uptown in the 50's. People at the counters, waiters, stunned computer personnel on a sudden awful break, residents of the neighborhood (Greta Garbo is no longer available, but surely she would be there) standing in their own silence at the storefronts watching. "Hell of a thing," I mutter, twisting in the chair, "It won't go away."

The Social Worker, forty maybe, ordinary features, ordinary dress, ordinary case folders in front of her, holds a pencil and regards me absently. "When did you begin to feel this way?" she says. "When did you start to have these visions? Did they begin immediately after the impact? Or did it start later?"

I could go on. I could attempt to explain this to her. But I will not. Description is daunting. "Such nihilism defeats any attempt at compensation," I said years ago when I, too, had experimented with speed-dating. "An opera was composed and performed at a concentration camp but that kind of thing is beyond me. Everything is beyond me. Many works of fiction and drama, even more of documentary and recollection have been written, there have been compositions in mourning and this decade's creations are just the beginning, but that silence covers them all. Nothing is larger than silence." This rodomontade caused the woman across the table to shudder and shortly thereafter the bell rang. I never saw her again. I never saw any of them again. None of the strangers seen on Second Avenue were ever

encountered other than in underpopulated dreams.

The Speed-Dating Woman, let us call her that as we will call the lost hijacker The Twentieth, had nothing to say. There are certain elements of experience that must be forever hidden. Clinical depression's murky perimeter cannot possibly expand to contain this situation.

And so only recollection's solemn grumble, self-important whine. Attend: I have seen things you have never seen. Reference to a secret history too privileged for the audience to share. This would be the opportunity to launch into biography but the planks of personal history behind which we hide have for me been disassembled and thrown into the fire. I have no personal history. I am Witness. Pure observation to the core, passive and passionate transcription. If the events defy forgetfulness, they also obliterate structure.

"What is later?" I ask. "What is earlier? Were you there? Could you possibly understand? Why don't you ask me about my childhood?"

Really, now.

PART FOUR:  
THE TWENTIETH

**H**ere's the deal, I want to say to the Social Worker: The Twentieth, the fulcrum of all events awakens that morning feeling out of sorts, grumbly, faintly sick to his stomach. Does he really need this? The cause is just but does he really want his parts spewed all over Metropolis?



He stumbles to the window, examines the nascent dawn. It looks like a nice day. Does he really want to make it his last, locked into blood and fuselage? Let me think about this, Twentieth mumbles to the street. Let me consider the conditions.

And so he considers. He is stunned by this frail conundrum of unjoined past and future, the twentieth hijacker also considers the past. Like Osama, he was on a speed-date the evening before although at a different venue. He was not successful. His strange, preoccupied manner, his odd gestures alienated the six women with whom he spoke. A bemused cordiality did not help matters: "Something very important is going to happen tomorrow," he had said to each of them. "I do not know if I can make any commitment." He mispronounced the word "commitment" and two of the women adjourned early, claiming distress and fled. It was embarrassing, could in fact have been catastrophic, but the evening is behind him. It is in the dawn that he must force calculation, decide if he will indeed join the others as prearranged. Everything in his life has taken him to this terrible, indecisive moment and now The Twentieth does not know how to proceed.

And so, as we left Osama bin Laden to his devices on the Upper West Side, so shall we leave The Twentieth. As this continuation of his social life must ultimately be his decision, so we should accept the fact that we cannot intervene. We cannot help him with the lost Michele. Just as she must carry her secrets, just as Osama must embed his necessity in functional disguise, so we must

accept the situation. We cannot intervene because at the end his presence will be of no more consequence than his absence.

PART FIVE:  
OUR SHARED DESTINY

I continue to consider conditions, I tell the Social Worker, who remains unmoved. You can understand why I would want to consider the conditions, regard in memory the faces struggling uptown. Don't you know there are no easy answers to this?

"Tell that to Michele," she says. "Tell her there are no easy answers."

"Michele has nothing to do with this."

The Social Worker shrugs. "Nothing has anything to do with this. Nothing you ever see or touch again will have be connected to this. It will all exist in an eerie, gaseous space where motive has been as torn from outcome as you have from your own, your native land."

WHY WE TALK TO OURSELVES – MICHELE REMEMBERS

"We cannot leave the land after we have lost the land."

**GRAY AREA**  
**Aligria Luna-Luz**

---

**F**ATHER WAS PUTTING ON HIS LEFT SHOE THAT morning when the thud of the first crash came. The crash did not stop him from putting on his other shoe. He got up and went to the window when he saw that a blizzard of paper had begun falling from the cloudless sky.

Our house always smelled of cigarette smoke the time he lived with us, and there was an ashtray in every room. He was a careless smoker, apt to unconsciously burn you in a stray movement of his active hands or drop a lighted cigarette into the cushions of the sofa when snoozing in front of the television. The city was not his sort of place. He was a man who came from a big piece of earth where

a few hogs and chickens lived and it was not an easy walk to a neighbor's house. New York meant cramped closed-in places — but here he was. Later he would say that people here lived together as in a mass grave.

He had grown up a fatherless child. His own dad disappeared into the merchant marines soon after he was born on the Island. My father worried about money and bosses, and developed an unnatural sensitivity to the sounds of the city. He worked as a commercial artist for a department store in the day, and sometimes drove a yellow cab at night. Besides tobacco he always had an arty smell to him, a waxy licorice odor with a touch of turpentine, and Old Spice. As I said, he was putting on his shoe that morning, getting ready for work, when the first crash came.

At first I paid no attention to the crash since I was already late getting to school — just another shipper at the Seaport dropping a steel container on the pavement. (Our distance above the street amplified all of the city's bumps and thuds.) Getting to PS 22 was foremost in my mind, but I did notice the confetti of paper that fell outside our twelfth-story window. Father rushed by me into the kitchen to get Mother. We could see the fire in the sky from our window. He turned on the television. There we saw the accident from different angles. Mother said I would have to stay home. The school was too close to the burning building.

Father told us to stay put and went out to get a better view. Soon after he left a low rumble shook our building from top to bottom. The giant cloud rolling down the

street chased him back home. He rushed in, covered in ash and dust, and slammed all the windows shut, then stood in the bathtub and took off his work clothes and shoes. He described the street scene of people flying through the air, and of one woman holding her severed arm as firemen people aided her. Mother showed her distress by making a sucking in noise with her lips. We heard a jet engine in the sky above and rushed to the window together. It was one of ours. My parents lost interest, but I stayed at the window for a long time expecting to see some sort of aerial dogfight.

By mid-day the electricity was out and when we turned on the taps no water came out. By the time the sun went down we were hungry and Father put on his street clothes by candlelight and went out into the city, heading towards the glow of the wounded ground. There were no barricades up at this point. He found a Chinese restaurant opened that was doing brisk business catering to the police and firemen. Later, as we ate the greasy chicken lo mein he brought back, he told us how he walked into the place as if he belonged there. Most of the emergency responders were in plain clothes so no one challenged him. Outside the window the street below was quiet and looked as if a coat of snow had fallen since the last time I looked out. A neighbor came to our door holding a suitcase and told us we should leave now before something else happened.

Father took me out with him the next day. The phones were still out and Mother was visiting the few building

residents that, like us, remained behind. We walked down twelve flights of stairs. It was impossible to get near the site now so we headed uptown. Dust still hovered in the air. Along the side of the Brooklyn Bridge on-ramp, near City Hall, which was an open street back then, there was a badly mangled fire engine. When we got closer we saw that it was really two fire trucks piled one on top of the other. Each vehicle was badly crushed and the only way you could really tell it was more than one fire truck was because of the two tiers of wheels. Father stared at the wreck while lighting a cigarette.

"I wonder if the firemen survived." I said. "There's no blood."

Father smiled gently.

"The firemen were in the buildings, not on the fire-truck," he finally responded.

We stood in silence for a moment.

That morning the streets were mostly empty like on a Sunday except for some soldiers who told us to move on after checking Father's driver's license. It was so quiet you could not tell it was the middle of the week. When we got back home the electricity was on and Mother was throwing everything from the refrigerator into a trash bag. I missed school the rest of the week and spent my time watching the army men parading in the street from the window.

Father changed after that day. He watched the news on television every moment he could and kept up-to-date when new names were added to the casualties list in the newspapers and at the end of news programs. It didn't

matter that he didn't know any of the people named.

Father used to tell me that I should be full of all the imagination in the world at my age. No one on television had any imagination, he said. He told Mother and me how anyone could take something as simple as a concrete mixer truck and load it with explosives turning it into a cannon that could be driven right up to City Hall.

He skipped work all that week and the next. His boss Rik called to ask when he was going back to his job. The same question Mother had been asking him. Rik's real name was Frederic; Father always called him Silent P when talking about him to Mother. She called him Ricky. "When are you going to call Ricky?" she asked him a week after the crash. He turned to her and closed his eyes. She just bit her lips.

Father told me once, while I helped him change a tire on the old Ford cab, that I should "advance naturally" in whatever I chose to do in life. Of course he did not say "advance naturally" he said *adelante naturalmente*. The Spanish does not translate quite right into English and I took his words, at first, to mean, "Get in front of nature." I think back then he saw me as a dawdler and was clumsily trying to educate me.

**F**or months afterward, whenever the wind blew from Jersey, we could smell the burning. During that period Father quietly quit his day job; driving a cab around downtown became his only livelihood. He spent more time in his cab than home. Then one day he stopped com-



ing home. There were no farewells. He didn't even bother coming back for his clothes or shoes. I would stare out the window at passing taxis on the street below, but they all looked alike. Walking home from school I looked closely at every cabbie that drove past. Father didn't come back, but he didn't go away either. I saw him a few times every week, always behind the wheel of his yellow cab; sometimes with a fare sitting in the back seat.

Father's parents and Mother met together at our apartment to decide how to proceed. No one had an answer. Reasons for his actions were suggested: The shock had twisted his mind, the bad air compromised his reasoning, and one malicious neighbor proposed that another woman might be at the heart of the matter. Abuela said, "Maybe he has a terminal illness and cannot bear to tell us." No one knew what to do. Mother finally said that Father has too much imagination.

The neighbors began calling Mother *la pobrecita*, the poor girl, behind her back. Mother asked our priest, an Irishman with a very pale face who spoke an unimpassive Spanish, to talk to Father, but the yellow cab never stopped for the darkly vested Irishman no matter how frantically the priest waved his arms at Father's cab. The priest counseled Mother to remain faithful and pray against the demons that had overtaken Father. Little by little people stopped reporting sightings of Father driving around in his taxi to Mother and he became a ghost in our home, rarely mentioned and when his name did come up in a conversation Mother would cross herself.

I began high school. The times I did see him driving pass I still attempted to flag him down, but he never stopped for me. Sometimes I would shout out his name. It didn't matter. Over the next few years some of the neighbors came down with mysterious ailments and died. There were three on our floor that passed during this time. The neighbor who said Father has a mistress had her voice coarsen over the years, as if a hangman's noose was tightening around her neck, and she was diagnosed with a throat tumor. "They lied about the air. And all the other dangers to us," she told Mother. The superstitious, who complained of chest pains or breathing problems, took all of this as some kind of sign and began to move away. The landlord lowered rents — though not for us — and new neighbors moved in.

I had already decided that I was not going to college after high school — the army was the best place to get back at the people who took Father away. When Mother discovered my intentions she looked at me the same way she had looked at Father those last few months before he left.

I also decided that I would talk to Father before I enlisted. I still caught fleeting glimpses of him patrolling our neighborhood in his yellow cab. I noticed that the rooftop taxi crown and hood medallion were missing; only small screw holes in the car roof and hood remained. It had been a long time since I had seen a passenger in his back seat.

One day I discovered where Father slept at night. It was a miserable hotel off the West Side Highway that let rooms by the hour. I was told that he was allowed to sleep

there when not ferrying nightshift hookers back and forth. One humid summer night I stood outside the hotel watching people coming and going and finally got up the courage to talk to one of the girls.

"I don't know him," she said, looking me over head to toe. She was not much older than me and may have even seen me as a competitor. The hooker seemed ready to walk away.

"He's my father," I said.

She looked more closely at me and must have noticed some family resemblance because she smiled. She motioned for me to follow her and led the way up a flight of stairs. She had eyes tattooed on the back of her knees and at each step they winked at me. I was led to a red door. The girl winked at me with a true eye and went back down the stairs.

I knocked on the door. Nothing happened. No sound from within. Thinking now about that moment I feel my memory is playing tricks. I heard a voice through the door say, "Go away." It was a woman's voice. What should I have done? I shook myself and left.

**T**he day they killed the bastard I could see that Mother was excited. I think she believed that Father would now return. I knew better. I snuck out of the apartment that night and walked to the site. There were a lot of young people there. Like me they could not have been more than children when it happened. Most had been drinking and the place turned again into a celebration of

death. The crowd was no different from the day tourists that flocked to the site. Father was not there.

I had long made it a habit to study how people hail taxis. There was more to it than what one saw on the surface. I used to think that it was like hitchhiking, which I knew about from an old black and white movie titled *It Happened One Night* where Clark Cable is planning to write a book on the subject and demonstrates his various hitchhiking techniques to Claudette Colbert. I learned how to bring to a halt any taxi cab in the city, but I could never get Father to stop for me. I would have to think up another way.

**F**inally the day came.

I saw him waiting at a red light and I ran up to his window.

“Papi, let me drive.”

The traffic light turned green and he did not immediately drive off. He hand-shifted into park and slid across the seat. I opened the cab door and took my place behind the wheel as the car behind us blared its horn. I noticed the ashtray in the cab was too stuffed with cigarette butts to fully slide back into the dashboard. Two pine-tree air fresheners hung from the rear-view mirror. The fare meter was missing. So was the plastic partition between the front and back seats. It was four in the afternoon and traffic was building.

I told him I was going into the Army. He was silent for a moment.

“Is it better to be killed by terrorists abroad or here?”  
He said.

“What else can I do?” I answered.

Father hooked his left arm over the back of the seat.

I adjusted the rear-view mirror and we drove off together.

**Translated from the Spanish by Luis Ortiz**

FREE PROMO - DO NOT COPY

**CANDLE IN A  
CHIANTI BOTTLE, OR,  
WIGOUT AT THE  
CORNER OF BLEECKER  
AND MILKY WAY**

**Paul Di Filippo**

---

1.

AH-LEU-CHA

**W**HY, YOU QUERY WINSOMELY AND WHIMSICALLY, DID I, Nick Champion, forever hassled, overburdened artiste of the thyatron tube control panel, always end up being the sad cat delegated to sweep up the gruesome broken glass after a night of happy rioting by A-Trainers, Birchers, militant pansies, Bronx Bagel Babies and Minor Mafia thugs? Because good ol' Nick Champion, I reply with equal panache and demureness bordering on bile, was the only fucking employee of the Village Gate that a) knew which end of a broom met the pavement; b) was

awake and sober at seven AM; and c) was even crazier in love with this wayout dive than its owner Art D'Lugoff, that's why.

You dig?

So there swept I, morning of Thursday, September 24, Anode Dominatrix 1959, using a wide-mouthed galvanized dustpan to funnel the shards of the Gate's front windows into a big dented trash barrel. I was fortified mightily by two espressos from the Gaslight Café, personally brewed by owner John Mitchell. I lived above the Gaslight, up on MacDougall just a couple of blocks from the Gate. I could have lived above the Gate itself and saved some berries, if I had been satisfied with flophouse conditions, but that wasn't my bag. I liked my home scene neat and refined: Wollensak reel-to-reel, Heywood-Wakefield couch, bullfight posters on the bedroom wall.

At 6:30 in the morning, Mitchell wasn't up early, he was up super late. Big bill o' fare at the Gaslight yester-eve, with the basket making the rounds a half dozen times. Poets, musicians, dancers, a real happening. The noise of the performances and the finger-snapping response of the kittens and gators in the audience drifted up the airshafts to lull me asleep when I turned in at 1:30. Wednesday was always an early night off for me at the Gate, once I got the simple lighting set up for the perennial closing slot holder, Big Tex Poteet and his Reet Petites. They weren't Monk, but D'Lugoff had nothing against pulling in the squares, and Wednesday was a slow night.

Consequently, I slept like murder and was up five



hours later. I never needed much sack time.

So I wander from the street down grease-slippery steps into the empty Gaslight cave through the open service door and find Mitchell in front of his big ancient La Pavoni Ideale, which looks like a Little Nemo steam locomotive mated with a samovar, and I say, “Crema me, daddy-o.” Red-eyed and sleepy, Mitchell snorts semi-derisively-like, then pulls me a ristretto, and one for himself. We clink cups, then sip.

“Surprised you slept through all the hullaballo,” he said.

My stomach elevator down to my engineer boots. “Not another riot?”

“Just a small one. The cherry-toppers fulla bulls whooped in fast, gotta give ‘em that.”

“What is it with these jiveass muthafuckers? Can’t they all just get along?”

“You know the score as well as me. The local Dagoes who used to run Greenwich Village hate anyone not born here. The spades off the A-Train hate the ofays. The ofays freak when they see white Bronx Bagel Babies hanging with the A-Trainers. The Minor Mafia is out to loot and pillage everyone indiscriminately. The ban-the-bombers hate the my-country-right-or-wrongers. The folkniks hate the rock-n-rollers. And everyone hates the fags — even the fags!”

I winced at Mitchell’s last gibe. “A sad scene, man. If only people could learn to hang loose and live together peacefully.”

Mitchell slid a second espresso in front of me. "Not likely, my friend. Not in my lifetime or yours. And meanwhile, innocent window glass everywhere is the victim. Makes me glad the Gaslight's totally underground. You guys never should have expanded to the first floor. I hear the Gate took a major hit."

I downed the long black and got to my dogs. "Guess I'll mosey over then. Thanks, John."

Out on MacDougall, I saw that the Kettle of Fish next door sported fresh plywood. Later, I learned that Café Wha?, the Punjab, Rienzi's, the Cock'n'Bull, and the Port of Call had all donned similar wood cheaters. I hustled down Bleecker. Would D'Lugoff have seen fit to spare me some labor, and boarded up any damage already?

Corner of Thompson gave me the answer. Only a mish-mash of old thumbtacked posters and hastily frame-stapled tablecloths shielded the gaping windows. Uncool and inutile, to say the least. Teahead architecture. I sighed, then got busy.

By the time I was done getting all the glass up off the pavement and out of the windowframes, I had acquired an appreciative audience of one, out of all the incurious sparse passersby. Chester Kurland, he of the entertaining cosmic spongebrain.

Chester lived above the Gate in the grotty flophouse establishment that had festered there for years, long before the advent of the club. Rooms fifty cents a night, bedbugs no extra charge.

Somewhere north of sixty, Chester was a World War

Uno vet. Came out of the trenches with gas-rotted lungs and a lifetime monthly check from Uncle Sugar. For the past forty years he had paid his month's rent in advance, then converted the rest into booze and beans at a ratio of ten to one. Miracle he was still alive. Chester resembled a toothless, withered, sexless apple dumpling wrapped in flannel and wool and an inch-thick, almost visible funk of moldy days of future passed.

Chester always came up short in the mazuma department around this time of the month, so I was suspecting to get hit up for a donation to the "Keep Kurland Katatonic Fund." But the old saucehead surprised me with one of his intermittent gnomic utterances. Rubbing the back of one dirty hand across his whisker-fringed lips, he mumbled, "Sumpin inna cellar, Nicky."

Chester was the only person who ever called me Nicky, aside from my Mom, and even her bellow wouldn't carry all the way from Iowa. "Yeah, Chester, I know there's something in the cellar. A lot of somethings. A stage, my lighting board, booze, the plywood I need for this job — "

Chester got angry then at my goofing on him. That surprised me, since he never usually got peeved. "No, asshole, sumpin new!"

"And how would you know, Chester?"

The ancient rummy deflated, all his aggressive certainty gone. "Aw, thahell witchoo ... I need my breakfast. So long, Nicky."

He rolled off, and I could hear him muttering something like, "Felt 'im show up, know I did ..."

I trundled the barrel back to outdoor storage, then used my keys to let myself into the Gate.

The darkened, musty, fermentatious club radiated a spooky, throttled-down vibe, as if all the ghosts of the past two years' performers were embedded in the walls, playing silently, sending spectral notes out to pile up in ectoplasmic drifts. I got a little antsy, something that never usually overtakes me here, and I've been in these early-morning-Nick-to-the-rescue circumstances more times than I can count. Goddamn that Chester and his spooky talk!

The basement of this building, Mills House No. 1 it had been named at its erection sixty years ago, was labyrinthine and capacious. Parts of it still weren't wired for electricity, including the room where the plywood sheets were stored against riot and other Acts ob De Lawd. So, lacking a flashlight, I grabbed one of the centerpieces from a table, and fumbled in my pocket for some matches.

The candle in the chianti bottle flared to life, immediately beginning to add more picturesque red wax drippings to the encrusted wicker basket cradling the glass. These faux folksy flambeaux were ubiquitous in Village joints, and I felt like hipster Diogenes looking for an honest fix.

Down in the cellar I made my way to the storage room.

I opened the padlocked door and saw a man sitting on the floor.

At first, in the wavering shadows, I couldn't be sure it was a man. I mean, I couldn't be sure once I had unpeeled

myself from the ceiling and my nerves stopped quivering like the strings of Milt Hinton's double bass after he was done slapping them. But in the interval from my first glimpse of what appeared to be a formless heap to this moment, the figure had resolved into a veritable person.

The guy was a spade, dressed in a shabby suit and battered brogans. He sat right atop a grating that communicated with the sewers, and whence wafted noxious aromas. Hard to tell his age, anywhere from twenty to fifty. Eyes closed, head slumped.

And then he lifted his head and opened his eyes.

You hear about "animal magnetism" and charisma and suchlike stuff, but until you run smack dab up against a real case of it, you don't believe in such powers. Leastwise, I didn't.

But this guy's gaze, catching the candlelight, held some kind of weird attractiveness, a blend of naivete and knowingness, strength and fragility, openness and depths of mystery.

He began to speak, but seemed to have trouble forming sensible words.

"Ah, ah, ah. Loo-cha! Loo, loo, loo-cha! Ah-loo-cha!"

My own voice was none too steady. I still couldn't figure out how he had gotten in here. I hadn't opened this room in ages, and chances are no one else would have either.

"What's that, man?" I queried nervously. "You into Bird? 'Ah-leu-cha?' I dig, great song ..."

He got unsteadily to his feet, and it seemed that his

pants cuffs trailed down into the drain, snagged on something, but then he pulled free and advanced on me.

“Ah-loo-cha! Ah-loo-cha!”

