

VOL. 1, ISSUE 1

SEPT. 2023

EPIC ECHOES

MAGAZINE

*Exciting!
First issue!*



Featuring:

Brandon Barrows

Jen Mierisch

Joseph Buckley

Spencer Nitkey

DC Diamondopolous

Paul O'Neill

Luke Foster

Burt Rashbaum

Manfred Gabriel

Matthew Roy

Kevin Hopson

E. Michael Lewis

and Matias Travieso-Diaz

EPIC

EPIC ECHOES

Vol. 1, Issue 1

September 2023

Like a Good Neighbor	BRANDON BARROWS	3
Munchies	JOSEPH BUCKLEY	16
Solivagant	COLE BURGETT	23
1949: Riders in the Sky	DC DIAMONDOPOLOUS	29
A Stone Sleeping Bag	LUKE FOSTER	35
Shiver and Quiver	MANFRED GABRIEL	45
Payout	KEVIN HOPSON	58
Waiting in Shadow	E. MICHAEL LEWIS	68
Double Blind	JEN MIERISCH	80
The Ferryman's Fee	SPENCER NITKEY	94
The Snow Ones	PAUL O'NEILL	118
Coffee	BURT RASHBAUM	127
Brain in a Jar	MATTHEW ROY	132
Don Juan, Derided	MATIAS TRAVIESO-DIAZ	146

Cole Burgett,
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Rachel Boylan,
MANAGING EDITOR

Interested in subscribing to *Epic Echoes* or publishing your own work in a future issue? We're always looking for punchy, genre-oriented short stories that can captivate, intrigue, and entertain a diverse audience. See [our website](#) for submission guidelines and more information.

Design and editorial content © 2023 Cole Burgett and Rachel Boylan. All rights reserved.

Epic Echoes, Volume 1, No. 1, Whole No. 1, September 2023. Published bi-annually. Direct all letters to the editors, inquiries, and writing submissions to epicechoesmag@gmail.com.

From the editors...

The first half of the twentieth century belonged unequivocally to the pulp magazines. Named for the inexpensive paper on which they were printed, the “pulp” featured earnest, rip-roaring tales with universal appeal but little prestige, especially among the high-brow literary elites of the day.

Nonetheless, many respected writers published in them. Editors featured works by the likes of Robert Bloch, Leigh Brackett, Mark Twain, Upton Sinclair, and Louis L'Amour, their stories running the gamut from westerns to sci-fi to detective fiction and beyond.

A hundred years on, the pulps have largely faded from the popular imagination, and few outlets publish short genre fiction not confined to niche areas of interest. We created *Epic Echoes* to help fill that void, providing a space for wide-ranging short fiction that's both unpretentious and meticulously crafted.

We're proud to feature just a few of the many excellent submissions we've received, confident that within these pages, you will find modern tales that pulse with the spirit of the old pulps.

Cole Burgett and Rachel Boylan

Crime stories were always a staple of the classic pulp magazines, especially psychological thrillers with twist endings. Barrows' story is a slow-burn chiller that effortlessly develops the tension and keeps you guessing right up until the final line.

Like a Good Neighbor

by Brandon Barrows

Brandon Barrows is the author of several novels, his next being The Last Request, coming September 2023 from Bloodhound Books. He has published over one hundred stories, mostly crime, mystery, and westerns. He is a three-time Mustang Award finalist and a 2022 Derringer Award nominee. Find more at brandonbarrowscomics.com and on X (formerly known as Twitter) @BrandonBarrows.

“I just don’t feel safe,” Marie said from the other side of our kitchen table.

“Oh, come on.” Emily shot me a look that silently demanded I chime in. “It’s a decent neighborhood and you live next to a cop for goodness’s sake,” she added.

“You read Front Porch Forum?” Marie asked. “Six cars, Em. All broken into over the last two weeks.” She shifted her gaze to me. “Tell her, Dean.”

“There’s been some break-ins.” Emily, my wife of many years, shot me that familiar, annoyed glare that said not helping. What could I do? It was true. “It’s probably kids,” I added, trying

to soften the blow.

“Or junkies,” Marie said, disgusted. “We never had this problem in Westfield.”

Marie Giddins, her husband Greg, and their two elementary-school-age boys were new to the area. Her husband was an engineer who moved them up from Connecticut, a month or so before, for a job with IBM. The couple were in their early thirties, ten years younger than me and my wife. Despite the age difference, we hit it off right away with Marie, and it was already routine for her to stop by for coffee after seeing her kids onto the school bus. Marie was a little louder and more forceful than our other friends, but she was livelier, too. I really liked Marie. In her own way, Emily did, too, but I was the one who was always glad to see our new neighbor. I enjoyed her company. Life was routine and dull, but Marie brightened it considerably.

Greg Giddins, however, seemed unlikely to enrich anyone’s life. He seemed to me like an ass, actually, though in fairness, we only met him a couple times; he was apparently always either working or sleeping. Whether the break-ins were thrill-seeking kids or druggies looking for quick cash, I couldn’t blame Marie for being nervous. Greg’s job had him on twelve-hour overnight shifts four or five times a week, leaving Marie alone most of the time in a new house, in a new area, with small kids.

Emily was right, too, though: it was a good neighborhood. The break-ins were unusual.

That didn’t necessarily mean there was no danger.

“You know what’s next, right?” Marie asked. “After cars? Houses. Criminals always escalate. Right, Dean?”

Instead of answering, I checked my watch, swallowing coffee as I did, then stood. “I better hustle.” I was on first trick all week, and it was already close to eight.

Emily offered me her cheek and I kissed it dutifully. “Don’t be late,” she told me, as she had every time I left for work for twenty-one years. I was late once, before I even went to the police academy, and she never let me forget it.

I said goodbye and went out to my car. All the way to the station I thought about what Marie said: “criminals always escalate.” For some reason, it stuck with me.

“I swear to God it’s true, Em. It scared the bejesus out of me.”

The next morning, Marie was already in the kitchen with Emily when I came downstairs. “What’s true?” I asked.

Marie turned, a coffee cup clutched to her chest with both hands. She pushed a reddish-blond strand away from her face and said, “Last night, around one, someone was rattling the side door—the one that opens into the kitchen? I woke up, thinking I was still asleep, that it was some dream, you know? But then I realized I was really hearing it. Scared me to death. I ran around turning on just about every light in the house. The noise stopped, but it took a while to nerve up and look outside, and when I did,

of course there was nobody out there.”

“Why didn’t you call nine one one?” Emily asked.

Marie scowled. “What are they gonna do? Wake the boys up, scare the hell out of them, too? Just to write some useless report and forget about it? No offense, Dean.”

I shrugged. It wasn’t quite so simple, but she wasn’t far off, either. We got calls like that almost nightly and it usually turned out to be nothing.

Emily put a hand on Marie’s arm. “Well, then what are you going to do? If Greg’s out, you know you can come to us, right? We’re here for you.”

“I know...” Marie said, her voice cracking on the second word. She turned her face down, as if to hide, and took a couple of deep, ragged breaths. “You guys are the only good thing about being up here.” She was quiet for a long moment before continuing. “I never wanted to move. I mean, it’s a nice area, but I loved our old house, and we knew so many people. I grew up in Westfield. The boys, too. Now they’re three-hundred miles from all the kids they’ve known since they were in diapers. They’re being troopers, but they aren’t happy. It’s miserable starting a new school in the middle of the year.” Her tone turned bitter. “Greg never even discussed any of this with me. He just came home one night and told me the house was going on the market because he got this great new job. It hasn’t even sold. We’re paying two mortgages. He’s making more money, but that, plus everything being so expensive up here—what’s the difference? God, he’s al-

ways been like this, ever since I can remember. I don't know why I put up with it so long. Damn him all to hell, he makes me hate him so bad sometimes. Whenever he gets an idea in his head, it's his way or no way."

Emily looked at me, obviously embarrassed by Marie's outpouring. Emily was very much from the swallow-your-feelings school of emotions. If there was a problem, you ignored it until it went away. It always bothered me, but of course, she didn't like to hear that.

She turned back to our friend. "I'm sorry, sweetheart."

"It's not your fault," Marie sniffed.

Emily said, "Dean, there's got to be something you can do."

A few possibilities sprang to mind, but I only told the women, "Let me think about it." Then I said that I was going into work early and, out of habit, leaned down to kiss Emily's cheek. She reminded me not to be late.

I got home around six that evening, right on time. Emily met me at the door, her anger plain. "What did you do?"

If she was asking in that tone of voice, she already knew, but that was how it went. Whenever she was upset, she wanted to hear me say out loud what she thought I did wrong. You couldn't talk about feelings, but you could sure as hell discuss mistakes and differences of opinion to death.

"You wanted me to do something for Marie, so I did."

“You gave her a gun!” she shouted. “Are you insane? She’s got two little boys in that house!”

“Daniel was around guns when he was younger than Marie’s boys.”

Daniel, our son, was away at school, in his second year of college now. I missed having him around the house; Emily did, too, though she would never say so. Without him to focus on, it was like our energies, our personalities, no longer meshed at all. Little annoyances we’d learned to live with took on new life, and everything clashed, caused friction. I knew the gun would, too, of course. I just didn’t expect her to learn about it so quickly. Marie must have mentioned it during an afternoon coffee klatsch.

The gun I loaned Marie was a Sig Sauer P320 target pistol that I bought years earlier for plinking and hobby shooting with my son. It was a nine millimeter, heavier than most target pistols, with a laser sight that made it nearly impossible for even amateurs to miss their aim. I thought all morning about the situation and then, around lunchtime, I swung by the house. When I found Emily was out, I took the gun from storage, gave it a quick cleaning, and went next door to see Marie. Greg was home, but of course, he was asleep, so the two of us had a chance to talk. When I offered her the gun, she wasn’t eager, but she didn’t refuse it, either.

“Dan’s father is a career cop—someone I thought had some sense about guns.”

“Relax,” I told her, knowing it would have the opposite ef-

fect. “I just loaned it to her, just to feel safe for a few nights until this burglary thing blows over.”

Emily’s body was tense, almost vibrating with rage now. That anger between us was becoming too common. “What about—”

“I asked Sergeant Mathers about a cruiser, extra patrols. He said unless I was volunteering for the overtime, he didn’t have anyone to sit outside Marie’s house all night. This isn’t the only neighborhood with break-ins. Besides, Marie’s no stranger to guns. She told me she went hunting with her dad growing up.”

“It’s not the same.”

“No, but she knows guns are dangerous, and I’m sure she can handle it.”

“Is it even legal? To just give someone a gun?”

“Loan,” I corrected. “And as long as she isn’t a felon, it’s fine. Trust me. I’m a cop, and I know a little about the law.” I tried a smile, but Emily wasn’t finished being angry. She might not be for days.

She turned and stomped towards the stairs. “I’m going to bed.”

“It’s not even six-thirty. What about dinner?”

“Figure it out!” she shouted. A moment later, a door slammed upstairs. I expected that reaction, so I could shrug it off. She’d just have to get over it.

I ate boiled hot dogs and watched a Schwarzenegger movie, then read for a while. Around ten, I went upstairs to find the bedroom door locked. I almost knocked, but decided it was better to leave Emily alone. Maybe in the morning, after some rest and some time, she'd be calmer. I got spare sheets and a pillow from the linen closet and made up the guest bedroom. I didn't mind too much. It wouldn't be the first night I spent there.

The gunshots came around two, jerking me awake so hard I nearly fell out of the narrow guest bed. The noise of the shots seemed to reverberate off the walls of the room, and I didn't need to be reminded that the bedrooms of our house were barely sixty feet from Marie's place. I was tugging on pants when Emily shouted, "Dean! Oh, my God!"

"I know! Call nine one one!" I yelled back and ran downstairs.

As I flung the front door open, there was the most terrible, soul-wrenching scream I've ever heard in my entire life. It was wordless at first, just an animal noise of raw agony. Slowly, it became a single syllable, "Greg!" drawn out and then repeated, over and over.

Half an hour later, the neighborhood was overrun with my coworkers. Marie was in our living room, clinging to Emily like she was a life preserver, the only thing between her and a cold, violent sea. Her eyes were washed out with horror and anguish, her body trembling beneath the same dark blue bathrobe she

wore that morning. Her hands clenched and unclenched in her lap, as if trying to hang on to something that kept slipping from her grasp. Her boys were upstairs, nestled in Dan's double bed, aware that something was very wrong, but not that their father was dead. Not yet.