Suddenly a thought appeared in my brain as if beamed there. “Whoa, pal, slow down. You trying to tell me your name? Al? Al Luchow?”

My question scored a big hit. He nodded his head violently, and smiled with teeth.

“Okay, Al, how’d you get in here? You been locked in all night? Damp as hell. No matter, you’re free now. You may as well beat it.”

Al frowned, and shook his head in the negative.

“Nowhere to go, huh? You looking for work? I could use a hand getting these sheets of plywood upstairs. After that — well, we’ll see.”

Al stayed mute. I had a hunch he’d never say anything but his name — and that hunch proved a dead cert. But he snatched up several big sheets of plywood like they weighed nothing, dashed past me and headed for the sun.

Looked like I had a new helper — at least for today.

## 2.

### STRAIGHT, NO CHASER

**T**he Gate was secure again, wooden windows awaiting the glazier. Al Luchow had really helped. Muscles aplenty, despite his skinny build.

Out in the sunny morning, I had been able to size up his looks better. His suit was from nowheresville, some

kind of grotty foreign weave like woof of raffia and weft of kelp. His complexion was kinda greenish below the African bronze, jaundiced in a weird way. Although his looks were craggy and ill-assorted, ugly even, he still radiated that raw animal appeal I had sensed in the basement. His speech was nonexistent, but he smiled a lot.

With Al effortlessly holding up the big sheets, I drove the nails home into familiar holes. Many more riots, and the window frames would look like Swiss cheese. We finished by 7:30, and I turned to Al.

“You hungry?”

Grin and nod.

“Okay, c’mon. My treat. Oh, and here’s a couple of bucks for your work.”

Al took the dough and pocketed it without apparent concern or appreciation. Go figure.

We went over to the T. A. Waters Diner on the northeast corner of Washington Square, and found a booth right away, despite the breakfast crowd of students, suits and second-string Sartres.

“What do you want, Al?” I noticed Al was studying the menu upside-down, and I got embarrassed for him. Probably grew up raggedy-ass barefoot Mississippi sharecropper poor. “Hey, I know what’s good. I’ll order for us both, okay?”

The waitress was a raven-haired, big-boobed dancer who went by the name Iota Scintilla. Today she was wearing a Mexican shawl over a peasant blouse that put all her assets on display. I had seen her perform at Trude Heller’s

Versailles club in between musical acts. As a dancer, she was an excellent waitress. That was the problem with half the acts on the Village scene: all ambition and enthusiasm and ego and very little talent.

I had Iota bring us dual stacks of pancakes, sausages, eggs over easy, coffee and hash browns. When the food came, Al made a face of vivid distaste at the eggs and sausages, but immediately began to scarf down the pancakes and potatoes, so I traded my portions of the latter for his share of the former.

I found Al's company quite pleasant, despite his silence. That ethereal buzz he radiated soothed and pacified urban-taut nerves. Most people talked too much anyhow. My good mood shattered however with the arrival of Clover Sterbcow.

"Hello, Nick," she crooned like honey over treacle, and I winced.

Clover hailed from the New Orleans Sterbcows. Had a mushmouth accent out of some minor Tennessee Williams play. Dad was a fatcat lawyer-type down there. Clover had come to New York at age nineteen to "find herself." Got a plump monthly check from Papa and Mama Sterbcow. No money worries, nothing to occupy her fine but untethered mind except self-indulgence, trivia, gossip and a network of interpersonal relationships among her intimate circle of thousands that rivalled the complexity of Politburo alliances and enmities.

Today Clover wore a white man's buttondown shirt under a tan windbreaker, and heathery twill pants over



her just-too-ample hips. Sandals revealed toenails painted black. An ankh on a leather cord around her neck completed the ensemble. Oh, and pixie-cut and pout.

Cute as a bug, in a sub-Shelly-Winters fashion, Clover really wasn't a bad sort, compared to lots of others in our mutual scene, except for one fatal flaw.

She had convinced herself that she was noggin-over-nookie in love with me. And that bag of hers was most ab-so-tively not mine.

"Clover," I clippedly countenanced. "Haven't seen you since the Miss Beatnik 1959 contest."

That was a jab. Clover had had her heart set on winning that gig, but had lost to Angel, a boss seventeen-year-old chick. Only the immediate funnelling of a half dozen White Russians down the Sterbcow gullet had forestalled a mean catfight.

Clover stuck her tongue out at me. "You're a stinker, Nick. But that's how I like 'em. Who's your new friend?"

I made with the intros. Al beamed at Clover, but didn't seem to dig the practice of shaking hands. Instead, he rummaged in one greasy jacket pocket and came out with a piece of foreign-looking candy wrapped in some kind of dust-colored fuzzy cellophane.

Clover took the candy and stuck it in her own pocket. "Thanks, Al, you're sweet. Not like some people I could name. So, Nick, you gonna comp me into the Monk show on Friday?"

"Only if you bring six paying customers with you."

"Can do. Little Clover knows just how to pluck the so-

cial strings. I'll see you there. You too, Al!"

And then she sashayed out of the T. A. Waters Diner in her wide-hipped sugar-magnolia invitation-to-love way.

I looked at Al and he was still grinning. "You damn fool, she's onstage like that with everyone. Shallow as a Cuban revolutionary's grave. Oh, well, you'll find out for yourself, I guess."

Clover's mention of seeing Al again later in the week made me think. What was I going to do with him? He obviously had no pad of his own, or he wouldn't have been crashing in the basement of the Gate. (And just how had he gotten into that locked cellar room, which I hadn't opened all day yesterday, and me holding the only key? Did Art have a key too? Probably did, come to think of it. But why would he put Al in there anyhow? Or had the vagrant slipped in unnoticed in some fashion?) And if Al had a home life of any sort, he would also have taken off by now, plainly, he had no better place to go. I couldn't just turn him loose with a good conscience.

I made up my mind then and there. My duties at the Gate beyond doing the lights had proliferated past all justifiable bounds, simply because I was the most competent employee D'Lugoff had. If all these tasks were going to fall onto my shoulders, I deserved an assistant. Al could be that guy.

"Al, let's go. We're going to get you gainfully employed. Your taxes will be funding Project Mercury before you know it."

By now the hour was nearing nine, and I figured Art

D'Lugoff would be in his office, attending to the many matters involved in running the club.

We found the impressario of the Village Gate behind his messy desk, a bundle of barely constrained quivering energy. He was studying liquor distributor invoices and smoking an early morning stick of tea to take his edge off. He exhaled a big lazy fragrant cloud of buzz smoke at us, and said, "Howdy, Nick, have a hit."

"No thanks, Art, you know I don't indulge."

"How about your buddy? Here you go, cat, ride the dragon."

Al Luchow accepted the joint, studied it — then threw it to the floor and crushed it to pieces.

Art jumped up. "Hey, man, that was primo weed! What's your weirdo hangup anyhow?"

Al flashed the expanse of his pearly whites on Art, and handed him a no-name candy. Art tossed the lozenge onto his desk. "Aw, you're nuts, both of you! Too straight to contemplate! What're you doing in here at this godforsaken hour anyhow?"

"Reporting on how we secured your precious establishment from vandals, that's what."

"Oh, yeah, the windows." Art calmed down. "That was one flipping mad scene last night. Man, I wish everyone in the Village would learn to co-exist. Well, thanks, Nick, I appreciate it."

"I couldn't have done it so quick without Al's help. You think we can take him on as a kind of dogsbody?"

"What's it gonna cost me?"

I ran a quick calculation involving weekly rates at the flophouse above the Gate, and some simple vegetarian meals. “Fifteen bucks a week.”

“Make it twelve, and you’ve got a deal.”

“Solid, Jackson!”

Art sat down again and grabbed a flyer off his pile of papers. “Now that we’ve signed up your nursemaid, I need your help. I want you to go check out this new joint. On the sly, like. It’s an Ivo Marinelli operation.”

Ivo Marinelli was a rival impressario, but unlike the general run of Village club owners, he tended to play dirty. Up till now, he had stayed out of our neighborhood, focusing his activities uptown. He liked to keep a low profile. Rumors had him as a silent partner in the Copacabana, the Latin Quarter and the Eden Roc — places where the stuffed-shirt L7 crowd hung out, listening to cornball acts like the De Castro Sisters, Lewis and Martin impersonators, and Kurt Maier on the piano. News of his arrival here was a stone downer.

I studied the broadside. “*The Gargoyle Galaxy*? And it’s only three blocks from us.”

“Yeah, I know, like we need the competition. The Village is overstocked already with joints. The Café Wha, the Café Bizarre, the Commons, the Roue, the Harlequin, the Blue Angel, Gerde’s Folk City, the Vanguard — Just how thin does everyone think we can slice this pie? And now Marinelli barges in with his shark tactics. Go suss him out, Nick, okay?”

I turned to leave in a hurry. Anything that threatened

the beautiful thing we had here at the Gate got me worried. The bad news made me momentarily forget about Al. He caught up silently with me outside Art's office.

"Oh, right, let's get you set up with a pad. And then maybe you can help somehow."

Al gave me a candy. I stuck it in the pocket of my jeans.

### 3.

#### FRAN-DANCE

I cleaned up nice. With construction grime removed, hair slicked down, Ray-ban cheaters, Hugh Beaumont cardigan, chinos and loafers, I looked like any other BMOC out to sample the beatnik scene. Joe College on the prowl for Janey Beret.

I had left Al Luchow in his new quarters above the Gate, with instructions that I'd catch him later. When I departed, he was busy studying the glowing coil of the room's beat hotplate as if he had never seen one before. I just prayed he wouldn't burn Mills House No. 1 to the ground.

It was only noon, and I didn't expect the *Gargoyle Galaxy* to be open yet. I was just intending to size up the façade, try to scope out how much gelt Marinelli was investing. To my surprise, I found the joint already pulling in eager novelty-seekers, fickle Village habitués bored with their usual hangouts. So in I went, Thyatron Tube Theseus into the Louche Labyrinth, under the deliberately primitive hand-lettered sign that advertised:

VINO, VIXENS AND VERITAS  
HOWL AT THE CONEY ISLAND OF YOUR MIND  
MORE BOP FOR YOUR VOOT

**T**he interior of the GG featured plush couches, artfully mismatched, and low tables (each spiked with the universal candle in a chianti bottle), dim overhead lighting and arty prints: Utrillo, Soutine and Dufy. A big full-service bar occupied one wall of the room, staffed by two cauliflower-eared apes, uncomfortable in striped Apache dancer shirts, who looked about as esthetically inclined as Floyd Patterson. Marinelli's muscle. Bead curtain at the corridor leading to the WC — or, as the sign had it, "Shakers and Sitters." The whole effect was House & Garden Bohemian, trendy and "hip," but utterly soulless.

At the end of the large room, perpendicular to the bar, a wide stage dominated. A trio was playing jittery jazz, Eric Dolphy lite, and a woman was dancing. Barefoot, dressed in a green leotard hand-painted with flowers, she had Iota Scintilla's bombshell build, but ten times her talent. Whipping her long blonde hair around and writhing her limbs like an octopus on uppers, she also wailed a song.

"Pull my daisy, tip my cup, all my doors are open. Cut my thoughts for coconuts, all my eggs are broken. Jack my Arden, gate my shades, woe my road is spoken. Silk my garden, rose my days, now my prayers awaken ..."

Standing at the bar I bought a beer I barely sipped and watched the performance till it ended. The woman slinked offstage like a wounded leopard in a cloud of musk.

The bass player said, "That was Fran Panagiotis, cats, interpreting 'Pull My Daisy,' from a new film due out soon. Give it up for Fran."

The finger-snapping had barely begun when one of the simian bartenders tapped my shoulder and said, "Mr. Marinelli wants to see youse, chum. Right through there." He jerked a gnarly ear toward the beaded curtain.

I suppose I could have just strolled out. But now that I had been sussed as a spy, I figured confrontation with this intruder onto the Village scene was my best bet.

Marinelli's office door loomed at the dark end of the corridor, beyond the johns. I knocked, then let myself in.

With his coarse pig-iron features and squat barrel body, Ivo Marinelli resembled a fireplug in clothes. And what clothes! Some rube's idea of a beatnik outfit, assembled off the rack at Gimbel's: striped pullover shirt, bandana knotted around his neck, Levi's that looked as if some subordinate had dutifully distressed them for the boss, and a pair of unscuffed Red Wing boots. Marinelli was plainly aware of the ridiculous figure he cut, as he itched and chafed and visibly dreamed of getting back into his favorite five-hundred-dollar sharkskin suit.

The reason for his farcical getup, I suddenly intuited, was sitting with one Danskin-covered hip on the edge of Marinelli's desk. Fran Panagiotis had a towel over her shoulders, and was using one end to dab her sweat-slicked face. She flashed me a demi-leer that would have melted most males into a puddle of hormones.

"Mr. Champion," rumbled Marinelli, my Minotaur, while

Ariadne picked at a corn on one bare foot resting atop her opposite knee. “Glad you could make it. I like your work. I caught your lighting scheme for the Nina Simone gig at the Gate. Friggin’ brilliant! That’s why I wanna offer you a job. I’ll double whatever D’Lugoff is paying you. And you won’t have to fix no broken windows.” Marinelli winked as ponderously as a rhino rolling over. “My glass ain’t gonna ~~get~~ busted.”

“Mr. Marinelli, I’m flattered, really, I am. But the Gate is my home, the place where my heart and passion live. I believe in the music and our mission and the people behind it. It’s authentic and true and the best thing in my life. Why would I trade all that for this plastic fake, no matter how much money was sweetening the betrayal?”

Marinelli tried to work up some outrage, but failed to be very convincing. You could tell he’d rather be ringside at the Copa watching the chorus girls shake their tailfeathers, with a martini in his hand. “Fake! This joint is genuine bohemian, the best that money can buy! Fran worked out every detail, and she’s got a real feel for this stuff!” Marinelli clutched the back of Fran’s neck in a grip that blended dominance and submission, love and hate. “You already seen how the marks are falling all over themselves to get in the doors. And I got Dave van Ronk playing this weekend! We’re gonna put the Gate and all these other half-assed amateur joints six feet under. You just watch!”

“Mr. Marinelli, I have a counter-proposition for you. Close up now, before you lose your shirt. The Village isn’t Uptown. The people here can spot insincerity and



poseurs a mile away. Your place will be empty after the initial novelty wears off.”

“Yeah? We’ll see who goes belly-up first! Now, get outta here!”

Fran had slumped back against Marinelli, and he was kneading her shoulders. I left the happy couple and went back to report to Art.

“Fuck ‘em,” he said through a thick cloud of muggle. “We’ve got a show to put on.”

\* \* \*

**T**hree AM Friday night, and the Gate was officially closed. But Monk and his buddies were still woodshedding on stage. This type of scene was probably my favorite part of the job. My duties were over, and I could just blissfully groove to the supreme music.

Even the memory of Clover Sterbcow’s annoying behavior that evening failed to dim my glow. After arriving with the requisite party of paying pals, she had gotten drunker than usual and been sloppy sentimental all over me.

“Oh, Nick, Nick, Nick, y’all so cruel to little old Clover. When you gonna give me a tumble?”

“When the Ninth Ward’s underwater, honey.”

That slur on her hometown didn’t sit well, so she hissed at me, made as if to scratch out my eyes, then flounced/stumbled off. Suited me.

Behind the bar, Art was taking inventory of bottles. I

sat with my feet up, sipping a Coke, grateful after standing at the board for hours.

Al Luchow was sweeping up.

The strange mute cat had proven extremely helpful over the past couple of days. Mild-mannered, eager to please, he did any small, simple chore with precision. More complex instructions, however, bypassed some essential circuitry missing from his brain. Everyone who came into contact with the guy cottoned to him — except for Chester Kurland. The old soak didn't actually dislike his flophouse neighbor, but he seemed skittish and wary whenever they met, like the way the hens back home in Iowa used to react to anything odd placed into their coop.

But generally, Al Luchow seemed a known quantity, already an almost invisible part of the Gate's scenery, unsurprising in his range of behaviors.

But then came the Riff.

Monk suddenly played five queerly assorted notes on the keyboard, a riff sounding like some communication from the Milky Way.

Al tossed down his broom with a bang and hopped up on stage. He dashed straight to the vibraphone that Milt Hinton had been playing before he'd cut out early. Al grabbed the mallets and echoed Monk's riff.

After their initial shock at the janitor joining in, the cats on stage, highly professional all, started to comp Al, who was walloping away with his four mallets like Kali tenderizing a steak. Whoops of excitement, along with exhortations of "Go, cat, go!" filled the club. The improvised music

sounded great, washing over me in dense sheets of sound.

Art came to stand beside me. “Listen to that! Who the hell knew! This guy’s too talented to be sweeping up here. I think we got ourselves a new act! And for only twelve dollars a week!”

I sighed. Good news for Al, for me — well, I could foresee I’d be picking up my own glass shards off the sidewalk again.

4.

TWO BASS HIT

**H**ow Al Luchow spread his easy-going vibe — pun fully fledged, natch — and turned practically the whole Village for a short time into something resembling Big Rock Candy Mountain crossed with a Swedish May Day Free Love Festival mated with Gene Kelly’s Technicolor backlot Paris from *Les Girls* is a long and convoluted tale. I know only some parts, but they’re essential parts, and maybe enough to round out Al’s strange biography.

And I saw firsthand how it all ended, too.

That’s something no one who was there will ever forget.

Am I glad Al’s path intersected mine? you quaveringly quack.

Even now, years later, that much I still can’t say for sure.

\* \* \*

**A**fter Al revealed his unsuspected talents, Art managed to convey to the enigmatic mute but grinning spade that his broom-pushing days were over, and that he had total Cartesian Blanche to play his outer-space music. Mr. Luchow and his Amazing Vibraharp would command the slow Wednesday night spot until crowds — or rather, the lack thereof — gave Art cause to change his mind.

I worked out a lighting scheme that would minimize Al Luchow's bizarre green-tinged complexion. Art rustled up an old Deagan model 'harp and the makings of a band. Thelonius Monk and crew these backing guys were not, but reasonably competent. Al spent a little over a week rehearsing with them — if you can call what they did “rehearsing.” Spontaneous, uncharted woodshedding that reminded me of the more far-out stylings of that Chicago kook Sun Ra.

And then they opened.

The Gate that night filled up about halfway, and I counted that a success. Our draw had been down significantly since Marinelli's joint opened, despite my brave and defiant predictions. Never underestimate the preference of the public for fake over real. For Al's debut I had enlisted Clover and her web of pals to flesh out the seats. And flesh out things Clover herself did. That night she wore a pink angora sweater about two sizes too small, and tore down pants to match.

“Oh, Nick,” she honeydripped as she coiled around me just prior to showtime, like a rough Louisiana study for “Laocoön and His Sons,” “aren't you so grateful to me?

Don't we work swell together?"

I unpeeled the Dixie wench from around my person and pretended to fuss with my board. "Yeah, sure, Clover, just like Echo and Narcissus. Now if you'd let me get these settings straight ..."

Clover warped into High Dudgeon. "Nick Champion, I swear! Someday you're going to find someone you want but can't have, and then you'll see how it feels!"

She stomped off to rejoin her crew, and I felt a little guilty. Like I said, Clover's not a bad sort, it's just that she's let herself get all mixed up about me.

Some straight applause interrupted my guilt trip. Al and band were taking the stage. I made with the spots.

The next half hour was a mild blast, a success but no show-stopper. The crowd seemed to dig Al's way-out sounds, and the band showed no hesitation following their wordless leader, but then, midway through a tune, Al did something totally unexpected.

While the band vamped, Al reached into a pocket of his baggy shabby suitcoat, essential part of the only outfit I had ever seen him wear, and came out with a handful of candy. He tossed it into the audience. At first people flinched. Figuring out what was going on, they relaxed and laughed. Some people unwrapped the candy and placed it in their mouths. Al threw more. Then more and even more.

Where was he getting the stuff from? I wondered briefly. His pockets hadn't been bulging to begin with, but he kept yanking out and strewing forth handfuls of the

wrapped lozenges ....

A flying candy beamed me and dropped to my board. Al ceased flinging stuff and resumed playing. I heard cellophane rustling, and glimpsed people beginning to lip and tongue and mouth the candies.

Within seconds, the wigout commenced.

As wigouts go, there was nothing violent or loud or deranged about the scene, but I could sense, with the same veteran sensibilities that alerted me to a room full of cats high on muggle even when not a whiff of smoke remained behind, that some kind of altered consciousness now grew among all the crowd that had partaken of Al Luchow's candy.

People were acting like tentacles of some composite organism. They closed their eyes as one. They swayed and davened in their seats in unison, as if they were underwater plants stroked by invisible currents. The audience began to keen and moan in an almost subliminal manner, their massed voices complementing the bouncy freeform bop issuing from the band on stage.

I had never seen anything like this. Scary and alluring at once. I got a spooky sensation that while the bodies of the crowd might still be here at the Gate, their minds were gone, man, gone.

The fallen candy on my board seemed to open a sugary eye and wink at me. I picked it up, hesitated just a moment, then skinned it and popped it into the old piehole.

The taste of the strange lozenge reminded me of one part retsina to two parts aircraft dope — banana oil — to

three parts rancid peanut butter. But somehow the disgusting taste did not make me want to spit the stuff out, but rather to suck harder.

Suddenly the smoky, scarred, claustrophobia-inducing confines of the Gate opened outward to infinity.

Al Luchow and his band were playing on a flower-bedecked stage under a limitless purple sky spiked with golden stars looking like Van Gogh whorls. The audience sat on velvet rainbow cushions scattered across diamond grass. I could feel the individual spark of each soul. Apprehending my arrival, the soul sparks all swarmed around me and brought me into their groovy astral dance.

For some timeless eternity we bopped to the celestial music, all cares and differences forgotten in an omnipresent fugal pool of harmony and love.

And then, bam! New York City bringdown.

Back in the familiar confines of the Village Gate, which looked both incredibly dowdy and limited, like some dollhouse diorama, yet somehow still homey and beloved, the band had left the stage. People gazed sheepishly at each other, tentative dumbass smiles festooning their faces, as if asking, "What now, but who cares?"

Art D'Lugoff stumbled over to me where I stood weak-kneed at my board. Twin trails of tears rilled his homely phizog. "Nick, Nick, what was that, man? So intense!"

Slowly, still recovering myself, I said, "That, Art, is the key to ending the fighting here in the Village, and my daily broken-glass excruciations." Then, because I am essentially a much more devious and nasty person than Art, I

added, “And, it’s a recipe for the bringdown of a certain Ivo Marinelli as well.”

5.