Lights from two cruisers and the volunteer fire department's ambulance flashed through the kitchen windows as I made a pot of coffee. Sleep would be impossible, so I might as well be caffeinated.

Twenty-five minutes earlier, the ambulance was the first to arrive, coming from practically just down the street and pulling up to the curb within minutes of Emily's nine-one-one call. As quick as the EMTs were, it was already too late. When I first ran outside, I found Greg Giddins on his porch, flat on his back, eyes wide and glazed—dead the moment Marie put two bullets through his chest.

Don Uhler, the department's one detective, showed up only a few minutes after the ambulance, accompanied by a handful of patrolmen, and quickly put the story together. Greg Giddins, not feeling well, came home from work early. His colleagues said Greg seemed to have the flu, or maybe a bad cold, and after loading up with over the counter medications, he was a little loopy, so they sent him home only seven hours into the twelve-hour shift. In this condition, Giddins apparently had difficulty with the lock on the front door of the still unfamiliar house. Hearing his fumbling, Marie thought her prowler—whether he was real or imag-

ined—was back and trying to get inside the house again. Using the gun I loaned her, she fired two shots through the stained glass in the middle of the door, killing her husband instantly.

In the living room, having gotten her wind back, Marie was sobbing again. I moved to the edge of the kitchen and heard her asking Emily how she could ever explain to her children what happened.

“Shush, honey, shush,” Emily soothed. “It was an accident. It’ll be hard, but... they’ll understand. It was just an accident.” She noticed me standing in the doorway and gave me a look as deadly as any bullet.

“Can I talk to you, Brennan?” Uhler was at my elbow, motioning for me to join him in the kitchen. The coffee was ready. I poured a cup for myself and one for Uhler, then leaned a hip against the counter. “Do you know these people well?” he asked.

“They’ve only lived here a few weeks, but I never heard fights or anything, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

Uhler blew on his coffee, then said, “No trouble?”

I remembered what Marie told us that morning and considered how best to phrase it without betraying anything. “I know Marie and the kids were still adjusting to the move. It was stressful for everybody. Marie and Em are getting to be pretty good friends, though. I think it helps.”

“Yeah,” Uhler agreed. “How about the husband?”

I shrugged. “Met him a couple times. Seemed to live for his

work, but Marie says he was happy about the new job. I can't say for sure, but everything seemed fine to me."

"You loaned her the gun?"

"Yeah. She was scared, alone at night with two young kids, and the break-ins around the area. She told me she grew up around guns and I thought she could handle herself with it."

The detective made a disgusted noise, then sipped coffee. "I don't like it, but there's no law against it, and I suppose you knew what you were doing." He sighed heavily. "Just one of these damned things that happen too often."

I agreed, adding, "I feel awful. I mean—"

"Don't beat yourself up, Dean." He put a hand on my shoulder. "Like I said, I don't love the idea of loaning out firearms, but I've known you long enough to realize that if there was any obvious trouble, you'd have steered clear."

"Thanks," I told him. "How are you going to handle Mrs. Giddins?"

Uhler frowned. "What can I do? The gun was in her possession legally, even if I don't think she had any business with it, and it was clearly an accident. A scared woman in a strange house overreacted. It's a tragedy, but I don't see a crime here."

We bulled around a while more and then first Uhler, then the uniformed officers left. The ambulance was already gone, so when my coworkers left, the neighborhood was finally quiet again. Emily settled Marie into the spare bedroom for the night,

knowing she couldn't sleep in her own home after what happened. I went into my and Emily's bedroom and sat on the bed. A few minutes later, my wife joined me.

Emily sat next to me, taking my hand in hers and leaning her head on my shoulder, something she hadn't done in many years. Neither of us spoke for a while.

"Dean?"

"Yeah?"

"You do think it was an accident, don't you?"

I twisted to look at her. "That's a pretty crazy question, Em."

"I know," she said. "I'm sorry to even think it, but..."

"But what?"

She shook her head, making her tousled hair bounce. "I haven't known Marie long, but she was lonely and we got to be good friends really fast."

"I know."

"But even with what she said this morning, I don't think you know how unhappy she really was. She hated giving up her old life, and some things she told me about Greg—"

"Emily, stop. You'll drive yourself nuts." I kissed her forehead. "Marie's our friend. You really think she could plan to murder her husband?"

"God, no. I just..."

"Go to bed, hon." I kissed her again. "I want to make sure

everything is locked up.”

She didn't answer, just flopped backwards on the bed and curled up, her expression thoughtful in the dim light of the bedside lamp.

I went downstairs, checked the front and back doors, and all the windows, making sure they were closed and locked. As I climbed the stairs, a dark form appeared out of the gloom, padding softly down to meet me halfway.

“Dean,” Marie whispered. “I can't believe—I mean, do you think they know? That you were the one at the door the other night or that—”

I pulled her into my arms and kissed her, feeling the lush body beneath the robe mold itself to mine in a way my wife never allowed herself to, even when we were first married. I whispered, “You did great, and Uhler knows you couldn't plan something like this. Now get to bed. We'll give it a few months and then figure out what to do about Emily.”

Buckley's punchy little creature feature evokes B-movie thrills without stumbling over into campiness, thanks to his artfully-developed characters and, of course, the unexpected monster: a fuzzy, bug-eyed menace that's as terrifying as it is memorable.

Munchies

by Joseph Buckley

Joseph Buckley is a horror writer and poet living in New Orleans. His work is featured in Coffin Bell, The Horror Zine and elsewhere. Find him on X (formerly known as Twitter) [@josephabuckley](https://twitter.com/josephabuckley).

When I woke up, the sky appeared a little more purple than usual like the sun was setting and not rising. That's when I remembered the weed brownies my buddy Ashton made from his father's secret stash. I could taste a residue of sweet, crusty crumbs still caught at the corners of my mouth. I must've blacked out the night before, or maybe passed out? Hard to say. I remembered there were a lot of bagel bites. I mean like family size boxes, many family size boxes. My stomach felt like a circus drowning in lava.

Anyway, despite the morphing colors of the September sky and my declining digestive health, I didn't want to be late for my first day of senior year at Ben Franklin High. And what is senior year but a year-long party? Who was I not to indulge?

I swallowed whatever dark globules of brownie crumb were left in the pocket of my jeans, pulled on my favorite black and red flannel, and hit play on my Discman; then, walking past my little sister's bedroom, I saw the strangest toy—this little, alien, owl thing.

Its eyes were large, bugged-out circles that blinked on their own in tandem with its bat-shaped ears. Soft pink and purple fur covered its squat, round body. The thing kept saying “achoo” out of its plastic, beak mouth. It reminded me of whatever the furry things from the *Gremlins* movies were. I sure as hell wouldn't feed the thing after midnight.

“Nathan, I thought I told you to take the trash out last night!”

My mom shrieked, sending my grumbling stomach into a roil. I whipped around and my CD-filled backpack crashed into the creature; its tiny, furry body thudded into the teen-pop posters on my sister's closet door.

“Ow. Ow. Ow,” the little bugger mimed robotically. Furious footfalls boomed closer. I quickly stuffed the doll into my backpack to try and shut it up.

“Nathan, what the hell are you doing in here? I thought I said take out the trash and move it before you're late for school.”

“Ow. Ow. Ow.” The little creature sounded out a muffled cry for help.

“What was that?” She asked.

“Ah,” I moaned, grabbing at my stomach. “I got a stomach ache.” At least I didn’t have to lie.

She rolled her brown eyes and snapped, “get a move on.”

I was more than ten minutes late, which meant that Principal Castro (yes, just like the dictator) stood, arms crossed, at the entrance of Ben Franklin High with the yellow detention slip already written out, wavering in his evil hands.

“Welcome to your senior year, Mr. Fisher. Starting strong, I see.”

He handed me the slip and turned on his shiny heel, walkie-talkie garbling something about the welcome back celebration. Meanwhile, I watched purple, yellow, and pink patterns swirl through the sky, the beauty of which only served to illuminate how drab our box-shaped school looked.

Of course, when I walked into detention, Ashton was already there, long hair draped over his ears to hide his fuzzy headphones. He was in for smoking cigarettes on campus grounds. He was already eighteen (graduation problems), so he could legally smoke, but not within the boundaries of the school.

“Fisher, ha-ha, what you in for?” He slapped my shoulder when I sat at the desk in front of him.

“I don’t know, Castro’s got a stick up his ass about me being like two seconds late.”

“The dictator himself, man. This is a frickin’ prison-state!”

“Gentlemen! You want another day’s detention?”

Ms. Harder looked at us over the tops of glasses like she’d been practicing the move her whole life, delighted in the power she could still hold over us for a few more months.

I sat in that abusively hard desk chair doodling patterns, still stoned from whatever I had gobbled that morning. Ashton’s Nirvana CD was loud enough to hear coming from his clandestine headphones, but then the “Ow. Ow. Ow.” from inside my backpack interrupted.

“Mr. Fisher! What did I say? One more peep—”

“It wasn’t me ma’am. I—”

“That’s it, you earned yourself another day’s detention.”

Under my desk, I opened my backpack to try and find a battery pack on the furry toy. I flipped it around to the bottom, keeping the thing in the pack so Ms. Harder didn’t have another heart attack.

Its bugged-out eyes blinked up and down. And then I noticed brown crumbs all over its beak. Right next to its furry body sat an empty sandwich bag. I searched the bottom of my backpack and opened my CD cases, then the pen pockets on the front pouch, but there wasn’t even a crumb left. I couldn’t believe it. There was no way that toy ate my weed brownies.

“Yum. Yum. Yummmm,” it warbled out like it was inebriated.

“Mr. Fisher! You want to spend the rest of your life here in the detention halls of Ben Franklin? Hand it over.” I could smell

her old-lady perfume once she hovered over me, yanked the bag from my grip.

“Wait, there’s—”

But it was already too late. Ms. Harder erupted in a fit of screaming. The toy mauled her like the cartoon Tasmanian devil. It ate away all the skin on her face. Blood poured from the muscles and tendons on her exposed face without the skin to hold it in place. She slumped to the ground, either passed out from shock or dead. I’d guess the latter.

The little creature’s beak mouth moved up and down in that slow, dummy way, a flap of Ms. Harder’s face stuck at the corner of its mouth.

“Hungry,” it exclaimed. Well, duh.

“Wicked!” Ashton hooted. But then the little bugger was on its plastic feet, waddling toward us.

“Uh, we gotta get outta here.” It picked up speed and seemed to grow bigger by the second. “Fast!”

I grabbed Ashton by his tie-dye collar and narrowly escaped the ankle-high monster’s lunging beak. Cynthia, the quiet goth girl in there with us, wasn’t so lucky. The toy had mounted her head, somehow unhinged its jaw and gobbled her up like a snake in fast-forward, silver jewelry, combat boots and all. It then grew even bigger.

“Far out!” Ashton exclaimed like we were characters in a B horror movie and not seconds away from a cruel and unusual

death. The then human-sized toy bounded after us and crashed through the classroom door. A few students still lingered in the hallway at their lockers.

“RUN!” I shouted.

But everyone at Ben Franklin knew better than to trust the likes of me and Ashton, this not being our first instance of pure hysteria during school hours (which is a story for another time). But this time it was real. That toy, or monster, or furry thing had some crazy reaction to the weed brownie and planned to eat everything in sight.

“Yum. Yum. Yum.” It bellowed out now in a much deeper, still robotic voice, devouring underclassmen who laughed at the scared stoners. Ashton and I were almost at the front doors when Principal Castro slid in front of us.

“Ah, if it isn’t Ben Franklin’s two biggest overachievers.” He shook his head at us while blood splashed across the welcome-back banner in the main hall. You could hear the crunch of bones from a group of volleyball girls being inhaled like Pringles.

“Skipping out on detention, boys? Mr. Fisher, I always thought you’d do better than hanging out with the likes of this flunky.”

“Hey, man. There’s some alien-monster killing everyone. Let us out of here!” Ashton begged.

Then Castro’s jaw dropped. The fur-toy had grown so large that its round body burst through the glass display cases

of field-hockey trophies, then through the yellow lockers, then through the roof of the whole school.

That was when we managed to escape Castro's hold and booked it to Ashton's pickup. He sped to the Top of the World, an infamous make-out spot, tires screeching the whole way. From up there, we could see the whole town; could hear the thundering footsteps of the overgrown toy smashing its way toward downtown.

We lay on the hood of his truck, but when Ashton reached into his pocket it was empty. We were out of weed.

"What are we gonna do?" I asked.

Ashton shrugged and leaned back on the roof of his truck. I felt a queasiness in my stomach.

"We can try and rip down to my house, see what my pops has in the basement."

And in that moment, I realized that with the end of the world approaching, at least our world as we knew it, all Ashton wanted to do was get stoned. I felt myself drawing a line. I wondered what would happen to us. To me. To my family. At least I probably didn't have to go to detention the next day. Unless they found out I was the one who brought the toy to school.

Burgett leans into the pulp tradition of adventurous historical fiction with this gripping, tensely plotted tale of a lone-wolf hero whose honor and daring bring justice to a world in need of it. Swordplay, poetic imagery, dialogue that pops: this story's got it all.

Solivagant

by Cole Burgett

Cole Burgett is a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary and the Moody Bible Institute. He teaches college and high school courses in systematic theology and Bible exposition, writes extensively about theology and pop culture, and is the creator of the award-winning audio drama series, [The Lost Son](#).

In an epoch splintered by strife, beneath a marbled sky latticed with clouds like fractured porcelain, a lone silhouette clove a solemn arc against the light of a dying day.

They called him Kurosawa, a man of silence and stone. His soul was a parchment of scorn, inscribed with the bitter ink of betrayal and loss. His kimono, once vibrant with the colors of his daimyo's crest, was now worn and faded, a remnant of a life surrendered to the past.

He came to a hamlet on the edge of Lake Biwa, dwarfed by a towering castle perched on jagged cliffs high above, its vulture gaze souring the spirits of those dwelling in the village below. All within the castle's shadow was under the thumb of Takeshi, a warlord whose thirst for power was legendary, and his samurai,

less warriors and more rabid curs, enforced his brutal rule.

Kurosawa was a drifter, yet maintained the samurai's creed of honor, the bushido. It was his compass in a world turned upside down, charting his course amidst the chaos of storm-tossed seas. So, when the villagers in the hamlet had sent word begging for his blade, his code of honor locked his course. He could not turn them away.

Upon arrival, he strode in the local *izakaya*, each step making the timbers groan beneath his weight. The tang of sake and fear were heavy in the air. Peasants and shabby samurai shot him wary glances. He claimed a seat and ordered a cup of sake in a voice like thunder trapped in silk, silencing the nervous chatter of the other patrons.

When night crept in, Takeshi's goons swaggered into the *izakaya*, their brash laughter ricocheting off the woodwork. Their head, a behemoth named Masaru, clocked Kurosawa and sneered. "Look here!" he boomed, jabbing a finger Kurosawa's way. "A ronin guzzling like a daimyo?"

Kurosawa hoisted his sake with a wordless toast, then drained it in a single gulp. Meeting Masaru's glare, his eyes were a serene abyss. "Every man has his rights to drink," he said, tone as smooth as the still waters of the lake outside. "Even a ronin."

Masaru's face twisted into a scowl. "Insult me, ronin? You, without the worth of a master's gaze?"

With a long inhalation, Kurosawa anchored his cup to the

table and rose, his hand moving like a magnet to the hilt of his katana. “No insult tossed,” he returned. “Merely the truth stated.”

In a blink, Masaru unsheathed his weapon and charged, his roar filling the *izakaya*. But Kurosawa was a breath faster, his blade a streak of silver in the dim light, colliding with Masaru’s. There was a jarring clang of steel followed by a collective gasp. Then Masaru’s body hit the floor, head rolling to a halt at Kurosawa’s feet.

Silence boomed in the *izakaya*, thick and heavy. Seconds ticked by, scored only by the faint sigh of Kurosawa’s bloodless blade finding its sheath again. “Any man can play the beast,” he intoned, gaze sweeping over the remaining thugs, daring any of them to try. “But it takes a true warrior to be a man.”

Takeshi’s crew scattered and retreated, hissing and scowling, no doubt scurrying back to their overlord.

“You’ve poked the hornet’s nest,” a villager remarked.

Kurosawa acknowledged the statement with a nod. “It seems I have.”

News of Masaru’s death swept through the hamlet like wildfire. Before the first touch of dawn, Kurosawa stood alone before Takeshi’s stronghold atop the craggy cliffs. Armed only with his katana and a resolve harder than granite, he had walked into the viper pit of his own volition. Patience had its place, he knew, but why stave off the inevitable? Takeshi would seek him out. Better to face him head-on than risk the safety of the villagers.

It was not long before Takeshi slithered from the castle's gloom, a procession of samurai in his wake. Kurosawa recognized most of them from the *izakaya*.

"You slew my samurai, ronin," said Takeshi, his voice thrumming with fury.

"I swatted a rabid cur," Kurosawa retorted, steady as ever.

A smirk pulled at Takeshi's face as he motioned at the nearest samurai. Unflinching, the man drew his blade and charged. Kurosawa dodged, his blade a swift, lethal whisper that laid the man low.

Another samurai charged forward and fell just as quickly. As the man bled out, Kurosawa flicked the crimson from his katana and turned his attention back to Takeshi. He saw the ploy for what it was—a coward's tactic to soften him up. But Takeshi's men would see it, too. They would realize their leader's fear if he continued to feed them to the ronin.

And Takeshi recognized that. Sweat pearled on his brow as he unsheathed his twin katanas, stepping forward to meet his reckoning.

The fight that unfolded was a macabre ballet, a deadly dance painted in shades of red and glinting steel. Kurosawa moved with spectral grace, his blade an artisan of death. But Takeshi was not simple fodder. He battled with raw, predatory vigor, his dual katanas a cyclone of glimmering menace. They collided, their blades singing a lethal melody that reverberated off the castle's high stone walls.

Kurosawa was a storm incarnate, his blade the wind that dictated its course. Every wild assault from Takeshi met with a calculated riposte from the ronin, each parry and riposte weaving a new thread in this tapestry of battle. Kurosawa recalled the villagers down the mountain, their desperate eyes, their whispers ripe with the fragile fruit of hope. To them, he was the solitary torch in the darkness, their lone combatant against Takeshi's tyranny.

The warlord's wrath reached a crescendo. Enraged by the ronin's resistance, he roared, his face contorting into a snarl. His katanas, like twin vipers, struck with a renewed viciousness. Yet Kurosawa remained tranquil, his actions a study in lethal precision.

The final clash echoed as the sun clawed its way up the horizon, branding the sky in strokes of fierce crimson. Takeshi, winded, lunged, a last-ditch assault, wild and desperate. But Kurosawa was prepared. In one fluid motion, he sidestepped the charge, his blade cutting a deadly curve through the air.

The samurai spectators gasped, their faces shocked.

Takeshi stumbled forward, bracing himself on the hilts of his katanas. He strained to look back at the ronin, the man who had felled him.

"Your reign ends here," Kurosawa declared, his katana catching the newborn sunlight.

Takeshi attempted a final, defiant step—a last strike. Instead, he fell, crumpling onto the rocks. A deep, gruesome line

traced from shoulder to hip on his back, blood pooling beneath him in an expanding stain of defeat.

Kurosawa sheathed his katana and glanced at the remaining samurai, silently offering them their next choice. They were ronin now, like him. One by one, they dispersed, abandoning the castle, now in search of a new lord, a new allegiance.

With the castle emptied of its former occupants, Kurosawa turned his back on the looming structure and returned to the village. Cheers and shouts of gratitude greeted him. And though the humble village on the shores of Lake Biwa would become a beacon of hope in those turbulent times, though the saga of Kurosawa the ronin would echo across the provinces, he did not linger. Nor did he take any payment, other than a hot meal and a flask of fine sake. As quickly as he arrived, he departed again.

For he was a ronin, a wanderer.

His path lay yonder.

This story oozes classic pulp magazine appeal. It starts with a bang and doesn't let up. Diamondopolous generates tension through sharp, evocative dialogue, telling an unapologetically straightforward weird tale about an unlikely close encounter.

1949: Riders in the Sky

by DC Diamondopolous

DC Diamondopolous is an award-winning short story and flash fiction writer with hundreds of stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals, and anthologies. DC's stories have appeared in: Penmen Review, Progenitor, 34th Parallel, So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library, Lunch Ticket, and others. DC was nominated twice in 2020 for the Pushcart Prize and in 2020 and 2017 for Sundress Publications' Best of the Net. She lives on the California central coast with her wife and animals. dcdiamondopolous.com

Eleven a.m. and not a cloud in the sky as I took off from Oaks Field headed for Miami.

Beside me was my copilot and best-man-to-be, Ross, whistling "Riders in the Sky."

"She sure is swanky, Junior," Ross shouted above the engine's hum. He ran his hand over the Cessna's instrument panel.

"Twenty-first birthday is a biggie."

"Must have set your old man back a buck or two." Ross yawned. "Some bachelor party, huh?"

"Those two broads sent me to the moon and back."

Ross chuckled. “Sure you want to get married?” He cracked his knuckles. “No more fun like last night.”

“Who says?”

Still, I couldn’t wait for my wedding night with Peggy. I’d found the perfect location on Cable Beach to tie the knot. Old fashioned, Peggy wouldn’t have sex before marriage—worth the wait. She was gorgeous, stacked, and in love with me. It didn’t hurt that her father owned a chunk of Miami.

Ross tapped the compass. “It’s going haywire.”

“It happens. Especially in this part of the ocean.” I knew Ross preferred flying over land.

“Clock works,” he added.

The clock on the dash read 12:10, same as my Rolex. The fuel gauge showed just over half a tank. The other dials spun.

“Come in Miami, this is Flight 24,” I yelled over the Cessna’s drone. “Compass not working. Locate me will you, roger?”

“Flight 24, you’re on course.”

The cabin lights flickered.

Ross squirmed.

“Flight 19 disappeared here,” I said in a loud whisper, whooping and pretending to shiver.

“Fat-head.”

A dense fog advanced toward us.

“Miami, this is Flight 24, can we fly above the fog, roger?”

The radio crackled, sputtered, then cut out.

“Now what?” Ross said, breathing hard.

“Don’t worry.” I pulled back the yoke but couldn’t fly above it. Now I worried. “I’ll have to go around it.”

The fog followed our movement. Particles clung to the plane like static electricity. Beads of sweat broke out on my forehead. Since ten, I’d flown with my father in all kinds of weather, but this fog was weird. “I’ve never seen anything like this,” I said, trying to hide my nervousness. “No wisps of mist, no sun rays.”

Ross remained silent—not typical—as the fog swallowed us.

My heart racing, I glanced over at him.

“Ross?”

He was slumped in his seat, eyes closed.

“What the hell? Ross! Wake up!”

Before me, nestled in the fog, appeared the top of a dome.

The Cessna’s engine stopped.

My God. We were going to crash. I gasped with fear, when a sudden drowsiness overpowered me. My last sensation was being sucked into a hangar that opened before me.

* * *

Junior awoke shaking. He found himself on his back on a cold slab. Liquid swished around him. A cold clamp covered each eye. He howled. Nothing came out. His arms and legs couldn’t move. The stink of rotten seaweed hovered in the air. A high-

pitched note rose from the fluid and pinged nonstop.

Where the hell was he?

Spider-like tentacles ran down his chest. He screamed silently. Something went into his belly button, without pain. His heartbeat thrashed in his ears. Voices sounded like creaking doors. Over his right eye, the clamp snapped back. He saw a flash of silver. They plucked out his eye. Then put it back and replaced the clamp. Piss ran down his thigh.

The creatures treated him like a guinea pig, prodding and probing. Where was Ross? Would he see Peggy and his parents again? He begged God to let him live, promised to be a good husband and a better man.

* * *

We found ourselves hurtling through a tunnel.

Ross screamed, "What is this?"

I wrestled to control the Cessna inside the vacuum of a vortex. "Fog's lifted. Stay calm."

The walls of the passage were opaque and hazy, wide enough for me to fly through, but closing. Vertical mist-spirals swirled.

I accelerated to one hundred knots and kept the plane steady as we flew inside the cavity. If the wings touched the walls I feared we'd be crushed. A speck of blue appeared at the corridor's end.

"Is that sky?" Ross asked.