BYE BYE BLACKBIRD

**A**l’s supply of cosmic candy, the Goofballs of the Gods, indeed proved limitless. Or at least large enough for our purposes. I never asked where he got the stuff, but I think maybe even then I suspected. A suspicion about to be mostly confirmed by one certain private moment between me and Al. Yeah, yeah, I’ll tell all, you greedy sickos, and we’ll be just like schoolyard wiseguys pawing over the good parts in some D. H. Lawrence novel.

But back to our campaign to remake the Village: not only did Pusher Al continue to distribute his favors every Wednesday night to a growing and growing and growing, growling, grovelling crowd at the Gate, all eager for his performances, but he provided me personally, upon request, with bags of the celestial sweets. And where do you think those candies went? Why, out among the great unwashed of the Village scene.

We — and by “we” I mean mainly Clover Sterbcow, Bird bless her, and her crowd of Luchow-converted acolytes — handed out the stuff to every A-Trainer, Bircher, militant pansy, Bronx Bagel Baby and Minor Mafia thug we could connect with. And the effect was immediate and radical.

Peace and harmony dropped down upon our Village



— yea, verily, like unto ye Holy Night in Bethlehem. Cats were getting into each other's bags like no tomorrow. Squares loved the hipsters, chicks dug rival chicks with whom formerly they had engaged in hair-pulling, eye-scratching fights, and tightass cops could be seen breaking bread with blissful winos. Peaceable Kingdom, NYC-style. The Omphalos of something new and holy.

The newspapers ultimately got their hands on the story and played it up fairly big:

MASS MELLOWING OF GREENWICH RIVALRIES  
VILLAGE SQUABBLES HIT ALL-TIME LOW  
OUTBREAK OF BOHEMIAN CO-EXISTENCE

The reporters couldn't quite track down the reason for the change — or if they did, they thought it was too fantastical to include in the record, or smacked too much of endorsing drug use. But who cared what the establishment perceived? We were all high on the sci-fi, Sputnik visions sent to us by Al Luchow.

All of us except a certain Ivo Marinelli.

Custom at Marinelli's joint had plummeted, with the popularity of the Gate as the nexus of the new vibe. I had heard through the grapevine that Marinelli was boiling over at this turn of events — mainly due to the constant goading from Fran Panagiotis, whose terpsichorean exhibitions played to scunter and scunter seats.

I wanted to bring Marinelli over to our side, before he decided to do the Gate some real harm through his under-

world connections, but I let him stew a few weeks before I had Art issue an invitation for him to come hear Al's show the next Wednesday.

Marinelli and Panagiotis bulled in just minutes before showtime with a couple of goons flanking. Tonight, as if to reassert his power and status, Marinelli had reverted to fashion type, sporting an Italian suit that would have given Liberace's tailor the screaming meemies.

I performed the introductions among Ivo, Fran and Art.

"Listen, you punks," Marinelli said, "I'm only here to laugh at your amateur hour. Next week I'm bringing in the heavy artillery. I booked Mitch Miller and his Orchestra, and you guys will be history. And if that don't work — well, I got other irons in the fire, if you get my drift."

I could see Art bristling, ready to lay into Marinelli, but I calmed everyone down and got them all seated at a table close by my board. Then I had one of the waitresses bring them the "special" round of complimentary drinks, while I watched.

Prior testing showed me that Al Luchow's mind candy dissolved readily in alcohol, and worked just fine. Godawful taste, though. But I had the girl announce that these were genuine "absinthe" drinks, and that impressed Marinelli.

Elbowing Art slyly, Marinelli said, "I see you got nothing against a little bit of illegal hooch. Anything to turn a dime, that's the way to do it! Well, here's looking atcha!"

He chugged his cocktail just as Al and the band took the stage. Fran Panagiotis sipped hers with distaste, but

then Ivo forced her to down it all. “Whatsamatta with you, you got no class?”

Minutes into the first song, Marinelli and his girlfriend were plainly cruising with Captain Video and his Video Rangers, syncopating and swaying with the rest of the galactic groovesters in the club. I stayed straight.

When the drug finally wore off, Marinelli got shakily to his feet, with Fran using him as a scaffolding to pull herself upright.

“I — I — “ Whatever he wanted to tell us wouldn’t come out. Finally he blurted, “I gotta go see someone,” and staggered out.

The rest you probably heard. How Ivo Marinelli left the nightclub racket for good and founded a firm to make and sell spaghetti sauce: his mother’s recipe, Mama Marinelli’s Marinara. He got even richer than before his epiphany, but without any of the hardnosed gangster stuff.

And Fran? Last I heard, she had shaved her head and was sitting at the feet of Alan Watts.

\* \* \*

**S**o that was that. Everything copacetic. Happy weeks passed. The whole Village resembled an easygoing Eden, the Gate was raking in the crowds and their cover charges, and my own life had become carefree and streamlined, like the tailfins on a Chrysler Imperial.

We all thought it would go on forever.

But then Al Luchow’s friends came to collect him.

I should have known something was up that Wednesday. No one had seen Al Luchow all day, and he usually made a point of jamming beforehand.

A worried Art corralled me.

“Nick, you gotta track Al down and make sure nothing’s wrong with him. People will riot tonight if he’s a no-show, and they are stiffed of their happy pills and the kicky tunes.”

“Too true. I’ll get right on it.”

So knight errant Nick Champion set out on his quest.

I checked the most obvious place first: Al’s room above the club.

The grim sweat-redolent flophouse held no sign of Al. His possessionless cubicle could have been vacant for days.

I bumped into my old pal Chester Kurland in the dark cabbagey corridor. He grabbed my shirt and stuck his rummy face close to mine.

“Nicky, they’re coming! They’re coming from far away, but right around the corner! Two more of them!”

I unclamped Chester’s grip. “Okay, okay, Chester, calm down. Always room for two more at this big happy shindig.”

I left the bum muttering, and went out onto the streets.

Al was nowheresville.

Then something impelled me down to the Gate’s basement.

I found him there in the room where he had first materialized. He was huddled over the grating in the floor, mak-

ing unintelligible noises, the first time I had ever heard any sounds issue from him since the day of his discovery.

As I kneeled down beside Al, he jerked erect and began to sob.

I put my arms around him. "Hey, now ...."

And then we were kissing.

It felt so right. I hadn't touched a man in over a year, since I left Iowa. Sixteen months, three weeks and five days, to be precise. Celibate Sam, that was me. Kill the perverse urges, while running through my skull on an infinite loop was the voice of my mother telling the lousy faggot who was once her son to get out and never show his face in her house again.

Al Luchow's mouth tasted just like the happy pills: retsina, banana oil, bad peanut butter. I figured he did so much of the nameless drug it was just part of his system.

I was half right.

We somehow ended up on a pile of flattened cardboard boxes. My senses were spinning, and I never saw Al get out his clothes. But in some strange manner they had disappeared. I fumbled my own off, and then we were making it. Everywhere my tongue went, it met with the same taste. And then I knew.

Al Luchow was the drug.

We met naked on that other world, and made forever love. I wanted for us never to part, always to be here in Martian paradise.

And that, my sicko friends, is all the details you will ever get.

Inevitably, though, we ended up back on Earth. Al seemed calmed by our lovemaking. I got up and turned away from his naked form in order to reclaim my own scattered clothes. When I had gathered them up, he was already dressed.

“You’ll play tonight, Al?”

He nodded, mutely, and we left the cellar together.

\* \* \*

**A**l and the band were just taking the stage in front of a packed house, when a tide of excited whispers rose from near the entrance and moved inward, along with two late arrivals to the club.

The source of the hubbub soon revealed itself as these eminences.

Threading majestically and with catlike grace through the labyrinth of tables came Miles Davis and John Coltrane. Unmistakeable.

Although when they passed by a forty-watt bulb near the bar, I thought to detect the same green undertone to their complexions that Al exhibited.

Miles and Trane ascended the stage, the one so compact and feral, the other burly and powerful. Al Luchow hung his head in embarrassment, like a kid caught with his mitt in the cookie jar. But his pals laid a hand apiece upon his shoulders, and Al Luchow raised his face and tentatively smiled.

Miles made a peremptory gesture, and the stunned

sessions players passed over a trumpet and a sax.

The new cats began to play.

All the flames on all the candles stuck in all the chianti bottles flared up like torches for a moment before subsiding.

As Miles launched the impeccable, unimpeachable riffs of “So What,” all the others musicians joined in. The hypnotic, seductive, looping sonorousities climbed into our laps and whispered into our ears, and even without any drugs, we all went voyaging among the stars.

On that nameless, placeless world, the eight minutes of the tune stretched out to eight eons, and we could have gone for eight more. On that foreign, exotic stage, beneath a canopy of polychromatic solar gems, Miles, Trane and Al pounded out the whimpered, weighty, wispy notes, riding us their listeners like exhausted horses.

And then, silence, and a sad return.

Al, Trane and Miles were gone from the stage, leaving behind their stunned backup players. A ghostly note from Al’s vibraphones seemed to hover, then evaporate.

I collapsed onto a stool at my board. Then Art D’Lugoff was beside me, hopefully frantic.

“It all changed, Nick. Everything.”

“Sure, Art, sure. But now we’ve got to keep going all alone.”

## WHY NEW YORKERS SMOKE

Lawrence Greenberg

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**T**HIS ISN'T A STORY. I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS. I DON'T care; it doesn't matter. I'm standing on the 14th Street subway platform looking down at the ashen water that never moves, never ripples between the track ties. In this dark filthy water lie charred rats, singed hair, burnt-beyond-recognition pieces of things I don't want to see. I'm not coughing anymore, anyway. Not down here. I know where I live now. I can feel my lungs working again. Finally. I got down here in time.

When we catch fire, we're inflamed, we're ablaze with passion, yes? Then we burn out. Isn't that how it is, how



it works? Isn't that why so many of us eventually discover that our lives have gone up in smoke, that the past, looking back years later, is nothing but the ashes of the present? Or is that the other way round?

We don't think much about things like this, do we? Because they're not tangible, they're not right in front of us. Like the air. It's always the air, isn't it, the invisible particulate, I call it — the unseen. At the risk of sounding pretentious, the air in our lives represents whatever we don't know that we have to. We have to. Because if we don't — . If only, we say to ourselves. Don't we? If only I'd done this, or said that, or not left her or him, or — . The list goes on, doesn't it? But we can't not breathe, right? We can't help taking in one breath after another, not knowing exactly what it is we're doing. We just assume everything's OK because we don't see anything right in front of us at that moment. We don't know if something's there hovering, waiting for the right biophysical configuration to attach itself to. We don't care if it is. All we want to do is have fun. Isn't that true? We get a cold and we think it's because Aunt Sheila sneezed a few days ago not more than three inches from our face. One sneeze. We get cold sores, we get eczema, impetigo, ring worm, shingles, stomach viruses. All because we think something was in the air, and we only think about it after the fact. After the damage is done.

It's not that something's in the air. No — it's really inside all of us, isn't that what it is? Isn't that why we get annoyed over stupid little things so much? Isn't that why we're ready to set fire to the office we work in — because

we know we don't want to understand what's inside us, who we are underneath our false fronts? Isn't that why we can't wait to run into that bastard who used to be our boss, the one who fired us, so we can stick a firecracker up his ass? Isn't that why when those terrorists set off a bomb in the World Trade Center we secretly cheered? Isn't that why sometimes we really, truly think things would be a whole lot better if the whole human race was blasted out of existence by one big motherfucking nuclear explosion? Sure it is.

This is like the London tube down here now, where no matter what station you're in you smell smoke. It was like that in London before these fucking things showed up and it sure as hell's like that now, just like it is now in the Paris Metro stations, the Chicago El's few underground platforms, and even those underground NORAD command centers or whatever they are, where they press buttons to launch the previously ever popular, infamous weapons of destruction. Except nobody has to do that now. They did it for us.

Notice the use of the word "they." As in the ones who press the buttons, who really don't have to do it now if they don't want to. Also as in the things that nobody still knows the name of that arrived from who the hell knows where and started fucking up everything, only a couple of months ago. Yes, the use of the word "they" is fraught with the inevitable stigma of paranoia so inimical to our race that one wonders just how we've been able to survive this long without using it everywhere human beings

en masse come into contact with reminders of our own stupidity. Kind of like the billboards in John Carpenter's "They Live" which really said stuff like OBEY and BUY and GO STICK YOUR HEAD IN A FUCKING HOLE IN THE SAND YOU LAMEASS SHEEP, instead of gigantic Broadway signs telling us that "Delta's ready when you are" or to imbibe "The real thing," or whatever.

What these things did, what they're still doing, as far as I know, is filling our lungs with smoke, or actually something just like it, according to the brilliant boys down at CDC. And the stuff is enough like smoke so that the person bursts into flames from the inside just an hour or so after it starts. How these things do that — hey, I ain't no rocket scientist. Those smart-as-a-whelp CDC boys figured out these things had to be from up there, the great beyond, the vast reaches of our uncharted cosmos, because when they looked at the particulates from inside the corpses of some Burmese — for some reason, the things touched down in part of Southeast Asia first — they found nothing resembling organisms of terrestrial origin. How's that for a mouthful? So the first I heard of this brought to me by some smug looking news caster on the tube, and the first I saw of it, in Times Square, I'm singing to myself, "Burning Down the House" by the Talking Heads, or "Who By Fire" by Leonard Cohen or "Smoking in the Boy's Room" by Brownsville Station. Remember that one?

Maybe it's better that I'm down here, instead of having to listen to some asshole's car alarm go off at 5:30 in the morning and keep blasting away because the goddam

thing's broken. Maybe it is better to be down here than being topside where I can walk around and get to see the ashes of thousands of human beings JUST LIKE YOU AND ME, the ruined corpses of a whole shitload of humanity that just couldn't make it to their bodysuits in time. Wow. Kind of sounds like a B movie, huh — It's not, as a matter of fact. Yeah, maybe it is better to be down here instead of having to talk to my father who didn't care enough when his sixteen year-old son was raped in Chicago right after starting college to take a plane out to be with him. He's dead. He was dead before these things came, but now he's "dead dead", as the saying goes. Dead as a doornail. Deader than hell. Like the earth, now. Like my head or heart or whatever's inside that's supposed to feel.

It's karma that this happened. Sure, because nobody minds his own business, as Burroughs said — he of *Naked Lunch* fame — especially here in New York, which really means that we're all hiding from ourselves, so obviously we needed something to smoke us out. And New Yorkers love to smoke. Go down to Wall Street and see how many people poison the air. See how many of them do their goddamnedest to kill each other. So now we get what we deserve; we get enough toxic, weird interplanetary smokeshit in our lungs to kill us right away instead of having to wait a few decades. That should actually have made some of us feel better — knowing exactly how and when death is going to find us. Isn't that true?

Well, enough of this, right? Who wants to listen to some asshole rant and rave all day long? I'm standing here on

the 14th Street subway station platform, all right,

but I'm not alone. There's a few hundred people down here; most of them look like me, like homeless subway dwellers, and this is where we live. Those things, whatever they are, micro-fucking-alien-orgasms-in-your-lungs, don't like it down here. Who knows why? Let them do whatever they want up there. We don't have much longer, anyway. No food. No water, except what I'm looking at between the subway track ties. But some of us, the truly enlightened ones in the crowd, have one of the real essentials for people caught in a crisis. Cigarettes. And it doesn't matter what I say. They're smoking. Just like they would topside, before this all happened, without having to face any emergency at all.

No, this isn't a story. I don't know what it is. Maybe it's an anecdote. Maybe it's a vignette. I guess it doesn't really matter, does it?

## BOUNTIFUL CITY

Carol Emshwiller

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**W**ALKING AROUND SAYING, I LOVE YOU, I LOVE YOU, I love you, and not being in love with anybody .... Perhaps it's too much coffee. Or the air today, transparent ... pinkish. It usually isn't. After all, it's the city, everything black and gray. Chewing gum stuck all over the sidewalk. And spit. A quarter falls and you hate to pick it up. You get soot in your eye. But that won't happen today.

I love. I love. I could fall in love with the very next man who appears. I check them all out. Compare mustaches. Lots these days. How nice to smooth one. Or stroke a beard. Stroke rough man cheeks. Chest hair. Small of the back hair.

The city glimmers. I'm looking at the tops of buildings not down at the spit. All kinds of architecture all mixed up, up there. Some shine golden. Some painted Aztec colors: aqua and dull peach. Some Art Nouveau.

But how nice, right this minute, to be bouncing along the street looking up, but also into faces. Smiling. Evaluating. Thinking about beards and eyebrows. Thinking, I love you, I love you, but who? Love. How nice to be in it.

Where is somebody?

My goal in life is this one thing. (As if it hasn't always been.)

Walk proudly. But not too proud. You never know what the man in question might like best in his women. I won't be anything particular until I find out his taste.

There goes a possible man right now. I always did like skinny dark ones. And here's another right behind him. What a generous world!

The look in the eye is important. I peer. I stare. Here's another one. He's wearing a cowboy hat (I was always a sucker for a big hat). He's not from around here. What wonderfully bushy eyebrows! He's from out west. Patience is needed with animals especially horses. A patient man would be nice. Of course patience is needed in the city, too. Just crossing the street can be aggravating. And all that honking.

I wonder if he's rich. Of course he could be a farmer, not an oil man.

Even so I turn and follow that one. I don't remember if he had a kind eye. His mustache was so big I didn't notice

anything else.

But I don't want any short term relationships, I want somebody from right here. I turn back. I wander on with all the other walkers. I watch the Chrysler building roof glimmer in the setting sun.

Here's another man. Hat, dark suit, black turtleneck makes him look all the thinner. I turn and follow him. His legs are nice and straight, not like some.

How begin? Drop my package? Trip him?

When's the proper time to say, I love you? How long do I have to wait? I've been saying it to myself at every step. I may not be able to hold myself back. I put a cough drop in my mouth to keep me quiet, and follow.

Besides, love can go bad. Love can turn with the weather. I'll not commit myself until I'm sure.

(I have a picture in my purse of a man I never met. I cut it out of a magazine. Perhaps now's the time to throw it out — before some other man sees it and thinks things. Though I hate to. What if no other man ever works out? At least I'll have this one.)

**N**ew Yorkers walk for miles. It's the most walking city in the world, I'll bet. Now four of us: a trench coat guy, a girl with upscale backpack, my man, me ... . We've gone on for an hour as though we knew each other. From West 57th to East 15th. That's the way it always is in New York. The girl and I have smiled at each other though none of the men have. The girl turns off on 14th but the rest of us keep going, down, down, down town. It's getting late and



I'm hungry.

I almost lose him as he turns on 4th, stops for a newspaper. I do, too. I look deep into his eyes. You'd think he'd notice but he doesn't. Or perhaps he's afraid of commitment. I know his kind.

He's up the steps and in his building — not a very nice one — before I have a chance to trip him or drop my package. I had hoped he'd let me in. I could have said I was delivering my package. (I've bought new shoes. I was happy with them. That's another reason I was feeling so full of love.)

Where will I go from here? Walk all the way back up to Central Park?

But a light goes on in a basement apartment right beside the front door. I hunker down and look in and there he is, taking off his jacket. What a room! He needs a wife, that's for sure. Well now, I know a bit about who he is.

Two other black turtlenecks exactly like the one he's wearing are on the bed. Silky black socks all over the place. Piles of books and papers sideways on the floor because of no bookcases. No plants. I could see to that, though there's no place for them. If I cleaned it up, there might be room for a little stand by the window.

There's a pile of ropes in a corner on the floor. A funny pair of shoes on top. They're kind of like ballet slippers but with more rubber. What's the meaning of those?

I keep squatting down, watching. He cooks himself a couple of eggs on his hotplate. Sits on his bed to eat. He doesn't have a table. His bottle of wine is on the floor. He

drinks straight out of the bottle.

After eating, he takes off his turtleneck. I evaluate his chest. He's got muscles and nice curly black hair in the middle of it.

He flops on the bed, which is smaller than a twin bed. How could we make love on that? Besides, it's sagging. Maybe we should do it on the floor instead.

Then he realizes he hasn't pulled his curtains. He gets up, comes and looks right at me. Stares. Jerks the curtains shut.

I'll go home and write some love poems.

**N**ext morning, early, I go down there first thing and squat by his window. The curtains are open and he's gone.

I go up to The Cloisters. I imagine he might be there. I glance around every corner, hoping ... yearning ... Then I walk through Central Park. I sit on a bench and wait but nobody like him comes along.

I wander Lincoln Center for an hour. I go to the Museum of Modern Art. I eat lunch there. I sit with a notebook and pretend to write. I don't keep my nose in it. I look around. I stare into space a lot. If I was really writing that's what I'd be doing, anyway, waiting for inspiration. I see several possibilities ... almost good enough, but he doesn't come.

I go up to the top of the Empire State Building. Same waiting. Same looking around the deck.

I stay up there a whole hour. Yearning out in every direction.

Then I hear sirens. I look over the side and I see police

cars and fire engines down below. Crowds gathering. And here's a helicopter hovering right across from me. All of a sudden the roof is full of cops and firemen. Several look interesting. Lots of mustaches. Some sideburns.

Even as I look over the side to see what's up, I strike a pose, one knee cocked, toe pointed. Since I'm wearing running shoes, I know the effect won't be exactly what I hope.

My god, somebody is climbing the Empire State Building. He looks like a fly down there. There's nothing to hold him up but his fingers. How can anybody do that?

The cops are going to arrest him the minute he gets up here.

He's going slowly. Well, fast for what he's doing, I suppose. I'm holding my breath. I didn't realize it until I started feeling woozy. I take long slow breaths, counting four beats to each. It looks like the cop standing next to me has to do the same.

The man climbs closer. Black turtle neck, black pants. He looks up and it's him. My man. We're two of a kind. Him and his love of climbing and me with my just plain love of love. I'm all in black, too. It's not only the New York color, it's slimming and mysterious and sexy.

How nice that there are two sexes. Everywhere one looks one finds one or the other, and especially how nice that there's the other. Bulges one place or another. (In some languages even the chairs and tables have a sex.) The whole world as if for me. Like this policeman right beside me. I match my breathing with his so as to be sure

not to forget that I have to breathe.

Look at those black eyes as my man looks up. Surely he knows I'm the one who walked from west 57th Street to east 4th Street with him. Surely he remembers closing his curtains when he saw me looking in.

I'm so proud. Who else could do this besides my man? I can't wait till he gets up here.

But can he climb over and around that net they have in place to keep people from jumping? Not from jumping, but from landing on the sidewalk. Of course he can.

What should I do when he gets here? Should I try to keep the police from arresting him? Should I distract them?

The roof is full of people now. A lot of news people, too. I'm glad I came up hours ago to wait and watch for him. I have the perfect spot. People try to push me aside, but I have a good grip on the railing.