"Think so."

“God help us,” he cried.

The walls of the vortex closed fast.

We shot out into blue sky. With the Miami skyline visible, I slowed the plane to land and looked behind.

The vortex had vanished. “It’s gone. We made it.”

“Holy mackerel,” Ross whooped. “Great flying, Junior.”

Tears stung my eyes.

The clock on the dash read 12:15, same as my watch. We’d be landing on time at 12:35.

“Miami, this is Flight 24—”

“Where the hell have you been, Flight 24?” the controller asked. “Prepare to land.”

I pressed the yoke forward to fifty knots. Ocean Drive never looked so good with its pink and green hotels, palm trees, and beaches.

The landing gear released, we touched down.

On the runway, in his overalls and yellow vest, Fred waved two wands.

As soon as we parked, he darted toward us.

I opened the cabin door.

“Where’ve you been?” Fred hollered. “You’re two hours late.”

“What do you mean? It’s 12:35.” The fuel gauge showed half a tank. If we had flown an extra two hours, it would be near empty. “We’re right on time.”

“No you’re not.” Fred showed me his watch. It read 2:35. “We thought you crashed and sent out a search party.”

The vortex was crazy enough to describe, but I had no explanation for the missing two hours.

Peggy charged out of the departure door and ran toward us. My parents followed.

I jumped out of the seat and sprinted to them.

“We thought you were dead,” Peggy said, sobbing.

“Oh, Peggy, I’d never leave you.” I took her in my arms. “I promise to be a good husband and a better man,” I said, surprised by my tenderness and an unsettled feeling.

Foster's story shows off a strong voice and the ability to write from a controlled and effective first-person point of view. The narration itself reflects the claustrophobia experienced by the protagonist, slowly generating tension that builds up to a haunting climax.

A Stone Sleeping Bag

by Luke Foster

Luke Foster is a writer from Charlotte, NC. He has written short stories in every genre from comedy to horror, and has been published online and in print in the United States, Canada, UK, and Australia. He also curated, edited, and published the short story anthology Eight Gunshots: Stories of the Wild West. He can be found online at www.ImLukeFoster.com.

At first, I think the vibration is a propeller, but then I realize I'm way too deep to feel a boat move.

I put my hand on the side of the cave wall and push off, desperate to beat the earthquake I already should have recognized. The cave is shaking so badly I can feel it in my teeth. My flippers churn the water behind me, only adding to the froth the quake generates. The fact that I can feel the quake at all means I'm swimming right above the epicenter.

I am in so much freaking trouble.

My flashlight illuminates the cave mouth as I propel myself forward. More worryingly, it lights up the rubble falling from the ceiling.

And then, with a crack so loud it rattles my bones, the ceiling comes crashing down. I jerk to a stop and try to push myself backwards. The rocks miss my head, but a stray one hits my flashlight with a startling crunch. Blackness envelops me as the shattered tool sinks to the cave floor.

I propel myself back the way I came, praying the ceiling was only weak near the cave mouth. I stretch my arms in front of me, careful not to drive my head into a solid stone wall. It was a smart move. My hands bounce off a solid surface far sooner than I expected. I stretch one hand up and it brushes the cave roof before my elbow is fully extended. It's tight, but at least it's not falling down around me. Curling up against the wall, shielding my air tank with my body, I wait out the last of the vibrations, doing my best to keep my breathing regular.

After what feels like hours but couldn't have been more than a few minutes, the vibrations slow, then stop. I cautiously stretch my hand into the all-consuming blackness. Nothing in front of me. With a slow kick, I swim toward where I hope the cave mouth sits unblocked.

Hope is a lie.

Forget the entrance, the whole front half of the cave has come down. Some tentative pushing shows me these rocks aren't moving, either. I'm not getting out this way.

Don't panic. Don't panic. I won't panic. I can't panic. I'll never get out of here if I panic. Don't think about how much the rocks weigh. Don't think about how many thousands of gallons

of water are pressing down on you right now. Or what might happen if a seam gives way under the pressure, or the chance of an aftershock, or getting stuck in an unseen crevice or or or—

I hear a strange noise and it takes more than a few seconds to realize I'm screaming.

It takes more willpower than I would have suspected to calm myself down. It's only when I remind myself that the more noise I make, the more air I use, do I force myself into silence. How many minutes have I wasted? How much air did screaming cost me? How much air does my tank even have? I've been down here probably fifteen or twenty minutes. That means I have about forty or forty-five minutes left if I don't panic. If I don't hyperventilate and burn through my precious air. Forty or forty-five minutes. Plenty of time. All the time in the world.

I take a slow breath. In, two, three, four, out, two, three, four. I close my eyes. Not that it makes any difference, but it helps me concentrate.

I open my eyes. My world is still blackness. But I remember something I almost forgot in my panic. The tunnels!

The last dive team noted, what? Two tunnels? Yeah, two. They might lead to the surface. One is directly in the back and the other is ten yards closer to the mouth, on the left wall, if I remember correctly. The last team couldn't tell if they were connected, so taking either one is a gamble. It's, what? A thousand-to-one shot that one of them leads to the surface? A million-to-one? And that's not even considering that they weren't destroyed in

the quake, or another one wasn't opened, or that they'll be large enough for me, or—

Stop with the “ors.” I don't want to die in the dark, but I definitely will if I stay here. And right now, every unknown is better than the painful certainty that I'll smother on an empty tank.

With one hand on the wall, I swim counterclockwise, feeling for the way out. I'm torn between making a cautious search and not being so slow that I run out of air. I don't need to worry. After something like three minutes I feel a yawning gap.

Some quick exploration shows me the tunnel is about three feet wide all the way around, wide enough for me and my tank, but just barely. I don't have much margin for error if the tunnel suddenly narrows or dips down. If I damage my tank in there, I'm hosed. I might as well just slit my own throat and save myself the agony.

Don't. Stop. With less than forty minutes of air in my tank—maybe as little as thirty, and even less if the tunnel goes deep enough to cause a pressure change—I can't afford to psych myself out. Besides, didn't I want to be the first one to explore the tunnels? I choke back a bitter laugh and plunge headfirst from the darkness of the cave I know into the tunnel's black unknown.

I keep my hands in front of me, moving entirely with kicking. My legs will be exhausted by the time I'm done, but I don't have enough space to use my arms even if I could see.

Progress is agonizingly slow. Why didn't I bring a larger

tank? Because I thought I'd make a quick initial exploration and come back tomorrow with more equipment. Because I was cocky enough to think I'd be safe diving without a partner in an unexplored cave in an earthquake zone.

I don't want to die down here. Please, God, don't let me die. If not for my sake, then for my cat's. Who will feed Static if I die down here?

Every so often, my hands brush against the wall, indicating a curve in the tunnel. Each time they do, I have a small moment of panic. Is this the end? If it is, I'm stuck, counting down to an unknown, suffocating death.

My hands hit the walls. Occasionally I kick too hard or drift too far to the side and hit the stone sides. Is the tunnel getting narrower? Are the walls closing in? Is the ceiling coming down? Am I going to be pressed to death down here in the darkness?

No. It's fine. You're fine. You've been in narrow spaces like this before. You're not claustrophobic. You're not going to be crushed. It's just like being in a sleeping bag. That's all it is. Just a stone sleeping bag keeping you safe, and when you wake up you'll be on the surface and dry and freely breathing air and this will all have been nothing more than a horrible nightmare.

Remember how it felt to sleep in the tent when you were a kid? It made you feel so brave and independent. Curling up in your sleeping bag when night fell made you feel like an explorer. Not afraid of the dark or wild animals. Remember that. That's all you need to think about. How warm and safe you were.

My foot scrapes against the top of the tunnel. Not a tunnel. A sleeping bag. And it's not stone. It's nylon. I just kicked a little in my sleep. I'm just getting comfortable in my sleeping bag.

If only it wasn't so dark.

No. No. Do not think about the blackness. It's just like having your eyes closed. That's all. It's really dark because your eyes are closed. Your eyes are closed because you're calm and relaxed and ready to fall asleep.

And then something I can't see brushes past my face.

For a second, absurdly, I think it's Static. And then reality slaps me upside the head and I clamp down on my regulator so I don't drop it when I scream. What's down here in the dark with me? Was it just a bubble I exhaled? It must have been that. It had to be that. But it felt so solid.

Something brushes past my other cheek. And across my chest. I feel it even through my wetsuit. I kick faster, knowing I can't turn around and flee. Maybe if I blow past it, it won't notice me. Or if it does, I'll be too fast for it to do anything. That's assuming it's an "it" at all. Maybe it's a "they." I ignore the stinging pains that zip through my hands as I bump and scrape them against the oh-so-close sides of the tunnel. I can't afford to be cautious right now.

A part of my mind keeps screaming, "they're just fish!" Harmless little deep divers who are as surprised by me as I am of them. Just little fish. They can't hurt me.

And then I remember that one night, laying in my sleeping bag and thinking I was safe from the world outside, when something tickled the side of my face. It wasn't a loose hair. It was a spider crawling along my cheek. I yelped and swatted it and tried to squash it, but I ended up sleeping in the house. At least I slept in my own bed and not my parents'. My sleeping bag betrayed me that night. Just like this one is now. Only I have no home to run to, no parents to hug me and tell me everything's going to be okay. I only have me and whatever is down here with me.

Down here there's no light for my eyes to use to adjust to the darkness. I shouldn't be able to see the figures swimming toward me. But I can. Thin fingers reaching for me in the darkness, caressing my face and my chest through my neoprene suit. Hundreds of tendrils reaching from the shadows, hungry for me, wanting nothing more than to drag me into the blackness and never let go. I squeeze myself to the right, almost pathetically hoping the two inches of space will be enough to dodge their horrible grip. The rough sound of rubber on stone reverberates through my body as I rub against a wall that feels like a cheese grater. I force myself back into the center of the tunnel, afraid that any accidental cut or scrape will lure the things around me like moths to a flame. I kick harder, but my legs are already burning from the effort. I can't afford to slow down. I need to get out of here before whatever it is gets me. Or I run out of air. Oh, God, my air. How much do I have left? Ten minutes? Fifteen?

Caution is a luxury I can't afford. I drop my arms to the

ground and pull myself along with my forearms. Banging my head is the least of my concerns now. And then I hear the unmistakable sound of metal scraping against stone. It's my air tank.

I freeze. How stupid can I be? Bracing myself on my arms means I take up more space horizontally.

I hold my breath, ignoring the flicking of the tendrils, which for some reason are slowing down. The creature must be waiting for me to kill myself. Which I just might have done if I punctured my tank. I strain my hearing for the telltale hiss of escaping air, but my pounding heart drives all other sound away. I close my eyes, hoping it will have some psychological effect on my hearing.

Five seconds. Ten. I have good lung capacity, but if I hold my breath for too long, I'll only take deeper breaths when I inhale again. Fortunately, it sounds like no air has escaped. I slowly release my breath, inhale slowly, and start crawling forward again, this time hugging the bottom. I feel my stomach rub against the sandy, stony ground. I try not to imagine how low the ceiling is, how if there was any light I could look up and see the roof inches from my head, pressing down and slowly squeezing me like a sandwich in a panini press. The tunnel would grow tighter and tighter, narrower and narrower, until—

No. I shake my head while trying not to smack it against one of the walls. The tunnel isn't closing in on me. It's no more dangerous than a sleeping bag. That's all this is. A sleeping bag. It's a comfortable space, and comfortable spaces can't kill you, no matter how tight they are.

It takes me a minute to notice nothing is grabbing at me, and I almost laugh. They weren't tendrils, or fingers, or something terrible. It was a school of fish. Nothing more dangerous than minnows. You give them to your cat for treats sometimes. I can't believe how badly I started panicking. I have to get out of here before I really go cra—

And then the bottom drops out, and I hurtle into the blackness.

Something batters me around as I scabble for a handhold, desperate to avoid plunging into some bottomless abyss where God-knows-what may live or where the pressure will crush me.

Another something slams into my stomach, forcing out my breath in a solid whoosh. I tumble end over end, spinning in every direction, unable to orient myself in this directionless void.

I hang there in the inky blackness, desperate to catch my breath but fearful that I'll waste what precious little air I have left. It can't be more than five minutes now.