Here he comes. I knew it, the net is no problem for somebody like him.

I start yelling and pretend to be about to jump over the edge. The policemen grab me. I wave my arms and slap at them. I want my man to see how I'm fighting for him.

Now the cameras are turned on me instead of him. There's much more action where I am than where he is. I put on a good show.

They arrest him and haul him off. I wonder where? Perhaps he'll be home on 4th Street after posting bail.

As soon as he's gone from the platform, I become completely reasonable. I don't get arrested. I talk them out

of it. I say that was my lover and I went a little bit crazy until he got safely up here. They understand. I go down the elevator with them. They're all attractive. They glow with man sweat. Many need a shave. I'd kiss their cheeks if I dared. I think of their hairy bodies. New York's finest. That's what they say. They talk man talk in their scratchy voices. I could fall in love with the voice alone. I've always loved basses. The deepest voice comes from a skinny little man hardly taller than I am. I'm thinking of changing my love over to him, but climbing a building is more romantic than a deep voice.

Maybe he'll love me if ... Well, if a lot of things. I might have the courage to climb buildings beside him, both of us in danger together. That might fuel our love.

How be my best self in front of him? Or better than I really am?

I'll say, "Knowing you I've become aware of things I've never been aware of before. The air, the flowers, the stars ...." (Hard to see any stars in the city. Hardly ever notice the moon. But now I seek it out from behind the street lights. And it's there.)

(Love should never go to waste no matter if a person is fat or thin or has a long nose or pigeon toes.)

I trot down to 4th Street to see if he's home yet.

He's not, but I sneak in with an old lady who holds the door for me though she's never seen me before. There's a nice spot under the stairs. I hunker down with the snow shovel and the broom and mop. It's been such a long ex-

citing day I fall asleep right away.

Well not quite. I think about him. Wonder what he does when he's not climbing the Empire State Building? How does he make money? Cat burglar? Climb straight up brick walls? I won't turn him in. I'll stick by him no matter what.

And then I fall asleep.

I miss him coming home. It's six AM when I knock on his door. I keep knocking until I hear a growl. Then he says, Go away, without even knowing who it is.

"It's me." I whisper it. "Me. Me."

Is now the time to say, I love you?

"I'm the one at the top of the Empire State Building. I waited for you all day and you came."

Not the time to say I love you.

(Even to say I love is embarrassing. How odd that it should be so.)

But nothing ventured nothing gained.

"I love you."

"Who are you?"

How answer such a question? I'm ready to be anything he wants.

"I am your heart's desire. If not that right now, I'm willing to learn."

"Go away. It's six AM."

"I'll wait."

I sit down with my back against the door.

I hear him getting up, taking a shower, listening to the

news. It's the very same station I always listen to.

By now it's eight o'clock.

He unlocks three locks including the police lock (I can hear it clank), opens the door, sees me, and slams it shut again. I hear the police lock thump into place. Who does he think I am, anyway? I couldn't even get in a normal lock.

"Go away. I'm not coming out until you leave."

I could say I'll leave and then not do it, but then he'd think I wasn't a very nice person.

"I'll leave. I'm leaving right now. I'm doing exactly what you tell me to and I always will."

First thing, outside, I buy a newspaper, and there we both are! There's one picture of him climbing up and another of me waving my arms and with my mouth open. I don't look very attractive that way. I must make sure not to do that again.

I stop at a cappuccino shop and read the article. People protested his arrest. They got together and raised his bail and the cops let him go. I don't come off too well. They call me a hysterical woman, claiming to be ... "claiming," they said ... his girlfriend.

I walk back to my place, thinking, I love you, I love you, at every step. Thousands of steps and thousands of I love yous. I just love. I don't care. It can be anybody.

At least I know his name now — from the newspapers. He already was somebody. The Great Buzzoni. Not a cat burglar after all. A high wire artist. I don't know how he makes his living doing that. Especially living here in New

York. Though he does have a cheap apartment. Maybe he's also a cat burglar.

Next day I stake myself out near his apartment with a purse full of diet bars. I wear a big hat. I hope men like women in big hats as much as I like men in them. Lots of front steps across from his place to sit on while I wait.

Finally here he comes, a beret instead of a hat this time. A neat quick man. No wonder I followed him.

I've figured out what to say. I say it. "Hello. It's me. I saw you climbing."

He walks right by. In fact he walks even faster. I have a hard time keeping up.

I shout after him, "I climb, too. I'd like to climb with you. Both of us climbing would be even more of a show. The Great Gabriella. And when I said, I love you, I meant I love the way you climb."

I wonder if I can do it. I've always been afraid of heights. I'll have to find a brick building to try it on. I'll practice in an alley so nobody will see.

Now he's slowing down. Now he turns around. He looks at me — really looks. "You can?"

We walk to the corner for coffee. I can't believe I'm walking beside the great Buzzoni and that I picked him out on the street, from millions of people.

(For all his sharp Italian looks, his name is really George Mayer. I wonder what I should say my real name is.)

We don't talk about climbing. And I don't dare ask how he makes his living. He doesn't ask me either. I suppose for the same reason. We might both be cat burglars. If he's



one, all the more reason to think I'm one. We ask each other everything but that.

(I'm glad I ordered the same things he did. It makes us more companionable.)

We're nature lovers, though here in New York there's not much nature to love, except cockroaches, rats, and pigeons, but it's spring. Some sort of sparrows are chirping in the trees.

We're lovers of sunsets and sunrises, and here he is living in a basement. Out his window he can watch feet. I have a better view from my fifth floor walk up.

What if he needs a helper? Dare I ask?

I ask.

He sits and thinks. Then, "All right. I could use somebody."

But I don't know what for.

"Tuesday, two weeks from now. Midnight. 17th Street at Broadway."

Good, that gives me time to practice.

He walks me part way home just for my company. He shakes my hand when he leaves and I feel his strong calloused fingers. Shaking mine does he know? He must.

"I'm a little out of practice."

His are not lover's hands. I wouldn't want them on my body.

**L**uckily my own window looks out on a back alley and there's a brick building behind mine. That's where I try to climb. I get up about a foot and hang there until my

fingers give out.

I practice all those two weeks, but I don't get much better. Maybe a little stronger. Mostly I ruin my fingers. Once I make it all the way up to five feet. Next day I lapse back to three.

I know myself. I may have acrophobia but I can steel myself against it. For his sake. When you feel your stomach turning upside down just look out at the horizon — if you can see any such thing from in the city.

**F**inally I get far enough up to sneak into somebody's second floor window. It's the middle of the day. Everybody's at work. Nobody sees me. I should steal something so I'll be of a kind with him. Our philosophy of life will be the same. I look around. Lots of books and papers and not much else. I open all the drawers. No jewelry. None at all. Looks as if somebody has already stolen everything worth taking. Maybe he did it. What's left for me to take? A book? A potted plant? That doesn't seem like much.

I lie down on the bed to think about it and fall asleep by mistake. When I wake up it's getting dark. I've got to leave fast. I grab the clock beside the bed and run out the door. Just in time because people are coming in downstairs.

I wish I'd taken clothes. I could use a new blouse. I already have a clock exactly like this one.

I do feel a sense of accomplishment, though. And I feel closer to him now that I know what it's like to do as he does.

I love, I love .... What a world, full of beards and lips!  
And all sorts of soft velvety things.

I've been so busy practicing I haven't gone down to his place at all, but then the time comes for our meeting.

(I'm wearing black tights and black turtle neck top.  
Climbing clothes.)

The city at night! Like a Christmas tree no matter the season. And how nice to be walking beside him, matching his stride.

But maybe he's not a cat burglar after all. Turns out he needs someone to help find a spot between two skyscrapers where he can set up a tightrope — in the middle of the night so nobody will know. And he needs somebody to help set it up. He wants to use the Flatiron Building if possible. It's always windy around there so it'll be dangerous but he likes that all the better.

We check it out. It's not possible. We walk up town to search for other places. Perhaps Lincoln Center.

When we stop for coffee, (it's three AM, but things never close in New York) I say first thing, "I thought you were a cat burglar." He looks startled — as if I'd found him out. Or maybe just that he hadn't ever thought of doing that before.

I say, "Oh, I don't mind. I do it myself."

He's still looking shocked. Even more so.

I say, "I don't ever take valuable things."

Have I made myself unlovable in just one sentence?

"I only take little things. Actually I've only taken one

thing ... ever."

I don't like the way he's looking at me.

"Actually I've never climbed beyond the second floor."

Why doesn't he say something?

"Actually I only did it for you. And I brought you this."

I try to give him the clock. (He already has one exactly like it, too. I saw it in his apartment.)

He waves it away.

He hasn't said a word since I mentioned cat burglar.

Do I know his secret?

You should never know a man's secret, especially if it's illegal.

Well, that's the end of that. I can see it in his eyes. Even with the gift.

There's plenty more — men that is. Maybe I should forget about them altogether, but I don't want to.

"I can get you more things."

I guess not.

We part. Not even with a kiss.

Anyway, his eyes were too close together, he's too short, I'm just as tall as he is. His nose is too long. His voice is the opposite of bass.

The moon is out. The city shines. It's full of men. I look into faces. I stare. I check out ways of walking. I follow first one and then another. Bald men with hairy bodies. Hairy men with hairless bodies. Joe, Pete, Sam, Henry, Louis, Bob, Charley ....

## CHANGE MY LUCK

Becky Roth

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IS IT LOVE TO FEEL SO TIED TO SOMETHING THAT IT has realigned your sense of reality and left you ill-equipped for others? I don't really love the city that way. But it is a crutch like a lover might be. Oh, another lover. Can I fetch that even here?

"So ... you come here often?" I dust my feathered bangs off my left temple in a gesture he could replicate too. Daytime sun saturates the Bellevue Ambulatory Care waiting area so the light is most kind.

God, he hopes not, he laughs, showing the slight points of his crooked teeth. I imagine them grazing my shoulder blade in a half-a-kiss.

We're the whitest and most stylishly dressed people in the World Trade Center Clinic (I'm really only three-quar-

ters white, but I overachieved in the liberal arts, call my mom mom and have seen all of Wes Andersen's movies; if I'm not white, I'm an entry on Stuff White People Like), and we hum with the concordance of fellow sore thumbs. I let my palm slide over the separations of his fingers, and imagine one or two of them inside me with a rhythm as palpable as a pulse.

I ask him a question, "... did you go to NYU and live in the downtown dorms?" Like me? We should go to brunch together and click champagne glasses over complicated eggy spreads.

"Stuyvesant," he says sheepishly. I hope he was a senior. I was just eighteen myself — maybe we could have had sex even back in 2001, in the rubble.

His name is Caleb, and it washes over my tongue like a tonic. He asks me what I do. I deflect because, really, who wouldn't rather answer that question than ask it. Caleb acts and fronts a band and good crap he writes poetry too.

I feel around the edges of his wealth for an exorbitant surprise, but he's just a paper-pusher like me. The only difference is he made a deal with time to ignore each other for now and reconvene at forty. Only real difference is I'm kind of a pimp. I say it and watch myself transform before his eyes.

"It's temporary." But that's what I say about all of it. Life right now is just the bullshit I have to get through until the day I am liberated by the fruition of my eventual genius.

I don't know how clearly this was Never My Intent. I used to think of myself as more of a feminist than that, but women and men, they're all just shits. Favoritism must be individualized, and even then it's still faulty.

They call my name, and as I rise I hook my fingers into the waist of my jeans so he might consider how they'd fall. I think he could be my favorite, even though I'd have to get to know him.

Dr. Melanie Viazzi accepts me into her office with a nod hello. She lines up my blood tests with little ado. Still asthma, definitely New Asthma. The government will have to buy me inhalers for the rest of my life, because New Asthma is the new black lung. New Asthma is found only in firefighters and first responders and me. Whatever, I lived too close to the towers, and now my lungs contract and inflame at will, the vagina dentata to the hard cock of my smoking habit. (Say what you will about dirty things to put in your mouth, my small defiance defined me despite the fact that they defined others in the exact same way. You go down — kingdom, phylum, genus, species, and if you follow a very specific path you find me — outer circles make me too.) I've always been a believer in loopholes, but sure, it makes me feel like an ass to hold out my hand like "9/11 9/11! Ding ding ding!" I do a lot more distasteful things for more tangible and evanescent rewards. 9/11 is just a thing that happened that also gets people's emotions going enough to give you free shit, and I have a reasonable devotion to free shit.

"But what about the other thing?" I ask, though it is

hardly the language in which doctors speak. Dr. Viazzi simply meets my eyes and awaits explanation.

“The pregnancy thing?”

I wonder what else she could’ve expected as she so thoroughly flusters. She sifts through paperwork to find the proof. “No,” she says, “you never asked me to run that particular test.”

“I asked them when they took my blood.”

I want to know the scale between sympathy and pity and place her face on it.

“How late is your period?” If I weren’t so reliant on this woman for my well-being, I would be insulted by her reluctance. She’s got a point though: my period is clockwork ticking. It’s just that I feel like my insides are being taken over by a fist of a force. My cramps harbor a distinct unfriendliness. I’ll admit I’m not exacting subservience to facts here, but it’s not like she has to go telling EPT how pretty it looks when it’s right either.

She gives me a small dose of What We Can Tell. My lack of baby-related abnormalities. If I want my options narrowed I can always order another test. Maybe an OB-GYN? She scrawls a number on the back of her business card. “Why didn’t you just call me?” she asks absently.

I can do that? Well, why else to I have all these cards. I had no idea. I can’t bear to look at her, or her sparse office, and my eyes tear up to let it gently blur.

“I haven’t had health insurance since I graduated from college. I’ve spent the last five years absolutely terrified that something should happen to me that I would need



to see a doctor for. That I could break my leg, or get the mumps for Christ's sake. And then I come to this clinic and everything's free, and you get me into the dentist and the eye doctor too, and if I can call you anytime, then what's the catch?"

She takes one impeccably uncomfortable step back. She asks if I've been to see Dr. Poon yet, the psychiatry screener. Yeah, but I didn't see any dead bodies day of, and they had to limit their cures to the needy. I can always try again, but I wouldn't make that appointment with her. She writes another number on another card. Thank you, Dr. Viazzi.

Tonight's a Rudy night, so I launch myself uptown in the belly of a subway car, apocalypse moldering in my bones. He asks me how the doctor went as he primes a tumbler of whiskey for my gullet. Appalling and infantilizing, and I wish I was back there now with the questions that occurred to me on the way. I pull from the glass, wipe my mouth. Rudy asks again. I just shrug.

"It's the same every time."

"Good," says Rudy. "Let's get to work."

We have eight clients tonight and Mr. Buckman wants a double. He sees Celine, and she's been looking rough lately. Getting cokier as she burns through clients. I feel for her; Buckman's insufferable without the drugs. I really have to stop indulging so deeply in empathy, but my girls aren't the body-shots-in-Cabo-Ashleigh-Alexandra-Dupre-types. They're just like me, if I didn't still think of sex as a way to fall in love.

Wei gets in first because she treats this life as something other than an aberration. Though once, when she was joking about giving me two weeks notice when she leaves, I said “If you ever leave,” and she looked at me like I had strut into the center of the room with her tombstone.

Wei’s also a performance artist best known for printing out her ex-boyfriend’s break-up emails, rolling them into a tube, and shoving it up her pussy. Which is to say, she’s not well-known. People give even less of a fuck about weird art than air-kiss art, and lord knows that’s irrelevant.

I’d recruited Wei for a reading series after the Lovestuffing Incident, but her ex got savvy and crashed. They beat the shit out of each other and everybody thought it was the art. Even then they called it derivative. The gallery owner was like “Series my ass,” and I had to use all the muscles in my pretty face to keep him from calling the cops. Wei’s my ideal girl, even if I could hand-pick prostitutes from everyone, not just the willing.

We exchange monologues about our lives on the outside. Mine’s shorter than ever and half wishful thinking. Hers is like she lives in the New York of the 1970s.

“So I was waiting for the subway and I realized I was on the same platform where I did this video art? In college? I stood on the platform and held up a sign like ‘Buy my panties for \$20,’ so I was like hey! Anniversary performance! So Deadass whips out his iPhone, but we had no sign, so I had to draw it on my T-shirt?”

So that's why she showed up in a blazer and a bra. I thought it was just new style. I help her fix her hair so it's fobby, and change her into some poly-blends so Mr. Abrams can go pretend he's not gay for an hour.

I make small talk with Buckman while Celine does whatever it is that makes her so goddamn late. Silda shows up and Buckman would prefer wait for Celine. Whatever — Buckman's touted his supreme non-racist credentials at least tangentially, but whenever I try to sate him with one of the non-white girls, he'd always prefer wait for Celine.

We talk about books; he's really into the Dennett-Hitchens nexus of ascendant atheism. And I'm like really? Only white chicks? Because Celine is always late, and Buckman is always early.

Celine comes in clean. Thank god she listened for once. Girl is just a cautionary tale till she kills herself. Celine is so white-trash-angel pretty she could've ended up on Reality TV. I feel like I saved her: of all the bullshit currencies that won't make you happy, money is more useful than fame.

I plunk the lock down after the last client leaves, and Celine's right behind me. "You in tonight?" She's been in by now, obviously, and it's not that I'm envious of her diluted pupils, but I just think high looks better when it's on me. I take my bump off the delicate snout of my mail key. It burns — yum, baby laxative and lava.

After Celine tarts off into the night to Get Worse I'm left with the distinctive thumping of Rudy sampling Silda like she's the wares. Sometimes I offer myself in before he

gets close to using a girl up, but Silda has an incredible gift. She never seems to acquiesce to sex, but always to want it. To choose it.

Silda's black and I'm white. We're basically the same except I took my middle-class white girl advantage and booked it to NYU, and Silda stayed and worked her way through Hunter. Still is actually, getting her masters in marketing. (I got my BA in diletantism, with minors in bong hits and bar bathroom blowjobs.) Sometimes I just want to put her on a stamp. And sometimes I want to call her uppity just to see how hard she'd sock me.

This isn't my world and my mistakes are often made out of sheer ignorance. I don't come to degeneracy generationally. My parents didn't fuck up — would make more sense if they had. At least something in my life would make a straight line. I was just a sweet little trodden-down office drone when nasty opportunity did me over.

Renowned sex therapist Madeline Ambergris took me in as a humble secretary, and promptly found herself needed in Virginia to tend to her mother's various fluctuations between deathbed and miracle cure. It was an easy step to a cash pyramid of sex acts under the expeditious credentials of a genuine therapist. When she found out she didn't yell or fuss. She just drew her mouth into a prim frown and choked out her disappointment in a voice streaked with tears.

I never poached her clients or re-appropriated her surrogates — just brought new girls into her shell of an office and veneer of legitimacy for blowjobs and wads of

cash and extra for anal and all the other things you never thought you'd say over the phone in a professional tone while tapping your pen against a planner that uses all the tiny hours. Yes, I debased her business. I kept it alive too, but no one calls what I did adaptation or evolution.

She wanted to call the cops on me. I let my eyes wander for saviors and they fixed on poor, sad Rudy Munchum. An Ichabod Crane-looking client who considered my girls his new philosophy on life since his wife left. He was my dollar sign, my plumbable one, and if he didn't know it then, he ignores it now. So we locked Ms. Ambergris' lips with a lump sum, and relocated to a spartan three bedroom just under the Upper West Side.

Owing Rudy my freedom, I gave it to him too. I still make the schedules, take the money, and manage our manifest presence. Rudy doesn't want to have to worry about things like buying new sheets. He just wants to crawl into clean ones with me, three or four nights of the week, five if I'm feeling friendly. I never am, but I fake it sometimes.

Rudy was once a husband, and an adjunct professor of cinema studies at CUNY. His layoff hurt his heart, and his marriage most of all. Not his livelihood — his career goals seemed mainly to be about self-esteem, and certainly not as lucrative as having been born into wealth. His material survival ever intact, he lost his fighting moves. Maybe he never learned them well enough. Money breeds these deficiencies better than it does happiness or eternal life.

Rudy doesn't talk about his wife, ex-wife. I wish he

would, so I might know what he isn't seeing when he looks in my eyes. It's a whore's wish — the real girl in me doesn't care if he gets better.

I still look at myself in the mirror every morning, and I still adore my reflection. There's still a fidget of an observer in my frown. One who got close to these things to know them, and shirked back before she became them. Sometimes Rudy brushes my hair in the mirror, and I don't see her, and I don't like to look then. His eyes are as sheer as the glass through which I meet them.

"Coffee?" I sniff the air.

"You buying?" he shrugs. I'm never buying. But maybe I'm catching phantom odors.

He wants me to run across the street for our coffee, and I'm game, but I require privacy in the aftermath. He likes to read the newspaper and spar with me over whom to pillory or lionize, what policy is the portent of the Official End. We mostly just agree though, and I find it quite boring.

I curl my coffee up to my mouth with one hand, and slip my phone into my pocket with the other. I call random nags to him as I fade into the bathroom, raising my voice over the clicking of the lock. I turn the shower on for good measure. Safely entrenched in the echoing tile, I dial from memory.

"Hi Mom."

"Hi honey. How are you?"

"Okay. A little stressed about work."

"Oh, is the bar doing all right? What's going on?"

“Just the nature of the service industry, Mom. The little perks are the first thing to go. What with Great Depression Dos and all.”

“When people say it like that here, it’s usually because they’re blaming it all on Mexico.”

“Mom, you know that’s not what I mean. I know to blame the bankers — it’s just that they were also my business.”

“Have you ever thought about getting back into publishing?”

When I start to feel trapped I fire off missives to old colleagues to gauge the job market. But no one is ever hiring, let alone a literary agent with kind eyes, if that even exists. Mostly when I feel trapped, I call my mom.

“I don’t know if I can suck it up enough to do bitch work on shit books for fucked money.”

“When you talk about it like that ... ”

“It’s an indignity, Mom. I can use nice words but I don’t find them apt.”

“Look, if you didn’t like anyone at the WTC Clinic, I’ll give you the money.”

“Give me a couple more months. If my life’s still in the same way, I promise I’ll give their therapists another chance.”

“It’s not just where your life is. It’s how you look at it too. That’s what therapy can help with. “

You’re mostly right, Mom, but my life is way more terrifying than how I look at it.

For example, the first date dance. We’re leaning over

a bar at each other, and I've ordered a mixer in my whiskey like a lady does, when Caleb asks me how business goes. Do I tell him the truth — that less people come in, but they'll pay more money for weirder shit — or is it too soon to let reality darken the conversation?

"Why don't you come one night and see?" I widen my eyes in irony. "I'll give you a special." He knows he wouldn't want to, but we keep up the joke like I'm denying that side of his desire. Bad sign, but whatever, he's cute.

He pacts me to him with a peck on the lips. I instigate a deeper kiss. I lick his closed lips as he pulls away. I bring him back to my apartment, excited, and, in the back of my mind, eternally grateful Rudy never convinced me to give it up.

As we make it to bed some horrible canned melody infiltrates my bliss. Caleb kisses my side as I roll over to check the caller ID. Rudy. Caleb runs his tongue up my ribcage, tickling the bones and the fallows between them. I could just giggle, say "nevermind," and go back to receiving.

Perhaps it is my bane to have something to give. Perhaps I overestimate the offer.

No, tonight is not my night off. I never made a specific request in advance and Oh. My. God. If this job is going to be the bars on my cell I don't suppose vacation days are going to be what drain me.

Rudy's sulking in the bedroom when I get there. Wei's smoking a cigarette by the window.

"I'm trying to quit," she explains. Wei's hellos are al-



ways reasons why she is the way she is. I just tell her to put the blinds back down when she's done. It's not right they should be up at all, but my asthma itches so I don't bother admonishment.

Silda kisses a liar named John Smith, and tells him to call her as he leaves. Both prohibited. I reach over to the bookcase, and feel for a spine with good width. She smirks at the moment when I could've changed my mind. I smack her across the face with a hardbound copy of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

She doesn't cower. Good on her. But I have to book-slap her again. She crumples against the wall. I fake a third slap, and she flinches. Blood pearls from a paper cut on her bottom lip.

"Go change your sheets. And clean your fucking face if you're going to go around kissing everybody."

Rudy thinks I'm overreacting. I tell him a real pimp would cut a bitch, but that seems to entice him more than placate him.

Silda says I play favorites.

"Yeah," I sniff. "So why aren't you kissing my ass?"

No one kisses my ass.

Caleb comes the closest. He isn't so bad to date. He emotes a slight undercurrent of white man's torpor, but in a horridly self-actualized way. He doesn't spend too much money on me, but I don't notice until he leaves, and I realize I'm hungry. That he doesn't shell out actually might bring him that cringe closer to perfection.

But we have serious problems when we fuck. I cannot

handle when we fuck. It's too good Too Good TOO GOOD and then it's Over. When it ends it feels like he's ripped out a vital pleasurable center of me, but it's not a part of me: it's his penis.

I've started to take pregnancy tests every day, even though they always come up negative. Surebaby.com says "feeling pregnant" is a valid symptom, so what the fuck EPT? Caleb always wants to wear a condom, but I still think he'd be good cover, if it came to that.

My genuine apartment is some shithole share for \$600 a month within smellshot of the frothy Gowanus. I'd been honestly satisfied with it when I was just a secretary. I pay the roommate rent on time now, but I am generally expected elsewhere for the evenings. Once she asked me how I was doing and I told her every little detail from the wan faces of the men on those first few nights at the therapy center, to the fact that I am both terrified and oddly yearning for Rudy to go down on me since I thought I spotted a herpe on his lip.

"I don't have herpes yet?! Christ, how is this even degeneracy?" We laughed in concert. High-pitched and occasionally exaggerated hee-hees. Because of all the time in the world to spend it wild and unwise — she knew best of all how I crank Liz Phair when I get my period. I felt like an interpreter, bridging the world of the creative underclass and the petty criminal. But she was just dating a guy in a math rock band and writing for a cartoon show about zoo pandas that were always stealing their keepers' beer, and I really felt pandas would only go for the driest of

plum wines, so it was only inevitable when avoiding each other became usual and unabashed.

That she appears to be absent now is of decidedly infinitesimal mercy. Were she here she'd find a way to flee. I open my laptop and tell Facebook what's on my mind.

When my cheeks start to slacken and sink into my jawline, the lift of my breasts lands on my belly, my hair waxes chestnut to gray ... that's when I am going to start wearing an eyepatch. So people don't look at me "like that."

I could start a blog with this shit. Then what? Obsessively post oblique minutiae until there's no more room for ambiguity and I have to give up the regrettably salient circumstances of my life like those other tender-headed hustles of humanity? Please, life is for living. Not necessarily well, but you have to try.

Caleb's Gchat bubble goes from gray to green. I can't relent: he might not yet know I'm a vulture. Yeah, I change my actions and misrepresent my opinions to look better to people I like. Sometimes under the egregious auspices of self-improvement. I know that's not the way you do it. That's not even the way you get people to like you, and that's totally my aim. But fuck it, the real me deserves some privacy. She's not really that cool. She's kind of a dork.

As if he read my wish for intuitive entwinement, Caleb's picture pops up on the face of my phone. Wouldn't it be nice if he were psychic? I wouldn't have to talk unless I was being witty. But he has no time for my wit right now. In fact, he called to announce he'd like to abandon me altogether.

Caleb says he's moving to Portland, like every sixth person is planning to do these days. It's not that the city's got him down (but the city's got him down), but he's heard there's a way to be cool in Portland without being such a striver. He can be in nature, have a house, settle down, let time win. It's going to win anyway, whether he likes it or not, and he'd rather like it. He doesn't elaborate to invite me into his hypothetical house as guest or girlfriend, and I'm just like "Fuck you too." It turns so fast when men don't make me feel useful to them.

I tacked a poem I wrote above my bed, The Paragon Grave of Athena. It's from when I went all death pact on publishing a novel by 25. Fuck, finishing a novel. I was so sure I could.

I was a legend first, before I was a real person. The poem is all mythological allusions, careful cadence, and strange words plucked from obscurity. It sounds like I'm in college. Because I was. I was so good at college. I thought I'd be even better at real life, but I was wrong.

I grate some black pepper over my fennel, and start lining up spices for my sweet potatoes. My pork chops are starting to smell rich and juicy, like something the family I'll never have might eat.

I save one for Rudy, dropping the sweaty Tupperware in his lap as I arrive. "What is this, cold meat?" he says. "You know how I feel about cold meat." Oh, he feels quite charitable toward cold meat when he eats it all the time in sandwiches.

Silda's not in tonight and I don't mind. Celine wanders

in with two black eyes that 700 layers of foundation won't fix. "What'd you get a nose job or something?" I call to her. "How come they didn't shave the bump?" Shouldn't have mentioned the bump: it's a key word. As in now we have to go in the bathroom and do bumps off keys.

Celine only has two clients, but she gets the shakes after the first. Wei tries to lay a blanket on her, and Celine wheels her arms back like Wei is death itself descending. She starts to scream and our clients scam the fuck out of there. She's a spooked colt in the center of the living room, all limbs and whinnies.

Rudy tries to pin her arms and he ends up with his hand in her mouth. She gnashes on his thumb webbing. Blood drips from the dotted crescent where her teeth were.

He lobs his fist into her nose. There's a crumpled pop, and I allow myself to estimate that this is the second time her nose has been broken this week. Rudy finally pins her. He wraps her up in the blanket and pushes her toward the door.

"Wait, Rudy!" I flail through my wallet for a spare business card. "I know a doctor! She's at Bellevue, but —"

He just says, "We're pimps!" He's a wire electric, like someone hitched jumper cables to his Achilles tendons. He'd always watched movies about pimps, cool cats, always read interviews with men who made movies about pimps and how their glamour osmosed around like a transient thing. He's gone. Gone on after Who He Is and not just Becoming, and out of the door with Celine in a bundle.

I spend the early morning trying to get the blood up from the carpet unsuccessfully. I turn on the TV to drown out my inner monologue — some reality show about people who let the barren, useless things they want pass the barriers of their teeth in aching, unkind extravagance. It does what it's supposed to and I feel a little better: I may be a shit, but at least I don't talk about it. I throw down the washcloth at around seven. It's brown by now. I place an inconvenient end table over it. The voice shifts from regionally-accented and slurred to solemn. The words betray some importance to the human race. I turn around, and the image is another plane hitting another building.

No, not again. It could be a retrospective? But the newscaster flits his fingers to his earpiece with such concern. He says they don't know the origin of the plane, but it struck a high-rise at the edge of the Hudson River. Not just at the Hudson River. I can't believe this is the second time in my life that four blocks have stood between me and an attack on New York City.

Why couldn't I have been somewhere else when it happened? Why am I collecting my pittance here where it hurts? It's not even cute. To be in a petty crime scene next to a mass murder makes me feel small, like I'm meant for small things. My future looms. Or doesn't. I don't have enough space in my windpipe for another batch of ash.

I don't think; I act. The large canvas tote. Empty. Jeans, undies, t-shirts, an extra hoodie. All the bottled water in the fridge. A bottle of whiskey, full for hand-outs. Heeled boots to rubber-soled sneakers. I change into drab and

comfortable clothes. On 9/11, I was already on my way to class wearing some stupid tank top with red, glittery flames climbing up from the hem. A bum kicked me, and I kind of thought he had a point.

I know I can count on the city to be functional on the fumes of its own denial for another few hours. The delis will sell water; the buses will run. I don't trust the subway. Whatever it is hasn't fallen yet. Who knows what will collapse. An abiding love of business as usual may be the Great Mutilator of our times, but today it will get me to my refuge. Even if it is just some shithole by the Gowanus.

A plume of smoke disperses into the air behind me as I walk briskly to the bus stop that I've only ever paid attention to for this purpose. I don't look back. On the bus, people still chatter about trivialities like the weather, as if the taller buildings obstructing the struck one obstructed its impact. On 9/11, I remember how hard the girl behind me on the bus to class tried to keep talking about hair extensions as the second plane hit. She wanted to look like Aaliyah, in memoriam.

When I disgorge, I ponder splitting off to the bridge on foot. It might be easier for one person to pass. I don't want to get stuck out again. Last time, I didn't get to go back to my dorm because all I had to verify my residence was a lilac sticker on my student ID, signifying nothing to a helmet-wearing man of war. Eventually NYU gave me a letter to wave around, and the blockade guards turned over to Westchester Rent-A-Cops, and I got home. It took some wrangling every time, but the letter worked more

often than crying.

It doesn't matter when the bus waits by the mouth of the bridge, motor thrumming.

Queens and Brooklyn simmer in a respite of early morning tranquility. Brooklyn is slow, I guess. That's why I moved out here in the first place. Maybe I should leave. Possibility — I just have to hang onto that lovely notion until I get to my apartment, and carefully exhale my sloppy, short exhale again.

I never expected walking through my front door to be so normal. The building still sleeps, unbidden into fragile reality. Could the damage already have given them reason to evacuate? Well, I still need my passport and my sexy jeans.

I sigh mightily as I enter the apartment, interrupting my roommate's breakfast of leftover macaroni and cheese. Maybe I'm saving her too. She asks, "What's wrong?"

"Planes ... Buildings ... Smoke ..." I sputter.

"That?" She starts to giggle. "The drunk jet pilot? I guess everybody heard 'cause they didn't realize what it was at first."

Last time I thought the pilots who hit the World Trade Center were probably drunk. That it could only be neglect, not active antipathy.

"Poor pilot, but, I mean, he's a hero now. It was a private jet — he killed like three bankers. It's awesome. That's not what you're all crazy about, is it?"

"Are you kidding? I'm a New Yorker, I know what I'm doing." I think I know what I'm doing, and I just end up be-



ing wrong. “No, no, it’s just that I ... I quit my job.” It’s bad enough just to be unemployed.

Concern leaps into her eyes, and as much as I know altruism exists, I can’t help but think she’s at least half-concerned about the next month’s rent. “So what now?”

I have been asking myself that question since I graduated from college, and the answer is always the same: oh what an optimist am I.

“Dunno,” I shrug, “Craigslist?”

FREE PROMO - DO NOT COPY

9/11

Cora Inez Laxey

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**T**HE GRAY MAN ARRIVED BEFORE NOON, A GHOSTLY figure that broke away from the other ghostly figures trudging silently up Ninth Avenue from downtown. What made him leave the crowd and turn down 21st Street? What made him choose our stoop to rest on? Mother and I watched from the front window while the TV, on low in the background, looped the film of planes hitting and towers falling. After the early barrage of sirens, the day was eerily still. Cars and trains had been barred below 23rd street, there was no sound, no vibration. We huddled in our houses. Only the refugees plodded resolutely out of the smoke and on uptown; they didn't speak. Our part of the city, Chelsea, was silent but for the noiseless march

up Ninth Avenue. Medics waited at Chelsea Piers for victims, but there were no injured survivors to treat. In the days following, it was clear that there were no survivors to be rescued. Neighbors whispered that bodies and body parts recovered were brought to the pier and placed on the ice at the skating rink. But I didn't see this.

Mother made a cheese and tomato sandwich and I took it out to him along with a bottle of water. We didn't speak, though he nodded thanks. Mother and I watched from the window for another hour, two, but he didn't eat or drink. Late in the afternoon mother said "Let him in." I was surprised because she was never keen on strangers. When I was younger the neighborhood was unsafe and though it had "gentrified" through the years, mother never felt secure. But now was the time to come to the aid of strangers.

I led him into the living room but he wouldn't sit.

"Would you like to wash up?" I asked.

He shook his head.

■■ Maybe you should lay down." I led him to the stairs but he wouldn't ascend. He looked frightened. I couldn't imagine what he'd been through that wouldn't allow him to climb up one flight of an unpretentious wooden stairway, its side wall adorned with old family photos.

I decided he might prefer sitting in the garden, a small space, enclosed by surrounding buildings. Mother had embellished the fence with rose bushes and Rose of Sharon trees. There were flowers of all sorts along the periphery, her small vegetable and herb garden at the far

end, and lavender growing against our back wall. It was a very pleasant space, but he wanted no part of it.

In the course of gently urging him through the ground floor, he noticed the open door to the basement and peered down the dark passage.

“Not very nice down there,” I told him.

But he wouldn’t move.

I switched on the light so he could see the rickety stairs, cobwebs and dirt walls. Only the floor had been cemented.

The gray man was undaunted and descended to the musty basement. What was I to do but follow?

I rarely visited the basement, only to bring down a broken lamp or box of old books to be stored. It was about as pleasant a space as a Neanderthal’s cave. There were even some strange glyphs on the wall left by ... well who knows? These houses were built in the time of Clement Clarke Moore, the early 1800s. The land was once his estate and it was said that he built our house for an illegitimate son who resented Moore’s sternness and asceticism, a son who was his father’s prize Greek and Hebrew student until a quarrel turned him against the old man and his religion.

The gray man pulled out an old trunk, one that had once been my father’s when he was in the Navy, and sat. He reached into a box of books next to him and began studying the titles.

“Were you in the building when the planes hit?” I asked him.

He looked up at me as if he didn't know what I was talking about.

"You don't have to talk about it," I said. "Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

That look again.

■ Oh, that's a pretty good book." He'd picked up a book called *Cut to Fit*. "It's about the garment center. My dad was a manufacturer ... "

He replaced the book and picked up another.

"*The Arc and the Old Wisdom*, it's about the Queen of Sheba and Solomon, only they're both magicians. I liked that one a lot."

He smiled at me and opened the book. Maybe he read the first sentence, but he was too polite to keep reading so he just sat, looked at me, looked at the wall.

"Well, maybe you want to be left alone," I said. "If you want anything, just come upstairs or yell. Do you want to use the phone? It hasn't been working so well since the ... attack, but it works off and on. You could try."

He shook his head.

"There's a bathroom on the first floor if you want to wash up. Clean towels. I'll put some of dad's old clothes out. Let me know if there's anything else ... "

He didn't speak but he looked sympathetic when I mentioned my mother.

It was more than my father had been toward her. When he ran off with his secretary he left us the house and some money, pretty much all we'd had anyway since

he'd always been preoccupied with business and rarely home. We were actually relieved to be rid of him. Mother had some money and said she was thankful to him for one thing — me. This was very kind of her to say as I was not a daughter to be especially proud of. I barely got through school and had a few menial jobs before I became a waitress at the Dutch Diner. I loved my job as waitress but when it closed I was too old (nearly fifty) to get another good job nearby. Because of the neighborhood gentrification, all the local restaurants hired young attractive waitresses. Mother said not to worry, that we would be fine living off the money we had. She'd become quite feeble and complained that her heart often "skipped a beat." The doctor said her heart was weak but not in imminent danger. I convinced myself that she needed me to stay home and look after her which gave me a chance to read and write — I'd dreamed of writing children's books one day. She would have liked me to marry but boys frightened me. Actually, outside of the diner I was a bit shy.

I don't know what it was about the gray man that made me want to talk to him. I guess it was because he didn't talk back or laugh at what I had to say. I guess it was because he wasn't like anyone ...

The first few nights the gray man was around, mother and I locked our bedroom doors but by the third night, I forgot. I had forgotten for a week or two when mother mentioned that she'd neglected to lock her door for the last few nights and maybe there wasn't anything to be

afraid of.

“It’s rather nice having a quiet man around the house,” she said. “I just wish he’d come up out of that basement a bit more.”

“He needs time,” I told her.

“I suppose so.”

Within a few days the whole thing began to seem unreal to me. We’d seen the towers fall on TV so often that it was like a bad commercial, a commercial for fear. On my way to a certain store, I saw a confusion of flowers and lights down the block. I thought it odd that someone had opened a fruit store at this time and when I got close I realized it was our fire station. Five of our local firemen had been killed and people from the neighborhood had left offerings of flowers, food and candles. I was so unnerved by the sad-faced firemen that I turned down the block and began walking aimlessly. I walked for a long time, not realizing I was heading downtown until I noticed the buildings around me were covered with gray ash and the heat and odor I was experiencing was coming from the smoldering ruins that loomed just ahead. I turned back in horror but as I walked out of the area I studied the buildings. People had used their fingers to write in the ash, “together we stand,” “God bless us all,” “We will survive,” and other slogans. Some were in foreign languages, some were just odd symbols, glyphs, pictograms, formulas.

The knot that had gripped my stomach for the last few days, loosened.

**T**he gray man didn't eat much, made no noise and stayed mostly in the basement. We left him alone to work through his situation. I asked a couple of times if there wasn't anyone he should contact to let them know he was OK. He just gave me one of his looks.

**M**onths passed. Sometimes we forgot about him until we heard him move around. We got used to his being there.

Often I heard noises in the night and didn't see him when I went to the head of the basement stair. The doors were locked tight when I checked, and he was always in his place when I went down to the kitchen in the morning. I never questioned these midnight absences.

**W**hen our old neighbors realized how much their homes were worth, they sold out and moved away. I missed Mrs. Field across the street who made cakes every day and gave me what she didn't eat — which wasn't much because Mrs. Field believed that if you were going to be fat, you might as well enjoy yourself, eat what you wanted and become really fat. I didn't miss Ms. Linnet because she put out food for birds and sometimes there were so many that I felt like I was in that Alfred Hitchcock movie. Mother hated it too because they pooped all over our garden when they passed over.

The new neighbors were usually in too much of a hurry to say "hello" or "nice day." I didn't much care. There



was more time for me to daydream and read used books (which I had to travel across town for now), write silly stories and to talk to the gray man.

More months passed and the months turned into years. I had to buy clothes for the gray man from the Salvation Army. I wondered if any of the clothes had belonged to people he knew who died in the towers. He began to talk a little, greetings and thankyou's. I told him stories I was reading or what was happening outside and he'd ask me questions. But he never talked about himself.

Mother always said that Moslems weren't the problem, that the problem was extremists. She wasn't educated but she was wise. In the couple of decades following the attack, the amount of extremist groups multiplied. In our country we had The Beck Militia, the Pink Order, the Green Army, Absolutists, Trickle Downers and White Hearts (to name a few). We had the People's Volunteer Loyalist Order of Defenders and the 11/4/08 Cell. Suburbs supported full-contact Little League and Ultimate yoga was the rage. They lined up to join Sisters of Iron and the Bijou Brotherhood. There were people who wouldn't eat red apples or strawberries because it was "Commie food," and people who only ate animals with ears of a certain size. There was an Alliance for every month, every day of the week and there was no keeping track of the cells, the fronts, the factions outside of our country.

When mother died, out-of-town relatives called and advised me to move or at least install steel doors and shutters, sensors and cameras. The relative who told me this

had one baby every year in order to provide recruits for the “Lord’s Freedom Fighters.” This was the way they lived.

We weren’t as afraid in New York, not like they were outside. People from the rest of the country were at war with each other, everybody hated everybody else, and lived in fear. New Yorkers were a different sort. We lived in, and loved, this city because of its miscellany. For the most part we respected each others customs — or at least tolerated them. We enjoyed and celebrated each others’ holidays, music, stories and food — especially the food. We got along.

We bickered about traffic and what could be regarded as proper tipping but we built mosques next to synagogues, yoga studios next to game arcades, health food stores next to hot dog stands. Republicans and Socialists took turns taking their children to school and just about everyone had participated in a gay wedding one time or another.

The gray man had began to sit at the living room window in the mornings. He went out into the garden on a summer evening. He asked to have tacos one afternoon. He may have just been getting smaller but to my old and tired eyes, he looked as if he were getting ... less dense. Sometimes I thought I could see the light right through him. But I was getting quite old and my eyes and ears often played tricks on me.

At the end of the day in summer and fall, we’d sit in the garden. One evening I was sipping a glass of Malbec and the grey man was looking up at the sky.

"I'm nearly gone," he said.

And I knew my eyes hadn't played tricks.

In the morning he was gone, only a pile of old clothes and a coating of dust remained. I swept up in the basement and saw a stack of books near the trunk he used to sit on: a collection of Isaac Bashevis Singer stories, Chabon's *The Amazing Adventure of Kavalier & Clay*, Piers Anthony's *Grundy* and a couple of Terry Pratchett books, *Making Money*, *Discworld*. I wondered why he'd singled out these particular books and since my memory isn't so good, I reread them over the last few months.

All of them have one thing in common, a golem. I thought of the words and symbols written in the dust on those buildings downtown, the marks on our basement wall. Which ones had called up my gray man? Drew him to this place? Kept him from the violent excesses of that first legendary golem? What kind of things had he saved us from in the nearly forty years since the towers fell? It was hard to tell ... there'd never been a serious fire on our block, not a robbery (though Mrs. Markel's junkie son had taken money and her pearls before going to rehab). When the whole city was infested with bedbugs, not one was seen on our block; no bird, swine, stick-bug, or goat flu; no killer bees, wareworms, or rabid meercats; no tainted milk or yeanling meat made it to our corner deli, no ebon algae or hydra howlers in the pipes, no flying nettles or time cats.

Of course, one golem wasn't enough to save us from everything. We still experienced accidents, ordinary sick-

ness. Old people and pets died but we didn't see the extreme plagues that characterized the second, third and forth decades of the twenty-first century. He couldn't be expected to save a whole country, certainly not a whole world. But who would watch over us now? Who would provide even a scrap of protection?