Where am I? I have no clue. It has to be a larger cave. The ground didn't give way, it sloped. If it weren't for the current I could have recovered what little of my bearings I still had. I mean, it could be worse. I could've torn off my mask or dislodged my tank. But "worse" is only a matter of degrees. I don't know which way is up. I could swim in any direction and not know if I'm heading toward the surface or deeper into the darkness. Hell, I might even find myself in the same tunnel, going back the way I came.

I don't want to die down here, asphyxiating alone in the darkness. But I have three minutes of air left.

I'm sorry, Static. I should have left you extra food. I'm sorry, Mom. I wish our last conversation wasn't an argument. I'm sorry, everyone who told me not to—

No.

My chances of survival are slim to none, but slim is better than no chance. I pick a direction, and I start swimming through the darkness. I kick, I pull forward. It's so hard to breathe. I'm so tired. I don't stop. I can't stop. Steady movements forward are my only chance.

Am I dizzy? Dizzy's bad. I shake my head. Lights are flashing. Safety? Safety! No. The lights are in my head. Everything outside is blackness. Infinite blackness everywhere.

I grab for something. Anything. Some hint that I've found a tunnel. Found the way out. But there's nothing.

Nothing but the void around me and the lights in my head.

I'm so tired. So sleepy. One deep breath. That's all I need and I'll be good again. But it's hard to breathe for some reason. Maybe it's because I'm so sleepy. So very sleepy.

I should close my eyes now. Just for five minutes. Just five. Catch my breath and get my energy back. Just curl up and take a five-minute nap in my stone sleeping bag.

As its title suggests, “Shiver and Quiver” sustains a taut, eerie mood that stays with you. Gabriel masterfully balances this uncanny tone with a simple, profound humanity: a steady gaze at both life and death through the experiences of characters caught between them.

Shiver and Quiver

by Manfred Gabriel

Manfred Gabriel's previous work has appeared in over two dozen publications, most recently Modern Magic, Daikaijuzine and Liquid Imagination.

Each morning, Elke checked for the dead. She'd make her way between the rows of beds in the women's ward, stocking feet padding icy linoleum as the first rays of winter sunshine filtered through drawn curtains. Some of the patients turned restlessly beneath layers of down, their fitful coughs interrupting the silence. Others slept soundly, breaths shallow but steady. If anyone was not moving, not breathing, Elke would go to her, put two fingers to her neck to check for a pulse. There were always a few who did not survive the night. Elke would like to say she felt something for these women, but most came and went so quickly she never got to know them. This morning, however, was different. Helena had passed away.

Helena looked much older than her seventy-two years. In the Great War, she had served as a nurse. In this last war, its se-

quel, she was too old to have any purpose but to survive. Still, she kept her spirits high. Her eyes were bright and blue as the lake near where she grew up. Elke would sit at her bedside whenever she had a free moment between chores, so she could hear the old woman tell tales of frogs who would be princes, of cunning wolves and evil witches, her voice changing for the different characters. Elke had heard all these stories before, but it warmed her to hear them again, to recall more innocent times. Her mother used to read her those tales, and with a father missing on the front, she took comfort in them, gruesome as some might have been. She was fourteen going on thirty. After her mother had died in a bombing, she had to grow up fast to survive. Still, sometimes it felt good to recall what it was like to be a little girl.

The Sisters of Mary of the Divine Heart, the nuns who ran the hospital, said more than once that Helena was fodder for the grave. Elke did not want to believe it. But as she placed her face close to Helena's, there was no denying it. When Ulrich, the caretaker, and his assistant, a boy of about twelve, came to take the body away, she couldn't help but shed a tear.

After making her rounds, Elke went down to the kitchen for breakfast. She had little appetite, but knew she had to eat if she wanted to keep up her strength. She had already been thin before the war. Now, her ribs showed through her scabbed skin, and she often missed her period.

The other servant girls were already gathered around the table, eating dark bread with Rueben marmalade, drinking ersatz

coffee. The table they sat at did not have room enough for them all. Sometimes Elke, petite as she was, could wiggle a space for herself on the bench. This morning, she ate off to one side, on a stool in the corner. The other girls chatted mindlessly. They talked about whether today would be colder than yesterday, if snow was coming, if there would be some meat in the soup that afternoon. Elke found it to be so much idle banter, words upon words just to pass the time.

The remainder of the morning was spent cleaning under the supervision of Sister Inge. Sister Inge was not as stern as some, but strict enough. Hard work and discipline were the way into heaven, she told them more than once. Elke wondered if Sister Inge believed this, or if it was just a way of keeping them from complaining about their long days, sore knees, stiff backs. For the next few hours, Elke and the other girls scrubbed floors, cleaned toilets, dusted stair rails. They changed the sheets on the beds of those who had died so that by the afternoon someone else could take their place. There was no shortage of new patients. Tuberculosis and cholera were already epidemic. There were rumors of a typhoid outbreak, though they'd seen no evidence of it yet.

Lunch consisted of watery soup with beets and turnips, a few dried herbs and what salt they still had to give it some flavor. Elke still wasn't very hungry, but she ate all the same. She felt a sore throat coming on, and the soup made it feel better. After lunch, she went out to clean the morgue.

The morgue sat separate from the hospital, a red brick

building with a moss-covered roof in the middle of the courtyard. Elke pulled on her well-worn boots, buttoned up her raggedy coat, and with mop and pail in hand headed out into the cold. In better times, the courtyard had a mown lawn and flower beds, shade trees and benches where patients could sit and enjoy warm breezes. Most winters, snow would settle on bare branches and blanket the ground, giving it all a Yuletide feel even after Christmas had passed. This year, the winter had so far been cold but without snow. That autumn, the lawn had been dug up to make room for a vegetable garden come spring. The ground was hard and frozen.

The morgue door was never locked. Whoever wanted to steal the dead could have them. There was no place to bury them until the thaw, and none of them had anything worth stealing. Besides, there were more than enough dead to go around.

Elke went to work. The morgue was a single large room with small windows near the curved ceiling to let in the fading light. One wall was lined with glass cabinets which had long been plundered of supplies that were of any use—iodine, cotton swabs, rubber gloves, scalpels and rubbing alcohol. In the center of the room sat a table for performing autopsies, which could be tilted towards a nearby sink to let any excess blood run down the drain. There was a large lamp above the table that had no bulb (and little electricity to run it anyway) and a wood-burning stove in the corner which hadn't been stoked all winter. There was barely enough fuel to keep the living warm, Sister Inge had

told her. They would be lucky if their stores of coal lasted them until spring.

The far wall was lined with the lockers that held the corpses. Above the lockers, a compartment for ice to keep the dead preserved sat empty, and for the next few frigid months at least, was unnecessary.

The morgue frightened the other girls. Even the Sisters crossed themselves when they walked by. Elke didn't mind, though. Cleaning it was easy work. The coroner had been called off to war and never returned. There was no reason to autopsy the bodies anyway. What they died of didn't matter. It hardly mattered to anyone that they were gone.

By the time she finished, it was already getting dark. Night came early this time of year. In the dim light, she poured the dirty water from her pail into the sink, wrung out her mop. She was about to leave, when Helena came to mind.

She went to the lockers, and with a trembling hand, pulled one open, partly sliding out the tray that held the body, or rather bodies, three crammed together. So many dead, so little space. She pulled back the sheet on the one nearest her. An old man with sunken cheeks, lips blue, skin pale and bloodless. She quickly tossed the sheet back over him, slammed the tray in, shut the locker door.

“Looking for someone?”

Elke spun around. A man sat in a chair at the coroner's desk,

half lost in the dwindling light. He was gaunt with sharp eyes and a patrician nose. He wore a suit with a collarless shirt and no tie.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she said, trying to sound brave. After losing her mother and before coming to the hospital she’d had to stand up to more than one soldier with a gun and lust in what was left in his heart. This man was no soldier. He had no weapon she could see.

“Neither should you,” the man replied. He spoke with the practiced diction that reminded Elke of a schoolteacher: perfect, crisp consonants.

“I’m here to clean.”

“And that poor old soul, he was dirty?” The man grinned, revealing a missing front tooth.

“I was looking for someone. A woman I knew. I wanted to see her one last time.”

“The Sisters wouldn’t approve,” the man said. “But I won’t say anything if you won’t. Don’t worry, I mean no harm. I’m only paying my respects, same as you.”

She was about to ask him who he was but let out a slight cough instead. A bell rang in the distance. “Time for supper,” the man said. “You better get going or you’ll have nothing to eat. I know what it’s like to go hungry.”

Elke backed out the door, closed it behind her. After a few steps, she turned and hurried toward the hospital’s main building, mop clanging against her pail as she ran.

Elke said nothing of the man as she ate her coarse bread and stewed vegetables. Later, as the girls sat in the sewing room, darning socks, mending sheets, stitching torn gowns by lamp-light, she glanced out the window across the courtyard to the morgue, dark and cold, wondering if the man was still there. She did not know who he was, but she was determined to find out. He was her secret, and she would tell no one.

As one day passed into the next, cleaning, sewing, making her rounds, she looked for an opportunity to sneak by Sister Inge's watchful gaze and return to the morgue but found none. She would have to wait for the following week, when it came time to clean it again.

That morning, Lotte and Beata had both come down with fevers and chest congestion and had to stay in bed. Elke wasn't feeling that well herself. Her throat had gotten worse, her cough more pronounced. But she dared not say anything or she'd miss her chance to return to the morgue. Besides, illness had become the norm since the war ended. She always managed to get through it.

The two girls' chores were divided amongst the others. Elke worked quickly to get them all done, but it was almost night by the time she grabbed her mop and pail and headed out across the courtyard.

She brought a candle with her. She shined it around the room as she entered, leaving the door open, pail at her feet, mop

in hand like a cudgel. She stopped when she saw him sitting in the same spot as before at the coroner's desk.

"I'm sorry if I startled you the other day," the man said. "I didn't expect you to be here so late. Usually, I have the place to myself."

"I brought you something to eat," Elke said. She had snuck an extra potato during lunch. Now, she took it from her skirt's only pocket and laid it on the desk.

"Thank you, but I can't eat. Not here. Perhaps later. It would be rude to the others." He looked around the room. "They can neither eat nor drink, so to do so in front of them would be rude. I am a polite if uninvited guest."

"Who are the others?"

He leaned in close, took off his peaked cap. Hair had started to grow back on his once shaved head, black peppered gray. "The newly dead. Their spirits linger, scared and confused, waiting to be buried, pass on to the netherworld. In the meantime, I bring them comfort."

Elke thought a moment. "The soul leaves the body, goes to heaven or hell or purgatory upon death."

"That's what you were taught. I was taught differently."

"How do you bring them comfort? Are you death?"

A cold wind blew. Elke shivered, went into a coughing fit. The man rose, neared her. She tightened the grip on her mop handle. Every muscle in her body tensed. He moved around her,

shut the door. “If only I were,” he said, his gap-tooth grin bright in the candlelight. “No, I should be reading to them. Prayers, the old stories. I learned them as a child, but I forgot them long ago. I’m not a religious man. So I just sit. It may help. It may not. It helps me.” He raised his arm to scratch behind his ear. His sleeve, too short to begin with, ran partway up his arm. Elke glimpsed a 5 and an 8 tattooed on his forearm in simple dark print. She wondered if the numbers continued, running up the length of his arm to his shoulder. He noticed her staring.

“I was one of the lucky ones,” he said. “I got better food, better clothes. In exchange, I calmed the living as they arrived, bewildered and scared, just as I now try to calm the dead. I told them everything would be okay. It was a lie and I knew it. Here, I believe it to be true. It is my way of making amends.”

“You were just trying to survive,” Elke said. “Everyone’s done things they aren’t proud of to stay alive.”

“You are a sweet liar,” the man replied. “Come, sit.”

She did so, keeping a grip on the mop handle, ready to make a run for the door.

“I should be sitting for my own people,” he said. “But none are left.”

Elke was beginning to understand. “You should hate us.”

“I tried. But I grew up nearby. These people,” he gestured to the lockers, “were our friends, our neighbors, my father’s customers at his haberdashery. In a way, they are my people, too,

deserving of a peace in death they did not have in life, same as anyone.”

Elke shivered. The man went around to her, took off his shabby jacket, laid it over her shoulders. She thanked him, pulled it tight.

The following day, Elke told Sister Inge she had left her glasses in the morgue. A lie, of course. Sister Inge scolded her for forgetting them, reminded her they would be hard to replace, but allowed her to go get them after supper.

The man sat there as if he had never left. “Thank you for keeping my secret,” he said.

“I brought you something.” She pulled a book from the folds of her skirt, placed it on the desk. He picked it up, pages browned, silver lettering on the cover worn but still readable: *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*. “We have a small library. I thought the dead might like to hear you read,” she said.

“A good choice. Something for everyone.” He nodded at the lockers. “Which is your favorite?”

Elke thought of all the tales she had heard her mother read her as a small girl, the ones Helena recited from memory. “*Aschenputtel*,” she said.

He smiled. “Ah, ball gowns and handsome princes.”

“I was thinking more of the tree that held the mother’s spirit and helped her on her way.”

The man's smile disappeared. There was sadness in his eyes. He understood. "There are so few trees. The war took care of that," he said. "Still, spirits linger."

"I wish I could sense them like you do."

"You think it's my imagination, or that I'm mad?"

She shook her head. "Never."

"No, you are too polite." He set the book in his lap, looked towards the window. The moon waned, a lopsided ball. The room's only light. Wisps of frost formed on the windows. She shuddered but not from the cold or her lingering illness. A weight on her chest made it hard to breathe. Her heart raced. She turned towards the door, put her hand on the knob. It burned like ice. She pulled it back.

She could feel them now. Angry, remorseful, sad. She stood motionless while the man watched her, let these emotions flow over her, through her. She took several deep breaths which ended in an uncontrollable cough. She put her hand over her mouth. Blood sprayed her palm.

"You should have yourself checked," the man said, concern in his eyes.

"The doctors are all busy," Elke replied. "Besides, a couple of girls had the same thing a week ago. They got better quickly. It will pass."

"Then go, get into bed where it's warm, get a good night's sleep."

She still sensed the dead, but they no longer frightened her, either. “I want to stay and hear you read.”

The man’s face became hard in the moonlight. He shook his head. “Another time, maybe. You need your rest.”

Snow began to fall. The barren earth became shrouded in white. Elke knew this, even if she could not see it. The morgue was colder than usual; an iciness had seeped deep into her bones.

A pain engulfed her. Not physical. That was gone now, but the pain of loneliness, the pain of loss. The pain turned to anger. Her life, such as it was, cut short by a world that cared nothing for her. If she could, she would have reached out, struck out at the living, struck out at a vengeful God.

A voice came to her, the man’s voice, as if from down a deep well. He was reading from reading from *Aschenputtel*, knowing she must be listening:

“The step-mother had brought with her into the house two daughters, who were beautiful and fair of face, but vile and black of heart. Now began a bad time for the poor step-child.”

Here the voice changed. Helena’s voice, in the mocking, vile tone of the step-mother, “She who wants to eat bread must earn it. Out with the kitchen-wench.”

The story continued, the man narrating, Helena taking on the various voices—the stepsisters, the king, the prince. It came to Elke like a lullaby. She found she was no longer hearing the

story, only the words, until *Aschenputtel* came to the tree that held the spirit of her mother and said:

“Shiver and quiver, little tree,
Silver and gold throw down over me.”

The voice was not Helena’s, nor the man’s. The voice was her own. When she heard it, she held a breath that could no longer be held, and waited.

Straightforward crime stories are the bread-and-butter of classic pulp magazines. Hopson's story tells one such narrative, with compelling characters, sharp dialogue, and a shocking but inevitable conclusion.

Payout

by Kevin Hopson

Kevin has dabbled in many genres over the years. A few of his stories have been contest/award winners, and Kevin's work has appeared in more than twenty anthologies. You can learn more about Kevin by visiting his website at <http://www.kmhopson.com>.

As I walk to my car, I notice a vehicle in the parking lot with a flat tire. I don't think much of it at first, until I see the woman behind the steering wheel. It's Olivia. The two of us attend the same community college, and we have a couple of classes together. And she just happens to be the most beautiful woman in the world.

Olivia's talking on her cell phone and catches me looking in her direction. She lowers the phone a few seconds later and rolls down her window.

"Corey," she says.

I stop and approach her. "Hey, Olivia. Do you need some help changing the tire?"

She shakes her head. “I don’t have time. I need to be somewhere right now, so I’ll have to come back and deal with it later.” Her lips stretch into a grin. “Do you think you could give me a ride?”

Just the thought of her being in my car, sitting right next to me, makes my pulse accelerate. I have no plans, so I jump at the opportunity.

“Sure,” I say.

“Thanks.”

Olivia deposits the phone in her purse, gets out, and locks her car.

“Where are you at?” she asks.

“Right over here,” I reply, pointing a finger.

She sidles up to me, and I feel a bead of sweat along my brow. It’s a warm spring day, but Olivia is making my body temperature rise even more.

A hint of perfume tickles my nose. I glance at Olivia. Her wavy, dark hair rests along the back of her shoulders, her blue eyes eventually meeting my gaze. Then she smiles.

I let out a breath, turning my attention to the car. I pull a key from my pants pocket and press a button to unlock the doors. Olivia circles around the car to the passenger side door and gets in, while I ease behind the steering wheel.

I close the door, secure my seatbelt, and turn the ignition. “Where do you need to go?”

“I have a two o’clock appointment with a lawyer, but I need

to make a stop first.”

“Sure. Where?”

“You know the gas station at the corner of Lincoln and Nuckols?”

I nod. “Yeah. No problem.”

We drive in awkward silence for a minute, Olivia finally breaking the ice.

“Thanks again for doing this,” she says.

“Of course. Glad to help.” I ponder. “How will you get back to your car?”

“I’ll get an Uber.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind waiting around for you.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’ll be fine.”

I bob my head and purse my lips.

We arrive at the gas station a few minutes later.

“You can park near the air pump,” she says.

It’s one of those pumps where people can pay to inflate their tires.

I scan the parking lot. “There are a couple of spaces up front.”

“That’s okay. Just park near the air pump.”

I find Olivia’s choice a little odd, but I’m not about to argue, so I pull into an empty spot along the side of the convenience store and park.

Olivia exhales.

“Something wrong?” I inquire.

“I hate to ask you for another favor, but—”

“I don’t mind,” I interrupt. “What is it?”

“I need a couple of things inside, but I need to call the lawyer’s office really quick. Would you mind getting them for me?”

“No problem.”

Olivia takes a twenty-dollar bill from her wallet. “I need a strawberry-banana smoothie. It comes in a bottle in the refrigerated section. And I also need a pack of Newport cigarettes. You have to ask the cashier for those.”

I raise an eyebrow. I didn’t realize Olivia smoked.

“Okay,” I finally say.

“This should cover it.” Olivia extends a hand, offering me the twenty dollars.

“I’ve got you covered.”

Olivia shakes her head. “You’ve already done enough. Plus, I know the owner, and I always pay in cash. He appreciates it.”

I only have a few dollars in my wallet.

“Fair enough,” I say.

I grab the bill and pocket it. Then I exit the car and make my way across the parking lot. The door dings as I enter the convenience store. An old man behind the counter eyes me, so I smile and walk toward the back of the store, perusing the cold beverages.

I spot a fruit smoothie matching Olivia’s description. There’s

no other brand, so I assume I have the right one. I open the door, grab a bottle, and head for the counter.

“Hi,” I say to the cashier.

Wrinkles and age spots cover the man’s weathered face, a scraggly salt-and-pepper beard hiding some of his blemishes.

“I need a pack of Newport cigarettes, too,” I point out.

The man arches one of his bushy eyebrows. “Newports and a strawberry-banana smoothie?”

“That’s right.”

“Are these for you?”

My brow furrows. “What does that matter?”

“I’m just curious.”

“No,” I say. “They’re for a friend of mine.”

“A woman?”

I hesitate. “Yeah. Why?”

“She comes in here every Wednesday and gets the same thing. But today is Tuesday.”

I shrug. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

He snatches a pack of cigarettes from a shelf behind the counter. “It will be seventeen dollars and eighty-five cents.”

I pull the twenty from my pocket and hand it to the man. He opens the cash register, places the bill in one of the compartments, and starts pulling several other bills from the register.

When he hands me my change, my brows scrunch together.

He gave me fifteen cents back, which is correct for the coins. But, instead of two one-dollar bills, he gave me a mix of fives, tens, and twenties. It totals a few hundred dollars.

“This is way too much,” I say.

“That’s the correct change,” he insists.

I eye the bills again and shake my head. “I can’t take this.”

“Do you even know what you’re doing?”

“What?”

“Just take the money,” he says through clenched teeth, “and go.”

I’m at a loss for words and uncertain what to do. Given the man’s death stare, though, I decide to oblige.

“Okay.” It’s all I can muster as I exit the store.

I return to the car, and Olivia gawks at me as I sit behind the wheel.

“Did he give you the money?” she asks.

“Yeah. What’s this all about?”

“It’s part of our arrangement.”

“Arrangement?”

“I don’t expect you to understand,” Olivia says.

“I’m at a loss here,” I admit.

“Close the door.”

I close the door and hand Olivia her items, along with the money.

“I’m going to tell you something,” Olivia says. “It may be hard to believe, but it’s the truth.”

“Okay.”

“I work for a guy. He has a hand in organized crime. And businesses like this one,” she says, referring to the gas station owner, “pay him for protection.”

“Protection from what?”

“From other crime syndicates.”

I take a second to ponder. “That’s extortion.”

“I know. I got a call earlier from my handler, and he said the police are closing in on us. He told me to kill the weekly meetings. At least, temporarily. Until things cool down. Anyway, I only take the money and pass it along. I’m not involved in any of their other illicit activities.”

“So, the store owner pays every Wednesday?”

“That’s been the schedule.”

“And you always buy the same two things?”

“Yeah. It’s code. A sign that payment is due,” she elaborates. “However, my superiors can change the day of payment at any time. When they do this, someone else takes my place. The store owner is aware of this. It’s usually another low-level person in the organization that stands in for me. But today’s deal wasn’t approved by my superiors. That’s why I had you do it. No one knows about it but us and the store owner.”

A thought comes to me. “Jesus. Does that mean I’m going to be implicated in all of this now?”

“I won’t let that happen. You just have to trust me.”

“But don’t convenience stores have surveillance?”

“Most of them do, and this store does, but you paid in cash. Even if your face is on video, how would anyone ID you?” Olivia looks me over. “You don’t have any identifying markers such as tattoos or scars, so it would be nearly impossible.”

I suppose that’s true.

“Wait.” I pause. “If your guy said to kill the weekly meetings, why did you have me do the deal?”

“I need the money. I’m going to take a bus out of town. And since I disobeyed my handler, I’m technically stealing from the organization now. But only if my handler finds out. I’ll be fine as long as the store owner doesn’t talk.” Olivia hesitates. “I figure my best option is to get away from this mess. And I can’t do that by leaving a trail.”

It makes sense. It will be harder to track Olivia if she pays for everything in cash.

“So, the whole lawyer thing was just a lie?” I ask.

“Unfortunately. I needed an excuse, and it’s the first thing that came to mind.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “Why are you telling me all of this?”

Olivia rests a hand on my arm. Despite the fact she’s a criminal, Olivia’s touch still gives me goosebumps.

“Because I like you,” she says. “And because you won’t remember any of this.”

“What?”

I feel a prick, and my eyes bulge at the sight of the needle in my vein.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “You’re just going to take a little nap. When you wake up, you won’t recall any of this.”

A bout of drowsiness washes over me, and my vision begins to blur. Within seconds, everything fades to black.

When I wake, the clock on the car’s dash shows a few minutes past four o’clock, and my arm is sore for some strange reason. I remember giving Olivia a ride, but only vaguely. And I do remember pulling into the gas station. However, everything after that is fuzzy. In fact, it’s completely blank.

I glimpse the passenger seat, but it’s empty. The same with the backseat. Unless Olivia is inside the store, I don’t know where she could be. But, more importantly, I don’t know what would have caused me to doze off, especially for so long.

I check the store. Olivia isn’t there. And the guy behind the counter is eyeing me in a weird way. So, I decide to leave. I drive home hoping something will come back to me along the way. But it doesn’t.

Since my arm is still bothering me, I examine it more closely once I’m home. A vein along the inside of my elbow is slightly

inflamed and sore to the touch, but that's the extent of it. Could a mosquito have bitten me? The discomfort subsides by the next morning, so I put it out of my mind.