Perhaps the time has come for us to watch over each other.

## SPARROW

Don Webb

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**F**OR MOST AMERICANS FIXING THE BLAME IS AN IMPORTANT activity. Steven Catalin's father would have fixed the blame for what happened that October day on Miss Jackson, Steven's second grade teacher, if he hadn't divorced Steven's mom and drank himself to death. Miss Jackson had seven girls in the spring play and she had sewn eight fairy costumes. So she gave one to Steven. He loved it, especially the green gossamer wings. He danced and minced across the stage of Abraham Lincoln Elementary in Manhattan, Kansas with more joy and spastic delight than any of the girls. The next day he tried wearing the costume to school, but was dissuaded by the bus driver. Stevie wore the wings for weeks afterward.

He embarrassed his dad and worried his mom playing in front of their rural home — running back and forth with the sparkly wings, singing loudly songs only he understood. He played with wings every day and slept in them at night until they grew frayed and dirty, and finally, his dad tore them off him and stuffed them in the burning trash pile amidst Stevie's tears. Steven didn't talk to his father for nearly three months, which is amazing display of will in an eight-year-old. When he did it was to ask to go to Disneyland, which the family did when he was ten.

Steven was a small boy with brittle bones, and unlike his dad who went out for track and football, not given to athletics. He liked clothes, he liked his hair and his dad was worried about him being "that way." In seventh grade he went out for cross-country. Dad was overjoyed. Steven was the worst runner to make the cut. But he was in love with Mark. Dad had not foreseen this, but the coach found them making out in the wilds of Kansas. Dad tried all the wise parenting he knew. He beat the boy. He gave him a subscription to *Playboy*. He took the boy hunting. None of these interventions affected the lad, and in shame dad left the picture. Mom blamed herself.

Growing up gay in the "Little Apple" — Manhattan, Kansas, was not impossible in the twenty-first century, but it was awkward. The town boasts a university and six blocks of bars called Aggieland, which managed to have a gay bar and a fairly festive sandwich shop. But all young homosexuals in the Little Apple have one dream, the Big Apple. Steven's best friend Tony escaped to that paradise

when he was seventeen. Steven gave himself the Big Apple as a Christmas present when he was twenty. The first day he visited Ground Zero, Chinatown and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The first night there with the seven-dollar Bud Lites, he spent the entire fall's worth of savings, but Steven was resourceful and he found heavenly lodgings.

He didn't tell his mom that he was sharing a small apartment in a five-floor walk-up with two women and three men. He told her he had a place with a rooftop garden. True enough, the apartment had two hundred square feet of private roof area and Shirley and her Asian girlfriend whose name he couldn't pronounce had an artificial Christmas tree in their designated area. At night you could see both the Empire State and the Chrysler Buildings in the frosty air. Washington Irving and his Knickerbockers had given Santa Claus to America in New York City, and Steven thought Manhattan was his specially wrapped present.

Then came New Year's and Times Square!

All his dreams were being fulfilled. He lived with a gay black man and an Hispanic black man and a gay white man and the two lesbians. It was like a gay United Colors of Benetton ad.

Being gay in New York didn't make him a rare bird. Tony pointed him to a website that reviewed eighty gay bars, restaurants and saunas. A sauna drove the chill of December away in quiet delightful ways. Tony took him to places thick with gay history. Old men told him about Stonewall. Gay people lived, loved and died here. Although his job delivering mail was far from any dreams

he might have had about what he wanted to do when he grew up, everything else suggested that he had come home. Money was spent before it was made, and every month he “burrowed” eight or nine hundred bucks from his mother. Then Tony became involved with this older Pakistani man, and Steven was back to his own resources.

However time in the cramped apartment grew awkward and unhappy. Kansas didn’t have a lot of things, but it did have space. Shirley and her girlfriend were always yelling. The three guys slept in the main room, which meant that there were never any long periods of quiet. Like Steven they lived in bars as long as possible during the night, but when they came home they were full of chatter. At first their exploits fed the undernourished emotional and sexual life of Steven. But he stopped being a starving man soon, real life and love and lust and adventure were opening to him. He would spread his wings until he came home to a rather restrictive nest. Soon he was tired of his new friends. Soon he just wanted them to shut up at night. Steven, who had been an only child, never slept well with noise. A snoring sex partner was always a reason to leave. He asked his roommates how they managed to sleep though Shirley’s hour long bitch-fests, Juan showed him his prescription sleeping aid — a popular pill advertised in the cars of the IRT. Leon joked that he couldn’t use it because he was allergic to big glowing green moths. Steven just tried staying out longer.

Looking for new places to live when you work long hours and socialize long into the night is not an easy job.



Steven began spending weekends in Central Park. Part of him, to his surprise, missed the open spaces of Kansas. As a child he was alone because other children neglected him; as an adult, he wanted to avoid others. The richness of life coupled with the constant hemorrhaging of money proved a strain. One Saturday he spent almost the whole day leaning up against a tree moving around it to try and find the view that showed him the fewest people. When he left the park at dusk he took his time going home. After the wearing climb up the stairs, he heard reality TV blaring forth in the main room. The guys had bought a TV. At home in the Little Apple Steven had never been without a TV at any time, here he hadn't missed it. He went out.

He had a brief hot ten-day affair with a ginger named Max, a Midwestern boy like him. Max not only stirred his lust, Max reminded him of aspects of home. Max had a fabulous job in an advertising agency, and Steven spent almost all of his free time in Max's light filled Upper West end loft. They talked about their childhoods when they weren't busy with surprisingly good sex. Max told Steve about Texarkana, and Steve had him in stitches telling about his high school shenanigans. The thought of marriage and a white picket fence surprisingly entered his mind and in an unguarded moment he told Max. He might have well have confessed a desire to share leprosy. Max told him he was a drag, he was the kind of Miss Thing that he had fled Texarkana to get away from and told him to go back to the amber waves of grain. Steven had had heartbreak, but never real heartbreak. This wasn't a crush on

a high school jock, who could never return his love, this was the Real Thing. He cried on the subway. He cried at he made his way through the hot summer streets, had he been here six months? He cried on the five flights up. He cried before he put the key in.

Inside was a wall of sound.

All five of his roommates, Shirley, her girlfriend, Juan, Leon and Tommy were watching the Kardashians yell at one another. Leon acknowledged Steven's presence by asking him to get the popcorn out of the microwave. *Kourtney and Kim Take New York* was on, a rerun, and everyone was watching and yelling back at the set. Suddenly he was in elementary school again and his mom and dad were staring at the TV and not at him. But this time he didn't want anonymity. He got the popcorn and started to talk about Max and was asked to shut up until the commercials. By the time the commercials came he had an idea.

He bought a sleeping bag the next day. He would sleep on the roof. The girls had introduced a cactus and a rather sickly tomato plant to keep the faded artificial Christmas tree company. Most of the other tenants left the roof by ten, and although it is never quiet on the island, it was much quieter than the apartment. His roommates decided that he was crazy, and quietly worked out strategies to kick him out the first time he defaulted on his share of the rent. His mom asked him why he was always calling her from outside and he lied. Then she asked why he was always calling so often, wasn't he happy? So he lied more.

But still, he told himself, he was happier than he had been in Kansas.

He stopped going to bars as often. He bought a chair and carried it up to the roof. He began spending almost all of his time there except for bathroom breaks. He would find a new place to live by winter.

Or maybe he would go home to Kansas.

The dreams started in August. The first night as he was watching the Art Deco beauty of the Chrysler Building, he didn't even notice falling asleep. It seemed that his apartment building grew. It shot up thousands of floors. He laid on a cave-like shelf several thousand stories up. Vastly tall narrow buildings crowded a deep purple sky. The air was clean and steamy and thick. The moon had crumbled, this was shown to him in the dream, into a Saturn-like ring around the Earth. He lay on his shelf and watched the hundreds, thousands of winged forms that darted to and fro between the buildings. He watched them for hours marveling in the beauty of their flight. When his cell phone woke him at 4:30 to get first shot at the bathroom he was dazed. He hadn't had such a vivid dream since childhood. At first he lay in his warm sleeping bag with worker's denial — hoping that he wouldn't have to get up and go to work. The dream had been so inviting. But daylight and city noise would keep him from re-entering the dream so he rose and went downstairs to shower. He dawdled in the warm water until Leon began yelling at him.

The dream faded as he delivered the mail. By the end of the day he was ready for his slice of pizza and beer. He

met a man in a club and had quick impersonal sex. When the guy offered to let Steven spend the night, Steven surprised himself by saying he needed to go home. On the way home he cursed his stupidity, there was no way the dream would re-occur. He would just be lying on the stupid roof again.

But the dream did come. This night he saw the flyers more clearly. They seemed to have evolved from humans. They had arms beneath their wings, but their forms were slight. Steven imagined them as being four feet tall or less. Their eyes were big and birdlike, but on the front of their faces like owls rather than chickens. They had human mouths, but they sang like birds. Sometimes in the air they coupled. He could not tell if they were male or female or a combination of both. Just as it was time for him to awaken, one of the flyers began to land on his cave-niche. The flyer had cornflower blue eyes like Max.

He went through the next few days in an energetic blur. It was like the fall before he escaped to New York. Every moment was exciting. He was taking art at the university, working as a waiter in an Aggieland restaurant. Every tip brought New York closer. No more nights watching his mom watch TV. Now as he went from cubicle to cubicle with mail every delivery meant he was closer to going home. The harder he worked the better he would sleep.

Steven had no clear theories on psychology. It hadn't been part of his education nor his interests. He had no idea where dreams came from, nor what they might be. He would have been surprised to learn that anyone had theo-

ries about where humans spent a third of their lives. He didn't talk about it to his fellow workers, his roommates, his Mom. He thought of calling Tony, but he thought if Tony made fun of him that he would loose it. For the first time since Miss Jackson's class he had a Secret world.

One night as he lay in his sleeping bag he made some calls to Manhattan, Kansas, and found Miss Jackson was now in a rest home. He called her, but he could not make her understand who he was or where he was. Finally he just told that she was right to give him the costume. She had troubled dreams that night, but did not remember them the next day.

That was the night he saw himself. He was on the ground on some sort of brick lined plaza near three huge metal boxes supported by pylons. There was a reflecting pool that grew giant edible water plants, perhaps a sort of lotus. Other flyers would land nearby and make their way to the pond and eat the flowers. He hungered so he reached out for a very succulent-looking flower. He realized he had the tiny arms of the flyers. And he had wings! He looked at himself in the pool. He was covered in emerald green feathers, as lovely as a quetzal. He was a flyer.

Suddenly he became afraid. He didn't know how to fly! One of the other flyers, the one with Max's eyes began to sing to him. He didn't know the words. He tried to speak and the other flyer put his hands over the place ears would be, frightened or repulsed by the noises. Suddenly a spotlight dropped from one of the big metal boxes and focused on him. He woke. Steven's heart was pounding so

rapidly that it actually hurt. He left the roof, went down five flights of stairs and headed out for a MacDonald's. No more sleep that night.

The next day he began to wonder about the dreams. It was always night in the other world. He wondered if since it was night *here*, it was night *there*. If the moon had been destroyed, it meant that it was in the future. Maybe in the future humans became flyers. Maybe that flyer was he countless eons hence. Maybe that was the world he belonged in. He went to a bookstore after work and bought a couple of books on dreaming. He stayed in his apartment for the first time in weeks. His roommates were really cold, but what could they say? He paid as much as any of them. The books were useless. Nothing about a future earth. No stories about big metal boxes and insanely tall towers.

It took him a week to venture up to the roof again. He dreamed about waking up in an enclosed room. An orange-feathered flyer with crippled wings was bathing him with a black sponge. Steve decided that this was some sort of hospital. The nurse or doctor led him to a big room, which immediately reminded Steven of a movie hall. There were a few others in the room as well. Steven wondered if they were like him. He tried speaking again. They didn't flinch, but it was clear they didn't understand him. They made noises back to him. Then pictures began to form on the screen. Some of the pictures made sense. It showed New York more or less as it was in Steven's time. It showed floods. It showed humans attaching things to

their heads. It showed what might have either been wars or lava poring from millions of volcanoes. People began living in windowless boxes. Then people went away for a long, long time. There was nothing on Earth. The moon began to break up. Other creatures came in huge silvery ships and made war on the big boxes. Gradually Steve realized the big boxes were either big brains, or collections of brains grown together. The other creatures flew big ships the size of cities, but eventually the brains somehow *thought* them away. The Earth had stopped turning during the war, but the box-brains started it turning again. They scrubbed the air with lightning, and lowered the seas by putting water into the air. They made strange and beautiful plants like the lotus-fruit and a type of singing rose bush. They remade most of the Earth into a garden. They had huge robots that dug up things that were important to them like the pyramids or the Grand Canyon or New York City. Then they put small blue pods all over the planet, which put down roots like plants. While the pods grew they made the super-skyscrapers with thousands of floors of open cave-niches. Soon the pods opened and the flyers came out. The flyers weren't like babies; they emerged fully-grown and knew what to do the moment they were in the world. Their job was to fly, eat, have sex, sing and die. Sometimes a flyer was injured and lost its ability to fly. These poor creatures died of depression serving out their last few years as nurses to the occasional flyer that lost its memory. The brain boxes may have made the flyers as an art form. There were suggestions that other living art

forms had been tried, and maybe other would be tried in the future.

The next day Steven bought a spiral notebook and began writing down what he had seen in the film. He thought that if the occasional flyer had been born like him with some connection with the past, he could find other records of these later humans. About this time his job performance began to decline. He would bring the wrong mail, or leave things undelivered. He took long breaks, hiding in the restroom where he wrote feverishly in the toilet stalls. His mother grew worried. Steven would wander off into silence during their calls. She kept sending checks, and he paid his rent.

The roommates noticed that Steven seemed pale. He never ate with them, and he never mingled with them. He was in and out of the shower so quickly in the morning that nobody spoke with him, even Leon who was an early riser. They wondered if they should change their locks. They didn't know his mother, they didn't know whom to contact if things got bad. They discussed changing the locks, simply voting him out, or trying to have an intervention.

Intervention shows were fairly popular with the roommates along with hoarders and freaky eaters. They decided to have an intervention after watching a few more shows.

Steven's dreams of the re-education theater lasted a few weeks. It was late September and the temperatures were not as conducive to staying on the roof. In his more



focused moments he worried about losing his job or being kicked out by his roommates. He worried about the latter more because he might not get an apartment with a roof that he could sleep on. He felt that was key to connecting with his future self. Everything else seemed like a minor goal. What he was doing was joyous, weird and somehow important.

He surprised his roommates by buying pizza and beer for them all. He told them that he was sleeping on the roof to deal with trauma he had because he had been abused as a child. They had seen enough reality TV to know that this is a major problem that can cause drug abuse, hoarding or freaky eating. Having a roommate that paid rent and didn't use any space is not a great problem in the city. All of them felt they were better people for having heard his story and eaten his pizza. Two nights of rain brought Steven in, and everything was seen as solved.

The other worry did manifest. His boss called him. His performance was slipshod, and budget cuts had been made. She didn't tell him that his micro-showers also made him smell sour. He would have one more week of employment.

He poured over his dream books. There were suggestions for incubating dreams. Wear thick socks, take 3 milligrams of Melatonin, and sleep during odd times of the day. Somehow Steven had come to the conclusion that all he needed to do was fully wake up in his other body. The corner drugstore provided both the thick socks and the Melatonin. His unemployment provided daytime sleeping

opportunities. The first two days were miserable. He lay on the roof, eyes tightly closed trying not to hear people coming up on the roof. Shirley and her girlfriend came up to check on him and water their cactus. He needed something stronger. He waited till everyone was at work, then he stole pills from Juan's supply. He took a double dose that should overcome temperature, daylight and noise.

He drifted to sleep shortly after noon. He found himself back in his cave-niche. He, the future he, had been re-educated. It was daytime in the flyers' world. Thousands of the flyers graced the skies. They flew in beautiful arcs; several flew in complicated formations reminding Steven of the petals of the lotus flower. They sang. They engaged in sex in mid-air in groups of two, three, five, a dozen. Plumage of every color abounded, and the buildings sparkled and even made fluting sounds as the wind blew over them. Small lifeforms like bits of brightly colored fluff hung in the air, which the flyers caught with open mouths. The living art of the box brains was better than symphonies, operas, ballets, and laser light shows — better than any art that Steven had studied at Kansas State University. Steven walked to the edge of the great tower he lived in. Yes, he was still on the island of Manhattan. He recognized the outlines of the island bought so many eons ago for twenty-four dollars worth of beads. The giant robots of the box brains had dug out as part of their art. This was it! This was the home he had always been trying to come home to.

He walked to the edge of his shelf. He couldn't remem-

ber how to fly. He couldn't remember what air would feel like on his great wings, but he knew his body would know. His body had known what it would be like to kiss Mark, before he ever kissed Mark. His body knew what it would be like to see the Empire State Building at night, before the first frosty night he had seen it nearly a year ago. His body would take care of him.

His lover, the blue-feathered flyer with Max's eyes, flew by singing the touching song. Steven stepped into the bright air.

It was a minor miracle; they roommates agreed afterward, that Steven's body hadn't hit anyone when he stepped off the roof of their building at 3:03 on a Tuesday afternoon. The police were very resourceful in tracking down Steven's mother in Manhattan, Kansas. What a funny name for a little town. His abuse must have been terrible and they felt bad all that night as they watched TV. Later they agreed there was nothing they could have done, and packed up his stuff into small cardboard boxes to mail to his home.

Shirley's Asian girlfriend, the one whose name Steven could never pronounce, saved one souvenir: in his left hand he had been holding five blue feathers. She saved the least bloody one. She wanted to hang it up over their bed; apparently in her village (or whatever) they believed that unusual plumage could stimulate dreams. Shirley pulled it down the next week, and tossed it in the garbage. She really was a bitch.

## FIDEL'S BARBER

Paige Quayle

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IT WAS MR. ZHAO WHO SENT ME TO RAMONE. WHEN I took my dry cleaning in he said, “you need a haircut.”

“I’m going in to my barber tomorrow.”

“Barber in the city?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“Please,” he said. “The neighborhood is dying. You know what happens when a neighborhood like this dies? The money men come in. Think about it; do you want to pay five dollars for your morning coffee? Thirty dollars for ‘fee-arranged’ chicken? They let those chickens walk around and eat what they want. You know what chickens eat when they’re left out? They eat their own shit, that’s what they eat. Eh? You wanna pay cash-money for water?

You've been here a long time; you don't want to see it happen on this block, do you?

"I suppose you go to some big time barber in the city. Maybe your barber cut George Clooney's hair? Brad Pitt maybe? Is that what why you go to the city? You think you're gonna look like George Clooney? You think these guys buy pants in the Old Navy? Maybe you go to Ramon, you could afford some pants from Macys, pants I could get the stains out of. Celebrities? Phaaa! You want celebrities? Fidel Castro, how's that for celebrity. Fidel is a man of substance and ideals, a man of power and charisma. Patronize the old businesses. Go to Ramon down the block. He cut Fidel's hair."

I tried to remember Castro's hair but could only remember the beard. I wondered if Ramon had been responsible for that travesty. "This is back-alley Brooklyn," I told Zhao. "Nobody's moving in here."

"Take a walk four blocks out of the neighborhood. Look around. It's happening everywhere."

"Zhao," I said. "At what age do you become senile?"

"Go get your haircut," he said.

**O**n the way to work the next day, I went into one of those stores that sell the bottles of water. "How much?" I asked.

"Dollar and a quarter."

I carried my turkey sandwich in a bag as I always did but I asked. "Turkey on rye, lettuce and tomato, mayo?"

"Six-fifty."

Maybe the fact that I couldn't remember Fidel's hair was a good sign, a sign of simplicity, competence. My city barber had just raised his price to forty dollars. I had plenty of hair and the curl in it would hide mistakes. I canceled my regular lunch-time barber appointment.

That night I worked late, inventorying returns from Cato stores. Mel and Great Uncle Sammy, my bosses, left early for shul. I suppose I'm a "lapsed Jew" (but don't tell my mother). I was working as a shipping clerk while I wrote my novel. It was a good thing I didn't count on this as a career since the garment business wasn't what it used to be. There were no more crowds of hand-carts jamming the streets off Seventh Avenue, off-shore factories had taken over. Mel and Sammy were the last of a breed and I couldn't figure out why they were still struggling at their ages.

The next morning, Saturday, I worked on my novel till three, then walked down the block to Ramon's Barber Shop. I could see it had once been a fine establishment but now the walls were cracked and painted "close-out yellow" — or had they once been white and turned yellow with age? The original floor had been covered with cheap linoleum that was scuffed, worn and stained. Springs escaped from the bottom of six waiting chairs and the two leather barber chairs had been mended with duct tape. Latin music played in the background at a comfortable volume, Buena Vista Social Club.

The super from across the street was reading the Daily News sports page but he waved me toward a chair. "I'm in no hurry," he said.

Ramon was thin and dignified despite his age. He swept the hair off the chair with his barber brush and shook out a clean red and white wrap for me. "At your service," he said.

"Not too short," I said.

"Of course not. We have to leave something for the girls to run their hands through," he said. "A young man like you must have lots of girls ..."

"No one special." I thought about Jeanie who worked the bar at Putnam's in Greenpoint. I liked her a lot, but so did everyone else. Not only did she tend bar part-time, but she taught yoga at two World Gyms, baby sat regularly and wrote poetry in her spare time (she'd whispered that to me when she found out I was writing a novel). When would she have time for a date? I was afraid to ask.

"Aurelio, you hear that?" Ramon asked the super. "You have any nice girls in your building?"

Aurelio lowered his paper and looked at me. "Naa," he said. "Two singles under thirty, one has a kid, mean boyfriend in jail, kid's a brat. The other has a drug problem. You don't want that."

"Too bad," Ramon said. "Well, you look like you could find your own girls anyway."

There was a moment of silence and I heard myself say, "Mr. Zhao, the dry cleaner, tells me you cut Fidel Castro's hair."

Aurelio lowered his paper and smiled at Ramon, then went back to his sports page.

"Fidel, Che, Raul, Camilo, even Celia Sanchez ... all of

them I cut. We had a vision. We had a vision ...”

“You fought in the revolution?”

“I was a boy. I followed them into the Sierra Maestras. I slept with them in water up to my chin. I was at the Playa Giron. I buried friends.”

“What were they like, the revolutionaries?”