A few days pass, and Olivia hasn't shown up in any of our classes together. Her car is still in the parking lot with a flat tire, too, so I'm extremely worried. If I had her phone number or email address, I could get in touch with her. But I have nothing.

It isn't until several days later, when I'm checking the news headlines on my phone, that I notice something. A local crime boss and several of his associates were recently arrested. I would normally skim over the article but, for some reason, I'm inclined to read it.

It's a pretty straightforward piece and nothing I haven't heard about before. The accused face a laundry list of charges, including racketeering and even murder. I read over the names of the people in custody, my eyes going wide when I see one in particular.

Oh, my God. Olivia!

Readers looking for a classic ghost story couldn't ask for one better than this multi-layered tale of dark obsession. Echoing such writers as Robert Louis Stevenson and Henry James, Lewis builds an atmosphere as hauntingly enigmatic as his central characters.

Waiting in Shadow

by E. Michael Lewis

E. Michael Lewis studied creative writing at the University of Puget Sound. He is a lifelong native of the Pacific Northwest whose ghost stories appear in Flight or Fright (Cemetery Dance Publications), Savage Beasts (Grey Matter Press), Exotic Gothic 4 (PS Publishing). He's on the web (www.emichaellewis.com), [Facebook](#), and [X](#) (formerly known as Twitter).

“I’ve never seen a ghost,” John Beardsley said, shifting in the wingback chair before my fire, “although my mother says I have.”

John’s famous mother, Lydia Beardsley, had been an artist’s model and a bohemian in her day, sharing love affairs with various artistic and literary figures. John took after his father and became a tax attorney, a good one too, whose primary clientele was creative types, such as myself. The night John came to me, his mother lay dying in a hospice ward. Our conversation, gloomy to begin with, turned to topics one often speaks of when someone is dying—love, regret, and the afterlife.

After a moment he gulped the scotch I’d poured for him,

wincing and roughly cleared his throat. “Mother always claimed a certain sensitivity to the unseen world.”

I rose from my chair and returned with a scotch for myself. “But not you.”

“I’m not an imaginative man, and I don’t recall being an imaginative child.”

Beardsley went silent again and I let him brood. The tales of his mother’s polyamory and scandals assured his friends and clients that he understood creative people and the struggles they faced when confronted with the dull details of everyday life. I knew, though he was embarrassed and embittered by his mother’s behavior, he loved her very much. She baffled, yet fascinated him.

Finally, he said, “I’ll tell you what she told me tonight. I have no idea if it’s true or what it means if it’s not true. But it’s a damn strange thing to hear from your mother on her deathbed.”

Mother liked to proclaim she was raised in a haunted house. She talked of mysterious noises, unexplained cold spots, and the horrid dreams she experienced as a child. The spirits were always near her, she said, whispering or tapping on her shoulder or even pawing at her for as long as she could remember.

Growing up, my house was haunted too, not by shades or phantoms, but by my absent mother. My father kept the house in a constant state of readiness to receive her. You never knew what

time of the day or night she would arrive or how long she might stay. In my youth, when she would steal into my room at night, kiss me on the forehead and whisper ‘sweet dreams, little man,’ I sometimes had trouble knowing whether she had really been there, or whether I had dreamt it.

By the time my father died, though much of her charm remained, all her other lovers had deserted her. My father left her a little money. She settled into old age, and we became something like friends. When she grew bedridden, she invited me to sit while she told me stories of her misspent youth. You’ve heard me recite some of them at parties. Her candor was entirely dependent on the type of painkillers she took, and tonight she was full to the gills. I found her room quiet when I entered, her window open and a slight breeze rustling the hospital curtains surrounding her. I gently pulled them aside in case she was sleeping. To my surprise, she was wide awake, cowering in her bed. When she saw me, she shouted, “Get away! I don’t love you, I never loved you! Go back to the shadows! Go back to the dark!”

I tried to calm her but she shrank from me and tried to defend herself. When I clasped my hands over her trembling fists, she stopped and became alert. At first she called me by my father’s name, then finally, mine. “Oh John, it’s you. Thank God it’s you.”

I’ve never known my mother to be afraid, and certainly never to thank God in a time of crisis. I moved to withdraw and find a nurse, but she grasped my coat and held me fast. I finally convinced her to let me go long enough to move a chair next to

the bed and sit with her.

“Why are you so upset, mother? Who did you think I was just now?”

“The man from the shadows. I thought he’d come back for me.”

“A man from the shadows?” I was expecting a story about a childhood bogeyman, I suppose, a memory brought on by her approaching death. What she told me was very different.

“When you were very young, only two or three years old, I knew a man, an author, who would visit me while I still lived with your father. His name was Roman Maddox Booth. He was a friend from school and, though intense and melancholic, I enjoyed his company very much. I was already feeling constrained by my marriage and eager for any outside attention, even if it did come from a morbid fellow like him.

“He wrote for the weird pulp magazines as R. M. Booth. He was always researching the most dreadful subjects—cannibalism, dentistry, the occult. He was forever going to libraries, always on the hunt for some forgotten text or forbidden book of spells, but when I could steer him away from those morbid topics, he was sweet, and gentle, and doted on me increasingly.

“It became clear to me, after many lunches and afternoon walks in the park with him, and by the way he expressed dislike for your father and delight in your childish antics, that he wanted more from me than close friendship.

“Now, I know I encouraged him, yes, and think of me what you will, but in those days, I was not interested in scandal. I wanted to be happy with your father and contented as his wife. I was trying to make it work. I rebuffed his advances firmly until finally, during a secret visit to our house, he made a bold move and I asked him to leave.

“I have never seen a man so wounded by my refusal. He cringed from me, hand clutching his chest. I can still see his face—dark, scowling, eyes narrowed, lips pressed together as if trying to hold back a torrent of curses, or of tears.

“Finally, those lips parted and he dropped to one knee, taking my hand. ‘I love you,’ he said. ‘I need you, both of you. I want to stay with you for as long as I live.’ I didn’t doubt him, because I knew the depths of his soul, but at that moment, I was afraid of him. He wasn’t the kind of man who would force himself on me, but his dark intensity made me realize that if I submitted to his love, if I let his love into my heart, it would bind me like a prisoner. It was a love like no other, a terrible, devastating love.

“‘I don’t love you and I won’t leave my husband,’ I said. ‘You can’t have us. You’re the one that must leave. Don’t come back.’

“He cringed from me again, as if I’d struck him. ‘What am I supposed to do with all the love I have for you? All I can think of, day or night, is you.’

“‘Love yourself instead.’ I said it to hurt him, to shock him out of his lovesickness and get him out of my house.

“He rose and dropped my hand. His lips closed again and the room buzzed with unspoken threats. Finally, he said, ‘You are light from heaven. Without you, the shadows will claim me.’

“It was an odd thing to say, but he was an odd man, and in the moment I didn’t question it. ‘Let them,’ I said.

“He stalked out. The door slammed and woke you from your nap.

“Now, until that day, you were a bold, theatrical, little extravert, a charming child. Afterwards you became skittish, shy, even nervous. Your father noticed the change in you right away and sought the cause. When he found out that Booth was paying me secret visits, we quarreled. Once out in the open, the quarreling never really stopped.

“You would cry out in the middle of the night and rush to our bedroom, finding your father and I sleeping as far apart from each other as possible. You told us about a man who would visit you in your room at night.”

Beardsley paused and looked up from the fire. ‘I remember none of this, mind you,’ he said, as if he needed an excuse for his own involvement in such a tale. Then he went on.

“You told us he would wake you up, and take you by the shoulders, and ask you questions that frightened you. You never could articulate exactly what he asked, but once you told me it was about me and about your father. It upset you very much. You took to sleeping in our bed, in that space between us.

“During this time, I became conscious of a presence in our house. In the quiet of my mind, I could hear a sound, like breathing that was not my own. Always it was worst during moments of solitary intimacy. I grew nervous to bathe or undress. I felt oppressed, uneasy, and most of all, exposed. I grew anxious about being alone, even with you, and sometimes especially with you.

“Your father, that stolid materialist, noticed nothing of the sort, and mistook my unease for a guilty conscience over my concealed misadventure.

“We tried to reassure you, but even as time went on, you would not be comforted. Your father and I took turns staying up with you—another excuse not to share a bed. These nights were the worst for me. I saw figures all over the house, standing in corners, crouched behind furniture, concealed behind doors. Shadows shifted from room to room, watching every move in our sad domestic melodrama. I seemed to wander in circles, always turning on the lights, always sure we were not alone.

“Then, one night, shortly before your first day of nursery school, I stayed up with you in your room until you fell asleep. I read a little in the dim light, then decided to sleep on the sofa, since your father had gone to bed. I slipped out of your room, changed, and returned to check on you one last time.

“Your room was altered. The shadows thrown by the reading lamp were darker than the night outside. This darkness was cold, palpable. I heard rain beating down on the roof of our little house, and winds buffeting the hedges outside, but I couldn’t see

any of it through your window. It was like it had been bricked over, like I was entering a tomb instead of a child's bedroom.

"I watched from the doorway in horror as a stooped man crept out of the corner of the room and to your bedside. He wore a robe seemingly woven of night, of that palpable darkness itself, and covered in arcane symbols that scuttled and crawled through the folds of the fabric as he stole toward your bed.

"My sweet boy,' he said in a low voice, 'wake up and speak to me. Tell me about your mother. I love you both so much.' When he reached out to wake you, I gasped. He turned. His pale face was thrown into sharp relief. Roman Maddox Booth.

"Not since that day have I been so frightened to find myself in a room with someone. He straightened and faced me, eyeing me with the same narrowed slits as on the day I spurned him. He said nothing more, but I remembered his words from that fateful day. The shadows had claimed him.

"Go away,' I shouted. 'Stay away from us! I never loved you! Get out of my house!'

"The darkness muted my cries, but even so, he drew back in pain, just like that day. The symbols on his robe faded as he staggered back into the corner, his likeness losing its depth. I stepped forward. His features folded into two dimensions as he retreated, fading into nothing more than abstract shapes on the wall.

"The darkness lifted as I neared your bed. I awoke you and pulled you from the room. You protested weakly as I tucked you in on the sofa, but you quickly fell asleep. I laid beside you the

rest of the night.

“The next morning, you awoke early for breakfast. The smell of coffee and your father’s cooking filled the house. You led me by the hand to the table. You were cheerful and full of your old mischief.

“Your father asked, ‘Were you visited by the man from the shadows last night?’

“‘Who?’ You asked. At last, the veil was lifted. My happy, carefree child had returned. You never mentioned the man from the shadows again, and as a rule, neither did we.

“Later, I made inquiries to mutual friends about Booth. I half-expected to hear that he was dead, that he killed himself in some terrible way. I dreaded news that a suicide note would blame me, expose my dalliance, and imply more than what actually took place. I heard back that he relocated to an isolated estate out west, but was still alive, and writing, his work as morbid as ever.

“People told me for years that what I saw in your room was a dream, but I know it wasn’t. They suggested you had night terrors, and that they passed away as they do in most children. Your father said my vision of Booth was a result of my guilt for carrying on with a man behind his back. Well, little did he know just how unimportant my fidelity to him would become. I don’t know how he visited us, or by what occult means he came to inhabit the darkness in our home, but he stopped coming and I stopped telling the story. Until tonight.”

Beardsley finished his scotch and shifted his glass from one hand to the other. Then, with the awkwardness of someone who has said too much, he rose and said, “Well, I’d best be off.”

I rose with him. “And you have no memory of this?”

“Absolutely none.”

I guided him to my door. “Not quite a ghost story, though, is it? Not that I’m suggesting your mother was telling the truth, but I imagine a man who could use arcane means to travel through shadows could also make you forget that it happened.”

“Curious,” was his slow reply.

At my threshold, he buttoned his coat. “There is one thing. I always sleep with a light on. Have since I can remember. I developed a habit of reading before I fall asleep, you see. That’s all.” He nodded to me, as if I understood something he was only beginning to understand. Then he stepped into the cold rain.

His tale was odd, certainly, and I was up late transcribing it in my journal. I regarded it as an unfinished kernel of a story, but with so many other stories to tell, I forgot all about it.