“Brave. They were all brave. I don’t know the others well, only Fidel. Fidel is brave, smart, very smart. And confident. Never count him out. He has more strength than twenty men. He would move for days, weeks at a time ... walking slowly but never stopping, not to drink water, not to go to the bathroom. He knows everything, sees everything. He’s everywhere at once.” Ramon stopped and looked around as if he expected Castro to appear in the barbershop. “Fidel is not like you and me. Fidel is, *Patria o Muerte!*”

“So you admire him then? The stories about his cruelties aren’t true?”

“Cruelties? Many of the cruelties are true. He’s a man. He did good. He did bad. He had a dream. What happens when you dream? No matter how strong you are, you wake up in the morning. You do things. Maybe you do great things. Maybe you do things you never thought you’d do. Maybe you cut hair. Without the dream, maybe you don’t do anything.”

Aurelio grunted in agreement without putting his paper down.

“He had good hair,” Ramon said.

“Why did you leave?” I asked.



"My mother, my sisters, they wanted rich American husbands. What could I do? My father was killed in the revolution. I was the man of the family."

"Did they get them?"

"What?"

"Rich American husbands?"

"Ha! Do rich Americans want illiterate refugee peasants? Stupid girls with stupid dreams."

"Where are they?"

"Florida, Texas. When my mother died, I come up here to get away from them. They only want money from me."

"You could have introduced them to Fidel."

"Ha. What would Fidel want with stupid girls. He could have any girl he wants."

"I suppose so."

"He had good hair. You have hair like him, you know that? You have strong hair like Fidel. Cubano?"

"No. Ashkenazi."

"Ashkenazi? Some kind of American Indian?"

"European. Jewish."

"Ah, still, you have hair like Fidel. Raul had that hair too. You could be *hermanos*. Come feel his hair Aurelio."

Aurelio lowered his paper and gave Ramon a dirty look.

Ramon shook his head, then handed me a hand mirror and asked, "How do you like the cut? It's good, no? You look like a *revolucionario*. Look Aurelio. Cuba Libre."

Aurelio lowered the paper. "Cuba Libre," he said half-heartedly.

"Cuba Libre," Ramon called back.

I did look good and all for fifteen bucks with tip (a generous three dollar tip!). I walked a little taller when I left. I practiced a Fidel-like stride instead of my usual scuttle.

The door to Mr. Zhao's Dry Cleaning Store was open so I stopped. "I went to your barber," I said despite the fact that Mrs. Orleneff from downstairs was counting out dollar bills for him. "How do you like it?"

Mr. Zhao gave me a thumbs up and Mrs. Orleneff turned around looking irritated at first and then smiled at me.

*Viva la revolucion*, I thought. I promised myself to brush up on my high school Spanish.

I walked all the way to Greenpoint and sure enough, Jeanie was tending the bar at Putnam.

"What'll it be Davy?" She asked. "We haven't filled the taps yet. We only have bottles."

"Cuba Libre," I said.

"Wow," she said. "You go gay on me?"

"Hardly."

"Just kidding. Hey, I'm having a few friends over Sunday night. You doing anything?"

"Don't think so."

"Why don't you come over then?"

"What's the occasion?"

"No occasion ... well, actually I was hoping to get help putting up some book shelves. How are you with a screw driver?"

"No one's ever complained."

Jeanie gave me a quizzical look. "Hey, just because I tend bar ..."

"I didn't mean anything by it."

"OK, I'll write down my address. Sunday, sixish."

"What can I bring?"

"We'll call for pizza but I'm not mixing any fancy drinks on my day off."

"Beer. I'll bring beer. OK?"

"See ya Sunday."

I had a good week. Maybe I shouldn't have made fun of Uncle Sammy behind his back but it sure livened things up in the shipping room. No longer the boss's nephew, I smoked joints with the boys in the basement. We had laughs. I let them goof off for an hour then reined them in for the rest of the day.

Sunday I bought a six of Bud and headed out to Jeanie's house in Gowanis. Her place was a dump. Her friends worked hard on the shelves and listened when I told them how to do it. They were pretty dorky except that this guy Matt brought a hot dancer named Rina. Rina and I hit it off. We sat on the couch drinking someone's Brooklyn Lager and coaching the workers. What Rina lacked in the breast area, she more than made for in the leg department. I took Rina home while Matt stayed to help Jeanie clean up. Only I took Rina to my home for a few hours first. For the next few weeks she paid me a visit nearly every other night. Ever make it with a dancer? They have stamina; they have flexibility; they're used to doing what

they're told. It wasn't long before I got tired of telling her what to do, and she wasn't what you'd call creative.

Anyway, I was starting to have more offers. Linda, one of the buyers for Halo Stores out of Atlanta, took me out to a fancy east side restaurant and whined about her bad marriage till I went back to her hotel and shut her up. April at the copy center, Harriot at the corner deli. Francie, who I'd broken up with three months before, slipped back into my life. Girls smiled at me in the subway, in the street and every time I went into Putnam, Jeanie asked about Rina. When I told her it was over she got real friendly again.

It had to be the haircut.

The next time I went to Ramon's he looked unhappy.

"What's the matter?" I asked him.

"Matter? Trump is buying property on Brand St., three blocks from here."

"Trump? Donald Trump is buying property here?"

"Donald. Little Donald. That girl of his. One of them made an offer on the Tressler building."

"I haven't heard anything about it."

"Sure. He's keeping it hush hush. Maybe he gets a better price if no one knows about it. I'm telling you, he's looking to buy the Tressler Building. "

"What for?"

"What for? What for? Do I know what for? It's the end of the neighborhood, that's all I know. Where'll we go? That's what I don't know."

"You know what, Ramon? We're not going anywhere. We're gonna fight. We're gonna fight 'em Ramon."

“Fight Trump? We’re gonna fight Trump?”

“Sure. We’re gonna fight him and we’re gonna win. *Viva la revolucion!*”

“You got guts, kid,” he said. “And you got Fidel’s hair, that’s for sure. And Trump’s hair ... well, Trump’s hair ...”

We both laughed.

“Viva la revolution!” we howled.

Suddenly there was a loud thud as a baseball smashed into the old air conditioner that was wedged in the transom.

“Go play somewhere else,” Ramon yelled at them.

“It wasn’t us, mister. It wasn’t us.”

“Who was it then? The tooth fairy?”

“The stranger. It was the stranger; the man with the cigar,” they said.

“Ehhh, get out of here. Take your stories and your baseballs somewhere else,” Ramon said. “Kids ...”

**R**ina got her dancer friends to put on a show to raise funds and awareness. I made up flyers; April copied them and we put them up all over. Harriot saw that we were all fed. Francie agreed to act as our lawyer and I made a fiery speech at the public hearing. The three Trumps sat at the back of the room with those “Apprentice” frowns on but in the end, he bought the building from an undisclosed conglomerate and we were left to recycle our petition. All we’d accomplished was to get them a lot of publicity and raise the price, but Trump could afford it.

Still, I was a hero. When I walked down my street

downtrodden, Zhao looked up and smiled at me, gave me thumbs up as if I'd been successful. Ramon peeked out his door and said, "forget about it." Aurelio, in his doorway, just nodded.

A few weeks later I went back to Ramon for another haircut.

This time I went for a shave too. Ramon leaned me back in the green leather chair and wrapped a towel around my neck. I stared up at the warped tin ceiling while he sharpened his bone-handled straight razor on a leather strop. Then he took a warm towel from the steamer and wrapped my face. I kept my eyes closed while he lathered me up.

Soft rumba music played in the background and Ramon talked about the countryside when he was a child, going to Veradero Beach as a teenager, Havana as an adult. He talked about how his father knew Gregorio Fuentes (The old man of the sea), and how he often begged pesos from Hemmingway in La Florida.

He talked about the *barbudos* in the Sierra Maestras and how he finally convinced Fidel to let him cut his hair after he was victorious. And he talked about Fidel. "You're much like him, not only your hair," he said.

"I doubt we'll have the same impact on history."

"You can't tell. Fidel said, 'Men do not shape destiny, Destiny produces the man for the hour.' You did well for us."

What did he mean by that? "What else did Fidel say?"

"He said that capitalism causes war, hypocrisy and competition."

“Hmmm ...”

“No one else could have done what he’s done, no one ...”

■ ■ What about Che?” I asked.

“Che was crazy, smart but a little crazy. He took on too much ...but that was his destiny. And Camilo ...ah, Camilo, talk about crazy ...”

With that he slathered my face with Bay Rum, spun me around to the mirror, flung the towel into the corner and announced, “You’re ready to meet your destiny!”

I did look good.

**M**aybe I’d celebrated a little too much the first night I saw him. It was late, but not past two am. The only other person on the street was Scootch. Scootch lived under a blanket on the stoop of 83 or in the subway station. I’d never seen his face and though his blanket was filthy, his boots were sturdy.

That night he was on the stoop, and he might have been awake when I passed; there was a dark opening at the edge of the blanket.

The streetlight at the end of the block was out but I could see a tall shadowy figure walking past. It was no one I recognized from the neighborhood. He was wearing army fatigues and just before he passed behind the building, he hesitated, turned toward me and took a drag on a cigar that lit up his face. He looked straight at me and

shook his head, as if he was trying to tell me something, as if he was disappointed.

“Do you see that Scootch?” I said.

The blanket never moved.

Look who I’m asking, I thought, and ran down the block. There was no one around, but Ramon’s barber-shop was three doors down. I figured he’d gone there, but the gate was pulled down and locked tight. There was no light inside and no movement that I could see through the steel lattice. I scanned up and down the block and there was no one, not even a car nearby.

I shook the gate. Nothing.

I swore I’d go back to drinking beer after that, but it was a vow I didn’t keep.

Six days later I saw him in a crowd on Seventh Avenue at lunchtime. He had a suit on and no one else noticed him despite the cigar, but I lost him. Walking home from the subway a week later, I looked up and saw him in a car on the BQE! I hadn’t been drinking at all. A few more weeks went by and I saw him across the room at the Putnam on a crowded Friday night. He was wearing fatigues but not smoking. I lost him again.

Meanwhile, Rina went on tour with a new dance company. April’s roommate told me she’d gone to law school in Oregon. Francie announced she’d “moved on.” Harriot was obsessed with opening her own restaurant. Francie was too tired to come to Brooklyn and Jeanie was always working.

Time for another haircut.



"You know," I told Ramon. "There's a guy around here who looks just like Fidel."

"No one LOOKS like Fidel," he said.

"Then he's here."

"Fidel here. That's a good one."

"You'd know if he was here, right? He'd come to see you."

"Of course. We'd all know if Fidel was here." Ramon had no reason to believe I'd actually seen him; I wasn't sure of it myself. If Fidel was here, surely he'd visit his old friend and barber, wouldn't he?

"How about you take on Bloomberg next," Ramon said. "Call out your *miliciana* and go after Bloomberg."

"Bloomberg? What did he do?"

"Look at the streets, man. They're a holy mess. My car is ruined."

"You have a car?"

"Buick Lucerne. Good strong American car."

"What do you want with a car? You don't need a car here. People live in the city so they don't have to have cars."

"I don't NEED a car; I WANT a car. Everyone wants a car."

"I don't."

"OK, a young man like you, maybe you want a motorcycle. Harley Davidson, eh?"

"Harley Davidson ..." (I thought about how easy it was to become corrupt — Suharno Marcus, Milosevic, Duvalier ... I thought about Fidel, working in the fields

in his fatigues.) “Just watch what you’re doing,” I told Ramon. “Don’t take too much off.”

“I know what you want.”

This really pissed me off and if a cute girl, lost on my block and asking for directions, hadn’t flirted with me afterward I would have looked for a new barber right away.

That night I walked the girl, Amelie, to the subway station and on the way home I saw him again. He was standing under the streetlight smoking, a block and a half away. He was unmistakable and he still looked disappointed.

I was afraid to go after him, afraid he’d disappear again.

“Scootch. Scootch. Wake up, man.” I crossed the street and pushed the lump under the blanket with my foot.

“Scootch. Come on. Just look out here for a minute. Come on. Don’t be afraid. Ya gotta see this.”

The blanket moved.

“Come on. You’re gonna miss him.”

The blanket rippled and Scootch’s face peered out of an oval opening.

“Look down there,” I pointed. “What do you see?”

Scootch craned his neck but held the blanket tightly around his face.

“Fidel Castro,” he said.

“Yes! Yes!”

Scootch pulled the blanket back over his head and settled onto his stoop. Did I hear him chuckle?

I moved quickly toward Fidel and he stepped out of the light. When I got there he was gone.

I walked around that block and the next but he was

nowhere. Ramon's was locked up tight but his Buick was parked on North St.

I sat on the stoop in front of it, pissed as could be. Take on Bloomberg ... he wants me to take on Bloomberg for the sake of his Capitalist car and he doesn't trust me enough to introduce Fidel. AND, he thinks he knows what I want! What was the first land to go after Castro established the Agrarian Reform Law, the first land Castro nationalized after the revolution? It was his father's. His own father who sent him to law school to save his ranch from the hands of Batista, that's whose land he took first. He gave his father's precious land to the peasants. *Viva la revolution!*

My own drunken father had locked himself out of his car plenty of times. It was good training. I knew how to get into a locked car. I knew how to disconnect an alarm. I knew how to hot-wire. But it had started to rain and I had a better idea.

When I got the car open, I went for Scootch.

"Wake up Scootch. Come on buddy. We're gonna keep you dry tonight."

"No shelter," he said.

"No shelter," I promised.

He got up and shuffled behind me without removing the blanket. "No shelter. No shelter," he murmured.

"No shelter," I said. "Just exploited against exploiters."

I tucked him into the back seat of the Buick and went home to bed. Where had Scootch gotten those boots? Sturdy boondockers, steel-toed, thick sole, like construc-

tion workers or marines wore.

**T**he car sat in the same spot for days, plastered with tickets until the cops towed it. After that I made a point of passing by Ramon's to hear his lament but the gate was down, locked. I imagined him fighting with the DMV day after day. It would teach him a lesson. I wasn't worried that he'd come after me. Did Scootch even know who I was? If he did, who would believe him? Where was he anyway? And who put the Cohiba in my mailbox?

I went back to my old barber on 37th Street but now he charged \$50!

I wouldn't have felt bad at all except that Scootch was gone too. In the course of looking for him I noticed that Ramon's seemed to be permanently closed, the mugs, tonic bottles and other equipment, gone.

I looked for the mysterious cigar smoker in fatigues but kept seeing this middle-aged woman in spike heels squiring other well-dressed people around the neighborhood. When I saw her coming out of Zhao's, I had to ask ...

"What's up with the yuppies?"

"Real estate," said Zhao. "Making big bucks on this place and Ramon sold me a share of the Tessler Building a year ago. Ooo, we making very big bucks on that ...moving to Boca."

"What? Boca?"

"Not my fault. They made me an offer I couldn't resist."

"But you've been in this neighborhood ...forever."

"Hey, I like pants from Macy too and my wife ...she

likes the sunshine.”

“What about the neighborhood?”

“You’re the revolutionary, better get busy.”

“Busy. I can’t fight everybody.”

“A revolution is not a bed of roses.”

Where had I heard that before? Mao? No, Fidel! “I can’t fight alone.”

“Call up your girlfriends?”

“What happened to Ramon?” I asked.

“Went back to Cuba.”

“Back to Cuba! Who goes back to Cuba? You can’t do that. The government wouldn’t let you do that.”

“Ramon can do it. He has two passports, two citizenships.”

“But why would he go back to Cuba?”

Zhao shrugged. “He likes the weather.”

**I**n my mailbox there was an invitation from Harriot for the opening of her new restaurant, a card from Rina, a note from Francie saying that she’d heard some of the construction workers on the new site were non-union and unlicensed. Also, phone messages from April, and Amelie. I called Jeanie. She said to meet her after work, that she could cut my hair. I lit the Cohiba and dusted off the pages of my manuscript.

It was getting cold.

## IN A STRANGE CITY LYING ALONE

Scott Edelman

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**T**HE LONGER I CAN REMAIN QUIET, THE LONGER I CAN remain still, the longer it will take for them to find me, and the happier they will be.

Well ... happier probably isn't the best word. Are any of us ever going to be happy again?

Maybe not.

But when they find me, they'll feel relief at least, won't they? That's still possible, isn't it? I have to believe relief, that sigh of the soul, for those working at this nightmarish job, those trapped in this terrifying time, those who volunteered to be in this sad, sad place, can be as welcome as joy.

Relief can be hope.

These men and women, their spirits shattered, their city ash and ruins, used to the more human-sized battles of putting out fires or prying accident victims from crushed cars, are struggling to beat back the despair brought on by this unimaginable catastrophe. They need some glimmer of hope in order to go on.

I know I certainly do.

If I can help them grab hold of it, maybe I'll find there's a little bit of that hope left over for me, too.

And so I don't move. And I wait.

But you know something? As I wait, I don't hear them getting any closer.

Yet I can hear ... something. Muffled voices I can't quite make out. But it's not them.

This not moving, it turns out to be easier than I thought it would be. I honestly don't think I could move much anyway, even if I wanted to.

I can't seem to feel my legs anymore.

Not that I'm complaining. That's how I wanted it. That's the way it needed to be. Unless I'm trapped, really truly trapped, unless they can feel they've rescued me, well, where's the hope in that?

Besides, here in the darkness, I feel close to my parents in a way I haven't for years. From time to time I shut my eyes and try to imagine them both. (Though do I really need to shut my eyes? The darkness down here is so complete there's little difference between eyes open and eyes closed.) Mom and Dad were planted down in darkness, too, not so long ago, and not so very far from me.

Only it wasn't by choice.

Once, they were hundreds of feet above me, side by side in that tiny office of theirs, buying and selling, and seemingly never the same thing twice, measuring out their days in margins so thin they had little left over for themselves in either time or money. How they didn't go crazy I'll never know.

They worked together that way for years, held aloft by concrete and steel and the dream of a city they thought would keep thrusting up forever and would never be knocked down. I squint, trying to see them as they were, high above my head, but it's dizzying to try, their past as distant as birds in the sky.

But unlike birds, they fell.

They fell when the city fell.

A city I'd left behind.

I'd loved it once, this city. I loved them, too. When did it change? When did their embrace become less comforting than claustrophobic? I can't remember. All I know is that, as if a switch had been flicked, the city had suddenly become more prison than playground, and I felt as if I was both jailer and jailed. I no longer knew who I was any longer apart from them or it.

So I ran. I got out while I still could, before I became like my parents. But even after I was gone, I could still hear their voices in my head, and hear the sounds of taxis late at night on rain-swept streets as well. You live with a person so long, you live with a thing, and it gets inside you. It's as if I'd taken a piece of them with me. Although



they kept haunting me in that way, although the city's tug was inescapable, I never thought I'd return.

But then someone attacked them, attacked it, and I had to come back.

At first, I spent my days climbing through the rubble, as we all did, part of an endless human chain clearing away the debris, and spent my nights collapsed on cots at a nearby hospital. I thought I could find my parents, I really did. But I soon realized, as so many of us were forced to do, that for the most part, that belief was a delusion.

I worked as many hours a day as they would permit and my body would allow. I got a little loopy from exhaustion, I think. From time to time, I thought I could hear them, Dad worrying about me, insisting in that endless annoying loop of his that everything would go wrong, Mom assuring me that all would be right. Even though I felt their presence beneath my feet, we never found them. According to the news, from dust they came, and to dust they had returned. Those few we did find were beyond talking, either dead or so battered in brain and body they were barely alive.

But I never stopped looking.

I wasn't the only one. I was surrounded by seekers. I felt for them, with their crumpled and tear-streaked faces. But strangely, the ones I felt for the most were the rescue dogs. They were the only ones of us who didn't choose to be here. They didn't feel called. They were brought here.

The trainers felt the same way about them that I did. They knew that their animals couldn't handle the endless

disappointment and despair. So you know what they did to lift the spirits of the poor things? They had us hide, so we could pretend to be found.

And the dogs, the dogs would be so happy! Their eyes would be bright again, and they'd lick our faces, and ...

And I thought ...

If I could bring that joy to a dog, even in the midst of this Hell, then why not a person?

Wait. What was that?

Did you hear it?

Have my rescuers figured out what I've done? Are they any closer to finding me? I don't think so, but ... there are those voices ...

I can hear them now, this time I really think I can. Dad, calling from far off, asking me how I could have been so thoughtless as to do what I did, and my mother, shushing him and telling me not to worry. I smile at their familiar banter. How could I have felt that oppressive? How could I have run from them? I'd give anything to see their faces again.

No ... it's not them. What am I thinking? I've just been down here alone for too long. But it's not my rescuers either.

What's keeping them? I want to see their faces when they set me free. I need to see their faces.

That's why it had to seem real, you see. That's why it had to *be* real. People, especially not trained emergency workers, can't be tricked the same way the dogs can.

And so as it grew dark, I slipped away. It wasn't that

hard. The acres seem endless here, and even with all those wanting to help, there aren't enough people to be everywhere at once. I wriggled down into the rubble, crawling as if through a maze, hearing the concrete and steel shift around me ...

I never expected the girder to slide and pin me where I lay. But they had to have heard it as it happened, right? I was actually a little pleased and proud, because surely, that would make them believe.

And so I waited.

And I wait still.

Oh, I can imagine their faces when they find me, when they lift that final piece of debris and discover both me and the strength to go on.

We could all use the strength to go on.

I don't know that I have the strength to go on.

What's that? I do?

Who said that? I thought I heard somebody say that.

But no one is there.

Am I making sense? I don't think so. I think I've become delirious. I let myself get too hungry and thirsty, and I no longer know how many days I've been down here.

Yes, father, I know. I'm impulsive, and I keep doing these sorts of things over and over, jumping in before I check how deep the water is. And no, mother, I won't cry. I know you'll make sure I'm safe. You always do.

No.

Always *did*.

I should have planned better for this. I didn't really

have a plan, not before, when I left this city, and not now, that I've returned.

I feel in my heart a person should choose a place, shouldn't they, and not be chosen by it? If you end up where you started, but you never moved from the spot where you were born, that's not choice, that's inertia. That's why I really went away, I guess. But now I'm back. And I didn't come back. I was *called* back. So after all those years, all that running, it's still not of my choosing either. I still don't *know*. Isn't that silly?

I feel hands on me, and when I open my eyes, even though I'm still covered by the rubble I pulled down upon myself, I can make out the forms of my rescuers. After all this time, my eyes have gotten used to the darkness, I guess, and I can see their outlines better.

It's a man. And a woman. And they lift me up to the surface as if no concrete and steel bar the way.

It is only when the sun hits me and I try to make out the change I've made upon their faces, which is what all this was for, that I see my two rescuers were ... my mother and my father.

I tilt my head. No one else seems to be paying any attention to us as they go about their business seeking signs of life. And I so much wanted to see the relief on their faces. I want to shout, "Over here! I'm over here!" But when I look back to my parents, there is relief on their faces.

And I imagine that there is relief on mine.

My mother takes my right hand, my father takes my

left, and they lift me to my feet. I no longer feel dizzy. I no longer feel thirsty. I no longer feel as if I need to look any further for the place I am meant to be.

No one disturbs us as we leave this place of pain and sorrow, leave to return back to my city.

Back to my city forever.

FREE PROMO - DO NOT COPY

## INTO HOLY HANDS

Gay Partington Terry

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**L**ET US BEGIN WITH THE HANDS, FOR THEY ARE what first engaged me. The skin was aging, wrinkled, loose. The veins protruded, like wire casing, some of them blue-green on yellowish-gray skin. The palms were delicate. The fingers long and thin. The nails, soft enough to have been peeled short, were almost imperceptible, the cuticle chewed off leaving amber rings. The wrist bone protruded dangerously from dry, flaking skin. On the inside of the wrists, scars, a last attempt at control over destiny. Perhaps I should have recognized the coarse athetosis suggested in their movements, a symptom of their consumptive heresies, but I was spellbound. The otherworldliness of those hands fascinated and bewitched me.

The rest was irrelevant, a dark shapeless mound of

grimy rags like many others cluttering the streets. There was a cloth wrap or a hood that fell over the head that was always bent painfully low on the chest. There was no face, only shadow.

Only hands. Hands that called to me from the first day I saw them. Their elegant severity became an obsession. On cold days the mound expanded, padded against the frigid winds. On warmer days, less volume, but still covered completely, only the hands exposed themselves. Mornings, I pressed bread into them, or cracklings gleaned from my meager rations.

Evenings, I pressed coins, ever fearful of touching skin to skin. The head would bob in gratitude; the hand would close and recede into its safehold. The mound would rock slowly, side to side in contained ecstasy.

I read in those hands the end of the barrio, the end of Time, though I was blind to the implications. That is, I allowed myself to be seduced by the poetry of the hands while dismissing the seditious nature their true disclosure. I read in those hands the futility of my preoccupations, the emptiness of my life, the uselessness of my coming and going — except for what I might offer Them.

It was official hands that took my wife. Call it a disease of the heart if you will, but I saw those sanctified hands come in the night to deprive her of pain. A vision? I saw them, even though I wasn't there, even though I was alone in a room dreaming, even though I was supposed to be at my work.

I had no need of that shrill disturbance, the official

phone call. Later the Collector came for her and her things, but they left a slipper, a handkerchief, an old sweater, in their haste. These I pressed into the hands in gratitude for their devout mercy.

I was alone then. No companion to nurse. No simpatica with whom to share the thin broth. It had been many years since we'd had words for each other, her at her bed and I at my faithless figures, and yet ... She was grateful for my attempts to plump her waning body, amenable to her fate.

Only the mystical hands drew together in prayer at her passing. Imagine extracting a prayer from the sprawl of the decrepit barrio. I was ashamed that it was not I who made the gesture. I placed a candle in the praying hands, and it disappeared into the dark mound.

After she was gone and the extra room boarded up and annexed by the neighbors, I was even more about my work despite the futility. The light of my screen was consoling, the figures dependable. I may have lost my voice from lack of contact, but I was never distracted. I did my work, swept my room and cleaned my bowl. I was careful and quiet and never needful. I moved delicately at the edge of life, passing the hands twice a day, morning and evening. What was it that kept me in the barrio after she'd gone? Only the hands, for I had no hunger, no wish to live.

The Guardians discontinued my junkets to the Core after that night — as always, reacting too late. How was it that I became so wayworn? I lost appetite, stamina. My eyesight became dim; if not for the light of my screen, I



couldn't have worked. If not for the companionship of the hands ...

Weeks went by, perhaps years. If it is true that time and space are related, then it may have been a matter of hours — but I do not think they are so closely joined. The light became dimmer, the barrio more decrepit, cluttered with abandoned hopes, reeking with fetid desires. Only the hands were pure, virtuous, unsoiled, despite their wear. Their impeccable witchery intensified with each encounter. Long lean woman's hands they were, not square and blunt like mine. Innocent of the feter that surrounded them.

One morning I hesitated before them and a voice escaped the ragged mound. Not so much a voice as an illusion. "*Restes d'homme*," it seemed to say.

"Save your life."

"I have no life," I whispered back, and wondered all day if the hands had really spoken.

That night they seemed fawning when I offered coins. They did not speak again, but offered me a feather, a rancid filthy thing that had no doubt come from a diseased bird, one of the blind pigeons perhaps. I took it home and pondered it. It was greasy and deformed, but in a certain light I could almost see its former iridescence, the ghost of the pungent bird it came from.

Even the Collector would not accept it, but with it I could almost see his former existence. Yes, the Collector himself had once been flesh ... smaller ... hungry. The features were dim. I accepted the vessel he offered, the

reliquary of my dear wife, the decorative bones, and mumbled an ancient prayer in solitude as I partook of the ritual meal.

When he was gone, I looked at my own hands. They were swarthy and square, thick and awkward. They were often cramped from working at the keys.

The nails were yellow, hard. I clipped them straight across with one haphazard snip for each. They were marred by spots and lacerations. Several of the knuckles were swollen; some of the fingers crooked. Surely they were unworthy. Who would honor me with magical nibbling?

I returned the feather to the sanctuary of holy hands.

“You’ve passed the test,” they signed. (No voice this time.) “Humans are doomed by their sanctimoniousness, but there is a race of angels. You are eligible for the transformation.”

In the unpretentious hands, I placed a section of soft blood sausage from my ritual meal of the previous evening, and they disappeared.

That evening when I offered my small coin (it was the end of a lean season), the hands closed upon mine. They were soft and cool, a disquietingly unharmonious combination of qualities. I wanted to pull away, but I chose not to offend. I did not entertain thoughts of malady.

I looked about furtively, but there was no help in the barrio ... Then the coolness turned warm and released me.

“Again tomorrow,” they signed.

I hurried off.

In my room I suffered a cold draft as I tried to sleep. It kept close to the floor and reminded me of the hands. Surely purity by nature must be cold, like the stone statues on the platform of the subtram, the marble floor of the courthouse in the Core. (I suffered the coldness of that floor once in my frivolous youth when I was thrown there.) Only decaying things are warmed by the process of putrefaction. But where did the softness come from?

An attribute of sympathy, mercy, compassion perhaps?

I could smell the neighbor's cooking, hear her baby cry in the room they'd annexed from me. I am no good at philosophy, but I know there is no excuse for stench and noise. It was rare that they had anything more than the common ration of thin broth to eat. I could overlook one night of foulness. The child would quiet when its belly was empty again. Surely the Collector would get wind of their infraction.

A race of angels, the hands had said. Transformation.

Perhaps I should report them; there was the smell of onion. Then the mother sang a seditious lullaby to the child.

Well, I had bread to pour my broth over, and work papers to slip between my blankets ... and a commitment to purity.

I hurried out the next morning, having slept late, and was nearly run down by the neighbor.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "We are thankful for the room,

but sorry to hear of your bereavement. We wished to offer our condolences earlier, but did not wish to disturb you.”

The man had only one hand!

“You seem such a solitary fellow,” he said.

“I am.”

His coat sleeve hung flat, tucked into the pocket, perhaps even stitched down. “We would be most honored if you were to pay us a call.”

I looked at the empty sleeve, the single insurgent hand that hung limply from his other too-short sleeve. I looked back up into his stupid face, devoid of lines, watery of eye. There is no dignity in these youngsters.

I hurried on my way.

When I offered the dark crust of bread (the soft innards having been consumed with my broth), I whispered to the hands: “If we were any less faithful, we might have an onion.”

That evening, the hands did not attempt to speak, nor did they touch mine. Perhaps the mention of impurity had saddened them. I chastised myself for speaking of impropriety. Though surrounded by the barrio’s inadequacies, we had disdained speaking of them out loud. For that lapse on my part, I offered ten copper coins — enough for a bowl of broth.

That evening a melodrama erupted next door. Just after dark, there was motion in the corridor, figures coming and going, the whisper of women, strange odors, burning, the sound of choking, gagging. The metal door squeaked and thumped with each passing, there were murmurs in

the corridor where someone had smashed the light. I was afraid and pushed the table in front of the door. Someone knocked, but I was silent and they went away. I dozed fitfully, expecting a row.

Towards daybreak, the woman began to scream — louder than the child had ever screamed. There was a panicked scuffle as if intruders were fleeing.

Then the muffling of the scream; perhaps the husband had finally asserted himself. And sobbing. Then silence at last.

I tried to sleep. Authorities have no access to the barrio at night, but morning was imminent. I watched the grimy pane grow light behind its grill, waited to hear the sound of sirens, steel-toed boots in the corridor. There was nothing.

I heard the one-handed man leave, and hurried to dress myself. When I went out into the corridor, their door opened. The woman's face, streaked with dirt, lined with worry, peeked out at me. Her red eyes pleaded and I hesitated.

"My baby," she said. "My baby is sick. Can you help?"

She held the ragged bundle out to me. I could feel the heat, smell decay. The woman's hands were tiny, child-like; she smoothed the damp fur on the child's head. What could a woman with such small hands hope to accomplish? She looked so helpless. Her dark hair hung in strings down her back, making her look like a lost child herself. How had a woman like this chosen a one-handed man? Some dark collusion of fate had no doubt thrown

them together ... but to have a child!

I shook my head and went on my way.

The hands were waiting for me in the usual place, but I had nothing to offer them.

"Would the race of angels accept a child?" I asked them.

The hands folded as if in prayer; the head bent lower to the chest.

"Yes," they seemed to say. "It is what we seek."

"Can you come?" I asked them.

The hands spread themselves out, fingers appealing to the heavens. The head never lifted.

I grasped one of the cold hands, the other gripped mine. It was a tawdry display and I hurried away.

That evening their door was ajar. I peeked in at the neighbors. The one-handed man paced the floor holding the warm bundle. The woman lay sobbing quietly on a cot. The man looked up and saw me, so I crept away quietly into my own room.

That night was quieter. There was some furtive movement in the corridor, some strange odors, but the stench of desperation had dissipated.

When the one-handed man left in the morning, I tapped on the metal door.

The woman looked out, then opened the door.

"There is no hope," she said. "She's fit for neither life nor sustenance."

I stepped into the tiny room. The child was lying in a wooden box lined with rags. Its hands (once chubby,

perhaps, but now deflated hams) clutched at the fabric of its gown, unable to bend fully, lacking strength to hold on.

The eyes stared, unfocused; a sour venal drool leaked from its mouth and nose.

"My husband has gone to summon the Collector," she mumbled sadly.

"There is one prospect."

She shook her head.

"What will the Collector do with it?"

She began to sob quietly.

"It's so small ..."

"No." She begged.

"There is a race of angels ..." I took her hands, forcing her to look into my eyes, to read my sincerity.

"Angels?"

"I know how to find them," I told her.

"Your wife?"

"No." I said sadly. "They are too late for her."

She looked at the child and at me. "My mother told me of the angels when I was a child. She said they are beautiful creatures, close to God."

"Pure and innocent," I said.

"Can they save her?"

"I don't know. But I know they can transform."

She took a clean cloth, dipped it in water, and went over to the baby. She wiped it carefully while I waited. She changed its soiled diaper and put on a clean gown — white with little hand-stitched animals. Then she wrapped it and handed it to me.

“Her name is Hagalaz,” she said.

I took the child, tucking her little useless hands into the swaddling.

The mother had stopped crying. She patted my arm with her tiny hand and closed the door after us.

I tucked the bundle under my coat as best I could. It was turning cooler already, acquiring purity. The child didn't move ... or breathe.

On the street, people hurried about as if it were any ordinary day. The subtram contributed its rumble, the black damp claimed its tenure, the wind carried its usual warning, and I carried the cold and rigid Hagalaz next to my half-empty stomach.

The holy hands were wound about each other and neatly folded into the mound of rags; only the bony wrists stuck out. I knelt before them, touching them covertly to provoke them from their reverie. The head may have lifted slightly, but I could not detect any beam of the eye, only a hand moved tentatively to touch the bulk under my great-coat. The hands clasped together, fingers entwined, and moved to the hood in an attitude of prayer.

People passed by hurriedly, establishing a wide arc about us on the pavement. The hands waited.

“Please,” I said. “May I see your face before I give you the child?”

The fingers unentwined, the hands still together in an attitude of prayer.

“You must have faith, my son,” they seemed to say.

I did not hesitate, but passed the child into the cold



hands and took my leave.

It was impossible to work. There was a time when I knew what the figures on my screen stood for, but that is long forgotten. There was a time when I was happy to have work that took me away from the killing floor, lacking a natural endowment for physical labor. There was a time when the light of my screen encouraged me ...

I feigned illness and was easily released. Strangely, there were people about the streets. Were their work hours so skewed? Did they work at all?

How did they acquire bread and broth?

I hastened to the holy station, but the hands were absent. How I ached now to participate in the triumph, to join in the sacred transformation. I wondered that the mother had not given in to similar urges. Perhaps exhaustion and grief had overset her concern.

A few steps behind the greasy spot that marked the holy stand, was a dark conduit, damp with tears of the faithful, reeking with abominations cast off.

Through this stink of corruption, I determined to pass. I gasped my last lung full of electromechanically purified air, and stepped, head down, into the glory.

Before I could breathe in the miasma of transformation, I was accosted by eerie laughter, a rasping chant, the crackle of cleansing fire. Ahead my dimmed eyes could discern the faithful, gathered about the cleansing flames.

An acolyte turned the spit slowly, evenly, as if in a trance. My lungs spewed the pent-up air with loud relief. Shadowed eyes turned toward me and a call went up.

There was an illuminating smell ... heavenly, earthy, all realms combined.

I was grabbed, but in ecstasy of the smell I barely felt the pressure. Then a hand went up — a white and holy hand — and all was silenced. The spit turned in its contained orbit. I was released to follow the beckoning of the hand, to approach the sacred smell, to be redeemed. But there had been no transformation, it was the diseased child that turned blackened on the spit.

I looked about me. Mortals ... only mortals attended the death feast. Low and debased mortals, whose immodest hands hung at their sides smeared with fat and blood.

“No!” I shouted. “The meat is impure, unsanctioned. You mustn’t eat it. You risk Kuru.”

The spit never stopped turning. There was laughter behind me. I turned quickly, but the ghouls paid no attention.

Then the holy hands, my pure saintly hands rose to their full height and came down upon my wrists. They pulled me to a corner and the specter to whom they belonged stood looking down at me. A woman’s soft eyes peered out from the shadows of rags in pity and challenged my resolve.

“The meat will be well-cooked and seasoned. There is nothing to fear.”

So that was the gambit, ritualized gluttony, self-indulgence. With a motion as quick as I could muster, I pulled the hood down. The features were far from angelic, they were not even the orderly features of a human face, but a

chaotic distribution of fleshy organs, metallic parts, carbuncles, and circuit-printed substance. Her teeth were filed into points as were those of the acolytes who stood about us. It was an ancient custom, long abandoned, one that now meant to signify a new order, an end of the asceticism that set us apart from the barbarian scavengers of contaminated flora.

I looked from her turbulent face to her insidious hands, to the blackened child of disease.

“Blasphemy!” I said. “You violate the very economy of sacrifice.”

“How doth your broth?”

“The broth is pasteurized, sanitized, nutritionally balanced.”

“Where is passion, love? What virtue hath devouring without emotion?”

“What honor is bestowed by consumption without being consumed?”

“You are consumed by contamination then, no better than the scavengers ...”

“What are you consumed by, pasteurized man? Inhale the heavenly emanation; come, taste the chaste sincerity, untampered with.”

I could only shake my head. The arrogance of rebellion, the recklessness ... and I, deceived by the very organs of touch ...

I found my way back through the prewar conduit, and walked the streets of the barrio for hours, studying the austere display of lovingly bleached jaws and teeth,

bones and gaping heads that sanctified the Gothic edifice of the quarter. The streets were nearly deserted now. Good citizens were at their shifts, meeting quotas, working toward soundness, united in an ideology of nutrition, hallowed by a sacred domestic economic; a community of ultimate intimacy. My head pounded. My hands shook. Was it heresy? Or enlightenment? Debauchery or candor? If this be our culture, how could I fault the convictions of those so participatory?

I came to the edge of the barrio, where the filthy river separated us from the Core, the vegetarian Zeitgeist. Here in these last ruined buildings where the shadows and insects had all but taken over, there was always plenty to eat—corpulent, oily spiders and grebenes; fat larvae of bees, wasps, ants, moths and flies. Cooking fires offered up the sweet perfume of roasting beetles, water bugs and roaches. I purchased one of these treats from a vendor and sat munching, concentrating on the nutty crunch of insect and trying to ignore the stench of the fetid river that swamped its path like malevolent treacle. Across its murky countenance, three of the original sixteen bridges persevered. These, destined to be eroded away by the acid waters and caustic winds that had squandered the others, were chained and barb-wired, heavily guarded on both sides. Perhaps they think us torturing Iroquois. Obsessed Aztecs. Peking Man cracking open shin bones and skulls, strewing the remains around a cave. Perhaps they think we walk about with knife and fork anxious to sample their unwholesome flesh. They do not see the ten-

der loved ones who fatten themselves for us, and brave souls fighting perpetual street wars to be consumed in glory. They have never experienced the savoriness and exhilaration of ingesting sentient beings. They do not appreciate the Eucharist.

On the other side of the river a sepia haze hung over grizzled buildings and jaundiced earth, swathed in toxic bracken. Emaciated figures, depleted of animal protein, scavenged the vile gunk for provision. Imagine digesting the contaminated fungi! Imagine forsaking nutritional balance from large and plentiful assets for the impractical confines of inadequate cancerous herbage. Heaps of corpses wasted on the battlefield; where is justice and mercy in that? Of course, the greatest outrage of all was planting the dead (after allowing them to rot appreciably) into the foul earth, thereby perpetuating the mortification of life. I could foresee only population pressures, environmental depletion, drudgery, exploitation and disease in that venue. Those who do not honor flesh by ingesting, will never understand humanity.

I looked down to the turbid river for inspiration. Encumbered by history, burdened with contaminants, it persisted in its arduous slough. Surely it concealed atonement. I asked myself, what souls lie thick beneath the murk of water? I sat for hours until darkness provided closure and the lustrous water offered illumination. Perhaps it is late for an old man to acquire faith in the spiritual, but I am imbued with the soul of my dear wife who was a pious and plump woman. I vowed to play out my part in

perpetuity. After all, I've acquired the courage of a myriad of souls in the consumption of a lifetime (if only by way of the sanitized broth of the bureaucratic zealots). I am re-formed. I shall drink in the passion of the determined river, together with wife and accumulated intimates, and surely gain immunity from the contagion of politic. I shall file my teeth, raise my worthless hands to heaven, and achieve Grace.

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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**PAUL DI FILIPPO** has been a finalist for the Hugo, Nebula, BSFA, Philip K. Dick, Wired Magazine, and World Fantasy awards. He lives in Providence, Rhode Island but is a frequent visitor to New York City.

**SCOTT EDELMAN** has published more than 75 short stories in magazines such as *Postscripts*, *The Twilight Zone Magazine*, *Absolute Magnitude*, *Science Fiction Review* and *Fantasy Book*, and in anthologies such as *The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction*. *What Will Come After*, a collection of his zombie fiction, and *What We Still Talk About*, a collection of his science fiction stories, were both published this year. He has been a Stoker Award finalist five times, in the categories of both Short Story and Long Fiction. *What Will Come After* is currently a Shirley Jackson Award nominee in the category of single-author collection.

**CAROL EMSHWILLER** in 2005 received the World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement. She has also won Nebula and Philip K. Dick Awards. *The Collected Stories of Carol Emshwiller* was recently published by Nonstop Press. She lives in NYC.

**LAWRENCE GREENBERG** is a hard person to keep in contact with. Lawrence where ever you are call us. A native New

Yorker the last time we heard from him he was living on the upper west side of Manhattan.

**CORA INEZ LAXEY** hails from Brooklyn and tells us, “I’m a city girl. I hate quiet and bugs, can’t drive a car. I don’t wear high heels or pink. My dirty secret is that I’m not fond of pizza. I live in a tiny cluttered apartment with a big dog who likes to sleep; I wish I could ... ”

**ALIGRIA LUNA-LUZ** was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico, and moved to Brooklyn when she was fifteen. Aligria won’t say what year that was. She is working on a novel about Madame Blavatsky and the great Roberto Clemente.

**BARRY MALZBERG** is the author of over fifty books that encompass mystery, science fiction, movie novelizations, and literary pornography, the latter for the infamous Olympia Press. He was born in Brooklyn and now lives across the Hudson River in Teaneck, New Jersey.

**LUIS ORTIZ** is an editor, artist and author based in New York City. He recently illustrated *Streampunk Prime*, edited by Mike Ashley, and is the author most recently of *Outermost: The Art + Life of Jack Gaughan*. Forthcoming from him will be *The Monkey’s Other Paw*.

**BECKY ROTH** lives, works, evaporates, condenses, perishes, and persists on the stoic plains of Brooklyn. Her short fiction and artwork has been featured in *Eyesocket*, *Xenith*,



*Opium Magazine*, *My Unfinished Novels* and *Anti\_Chris*, and she is a regular performer at the Bodega Monthly reading series.

**PAIGE QUAYLE:** “My family’s been in this country a long time, hundreds of years — well, at least one hundred. They came from places like Northern Ireland and England as indentured servants and worked their way up to become tenant farmers. They were poor, but mostly upstanding folk. Farmers are middle-class where I came from. In the years they were here they married everybody: Dutch, Welsh, Slavic, even a Seneca Indian. They drew the line at Italians which is sad because it certainly would have improved the bloodline and Sunday dinners.” Paige lives in Brooklyn these days — in an Italian neighborhood.

**GAY TERRY** has published stories in the *Fortean Bureau*, *Lady Churchill’s Rosebud Wristlet*, *The Twilight Zone Magazine*, *Full Spectrum*, and other journals. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

**DON WEBB’s** unique short stories have appeared in many genre magazines. He lives in Austin, Texas.

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**The Monkey's Other Paw** Edited by Luis Ortiz (available Halloween, 2013)

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**Meeting The Dog Girls:** Stories by Gay Partington Terry. (ISBN 978-1933065-30-4; Trade paperback, \$14.95. Also available in Kindle and Epub format.)

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**Gay Terry** has published stories in the *Fortean Bureau*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Twilight Zone Magazine*, *Full Spectrum*, and other journals. She lives in New York City.

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