Then, a few years later, Beardsley died, and being childless, named me the executor of his estate. He had amassed a considerable nest egg through shrewd investments, and it took some research to sort out his wishes. In his papers, I came across a bequest, in the form of copyrights, to the writings of Roman Mad-dox Booth. I also found the very carefully preserved correspon-

dence between Lydia Beardsley and Booth, provocative letters filled with mutual yearning and innuendo. Lastly, I found a letter dated shortly after Lydia Beardsley died, which brought to mind the story her son had told me on that rainy night.

My Dearest John,

It's unlikely you remember who I am. I last saw you when you were nearly four years old. You were a delightful child, worthy of the affection and love of all who met you, myself the least among them.

I am guilty of many things, chief among them foolishness. As ridiculous as it may sound, though I haven't seen or spoken to her in decades, it remains the truth: I am in love with your mother Lydia. Knowing she never felt the same does not chasten the fire or diminish the disappointment I feel. Unrequited love is the most unreasoning type of love, which over time turns into dread, changing something effervescent into something immoral.

Your late father was a fine man, practical and in all things respectable, but utterly incapable of pleasing your mother, as was anyone she later lavished her affection on. Your father knew his folly almost from the moment they wed, yet he persisted in trying to tame her, which pushed her, I think, into many of the scandals that dog her reputation even today.

I wish I could have taken her, and you, far away from that unhappiness. When I met her, I was wandering through a cold

gray world, devoid of hope or promise. Every time I visited your mother was like seeing the sun rise for the first time. In the dim light of your bedroom, she shone like a beacon of fire. Waiting in shadow, I basked in her radiance, and prayed for her divine light to drive back my terrible darkness, so that we could be together in joy. That darkness extracted its due from me many times over. It is a sorcerous, occult darkness, made all the more corrupt because of the absence of you and your dear mother.

There was no one on Earth like your mother. Her face, the finest from my youth, remains with me in my elderly isolation, as does the sorrow for a life I never lived.

With love always,

Roman Maddox Booth

Good writing makes economic use of the space at hand, and Mierisch's story manages to pack a lot of punch into a relatively short amount of space. Twist endings are always difficult to pull off, but tight pacing and strong characters really make this one work.

Double Blind

by Jen Mierisch

Jen Mierisch's dream job is to write Twilight Zone episodes, but until then, she's a website administrator by day and a writer of odd stories by night. Jen's work can be found in the Arcanist, NoSleep Podcast, Scare Street, and numerous anthologies. Jen can be found haunting her local library near Chicago, USA. Read more at www.jenmierisch.com and connect on X (formerly known as Twitter) [@JenMierisch](https://twitter.com/JenMierisch).

A young man falls in slow motion through a rainy gray sky. His face is bloodied, panicked, his throat raw from screaming. His limbs flail and thrash, as if trying to grasp the air, as if refusing to accept that it is too late.

At dawn on Wednesday, April 24, Dario pulled on a sweatshirt, jeans, and work boots, and tried to stuff the dream back into his subconscious.

The kitchen smelled like coffee. It was dim, lit only by the night-light above the stove. A cell phone's glow illuminated the face of Dario's wife, Lourdes, as she sat with a mug at the kitchen table.

Dario opened the cabinet for a mug and shut the door too hard.

BANG.

He flinched. The noise was too loud for an hour when the kids were still asleep.

He poured coffee with a shaking hand. It sloshed out over the countertop. “Dammit,” he muttered, seizing paper towels to wipe it up.

Dario stomped the garbage can pedal and lobbed the soggy towels in. His movements felt too quick, too sharp. His muscles jangled with nerves.

A hand brushed his back. Dario twitched in surprise.

“You okay, hon?”

He hadn’t seen Lourdes get up. But there she was, concerned brown eyes beneath bed-head hair. Impulsively, Dario hugged her tight.

“Bad dream,” he murmured.

“Tell me about it?”

Dario scooped sugar into the mug. “It was just one thing, in slow motion,” he said. “I could see a man, falling. His face was all bloody and he was screaming. I couldn’t tell how far, but I knew it was from a long way up.”

“Like your dad’s accident?”

“Yeah,” said Dario, stirring absently, not meeting his wife’s eyes. “And it was raining in the dream, too. But the man falling, it

wasn't Dad. I could see the face, close up."

"Who was it?"

Dario swallowed. His fingers drummed the countertop.

"It was my face," he said. "It was me."

He looked at the family photo taped to the refrigerator. In it, Dario's teenage self stood next to his brother Carlo, with their parents behind them, on the steps of their old apartment building. The boys were grinning. Their mother wore her usual lips-only smile that never showed her teeth. Their father's head bent at a sharp angle, his neck fractured, his face slack, blood dripping from his hair.

Dario jumped. A yelp forced itself from his gut.

He blinked and looked at the photo again. His father smiled into the camera, his hand on Dario's shoulder, same as he'd done in that photo for the past ten years.

Today was April 24, Dario realized.

His father had died one year ago today.

According to Lourdes, Dario talked in his sleep ever since the accident. He called out to his father in the darkest hours. No, Dad! Hold on. Hold on tight, Dad. Mom needs you.

Lourdes hadn't said anything about the dream.

His wife stood at the counter, the kids' lunch boxes open in front of her, untwisting the tie on a loaf of bread.

"Okay," Dario said, suddenly petulant. "I get it. It's just a

stupid dream. You don't care."

Lourdes laid bread slices on the counter. "It's the last day of your life," she said.

"What?" Dario blinked and shook his head. "What did you just say?"

Lourdes was looking at the counter. The knife in her hand gleamed as she sliced a block of cheese. In the muted light, her hands seemed old, wrinkled, veins pulsing in bulbous ridges. Her hair cascaded down, a gray husk of decay.

"I said, of course I care, I'm your wife." Lourdes looked up at him, and her face was twenty-six years old, her hair a rich dark brown. "Be careful at work today, sweetie."

Dario stared, wide-eyed.

The dream must have shaken him up good. His eyes and ears were playing tricks on him.

Still, why had Lourdes said that, about being his wife? That was a funny thing to say. Was she annoyed at him for being short with her?

"Don't forget Kevin's soccer match tonight," Lourdes went on, reaching for a box of granola bars. "We're picking up your mom on the way over."

Well, that sounded more like Lourdes.

She tore off a sheet of aluminum foil with a grating rasp. "Oh, and your brother called me while you were in the shower. He said he couldn't get ahold of you."

Dario pulled his phone from his pocket.

1 Missed Call: CARLO

The phone's clock informed Dario that it was getting late. He dumped the coffee down the sink, crossed the room, and took his jacket from the peg by the door.

Lourdes glanced up. "Leaving early today?"

"Gonna take I-583," said Dario. "After that dream, no way am I driving across the Sonora Street Bridge."

"Want me to fix you a sandwich?"

"I'll get something from the lunch cart."

The screen door slammed behind him.

The work crew was building a school, somebody else's future. The sun shone weakly in a jaundiced sky as the roofers arrived on site.

Dario climbed his ladder, rung over rung. The soles of his work boots squeaked against the metal.

This morning he'd be finishing the roof of the two-story building that would house the middle-school kids. Fifty feet away, his buddy Esteban, already on the roof and piling bundles of shingles at intervals, gave him a wave.

Normally, Dario didn't look down. You never looked down, you focused on the job. Measure twice, nail once. Normally, Dario could focus. Normally a bad dream floated away with the

morning sun. It didn't linger, hours later, hanging around in the background like the buzzing of a fly.

Dario looked down.

The distant ground seemed to swell towards him. His stomach lurched. Quickly he shut his eyes, seized the ladder with both hands, and took a deep breath. Get it together, man, he told himself, suddenly infuriated. For God's sake, it was just a dream. The anger surged through his veins like icy water, and a minute later, his head was clear.

Dario had been up on the roof for a couple of hours when he noticed the thick gray clouds. They had moved in quickly, all but snuffing out the tepid sun. Humidity had rolled in, and Dario's T-shirt felt sticky against his ribs.

He reached for the pile of shingles and heaved one into place. It slipped too far down across the ones he'd already nailed. He shifted his position to grab it back and felt his foot slip.

Quickly Dario grabbed the harness and caught himself, clutching the frayed rope tighter than he'd hugged Lourdes that morning, heart pounding so loud he could feel it in his ears. He glanced at his feet. The worn-down tread on his boots had slipped across the already-laid shingles, which glistened, damp with condensation.

Before the dream images could flood back into Dario's mind, a voice boomed across the work site.

"Morning meeting!" hollered Trevor. "Everybody down."

Dario descended the ladder step by careful step, evaluating the slipperiness of each rung. At the bottom, he unclenched his white-knuckled hands and felt the overwhelming relief of standing on the ground again. He trotted over to the water truck, where everybody had assembled in front of the boss.

The balding man with the ZZ Top beard stood before his crew, hands on hips, thumbs hooked into his tool belt.

“Good start to the week, folks,” said Trevor. “We need that middle-school building and the two outbuildings finished by Friday afternoon. And now, I have an announcement to make.”

Dario felt an elbow in his ribs. Esteban’s hard hat was askew as usual, his clothes covered in dust. His grin threatened to split his face.

“Esteban and Dario have been promoted to journeyman roofer.” Trevor nodded towards them. “Good work, boys. It’ll be in your next check.”

Then their teammates were walking up and slapping Dario and Esteban on the back, offering congratulations. It seemed like everyone came over—the junior roofers Greg and Quentin, even the senior guys, and the masons working on the exterior walls. Everybody except Nick, the bricklayer, but that was par for the course.

Dario allowed himself to feel lighter. Maybe it was a good sign. The day might get better from here on out, and finally dispel that haunting dream.

After the morning meeting was the day's first break. Everyone headed for their cars and coolers for cigarettes and Cokes.

When Dario turned to walk to his truck, a blond man's shoulder collided with his.

"Oops." It was Nick, palms in the air in mock apology, teeth bared in a humorless grin. Nick the Prick, thought Dario, recalling the moniker he'd heard Nick's teammates use. With his smug swagger, Nick strode over to a stack of bricks and picked up a long steel chisel.

Dario's face darkened. Leave it to the resident asshole to ruin the good turn his morning had taken. "What the hell is your problem?"

"Me?" Nick's tattooed hand positioned the chisel against a brick. "I don't have any problems." He picked up a hammer. "Except the fact that only illegals get promoted around here."

The hammer swung, and the chisel struck the brick, scoring it deeply. Dario jerked reflexively.

"Jumpy, ain't ya?" said Nick.

"Man," said Dario, "this is not the day to fuck with me."

Nick cocked his head to one side. "Temper, temper, Tonto." He turned the brick over and positioned the chisel at its heart. The hammer flashed again, splitting the brick with a crack.

Dario opened his mouth, but he closed it again when he saw Trevor crossing toward the parking lot. He imagined punching Nick in his goddamn face and getting fired the same day he'd

been promoted. And having to explain that to Lourdes.

“You’re not worth it,” he told Nick, and walked away.

Nick’s hyena laughter prickled the back of Dario’s neck.

Dario repositioned his ladder and stepped onto the bottom rung. It was afternoon, and the fat brown clouds seemed swollen, pregnant with unshed rain.

A short distance away, Esteban was climbing his own ladder when a sudden gust of wind rocked it. Dario drew in a sharp breath as he watched his friend grab at the half-finished wall for support. But a minute later, Esteban was back up on the roof, working away with his nail gun, whistling a pop tune.

Dario had just felt the first drops of rain on his arm when the bell sounded for the end of the shift. Gratefully he climbed down and gathered up his gear. He waited for Esteban to join him, and together they walked away from the half-finished outbuilding.

“Hey,” said Esteban, grinning as they headed for the storage area behind the office trailers. “Come over to my place to celebrate.”

“I gotta get home,” Dario said. “My kid’s got a soccer match tonight.”

“This weekend, then.”

“Yeah. See you then.”

Dario’s phone chimed with a text message. He stopped walk-

ing and set the ladder down to pull his phone from his pocket.

Lourdes had sent a picture of herself. She was kneeling on the living room rug, their three-year-old son playing with toys on the floor behind her. She was wearing a low-cut tank top and making kissy lips at him. Love you, said the message.

Dario smiled. Things were good. The dream hadn't been a premonition, nobody had fallen, his wife wasn't mad at him for acting weird this morning, and he hadn't punched Nick in his stupid mouth and gotten fired. Plus he'd have good news to tell Lourdes when he got home.

He was the last to arrive at the storage area. Raindrops fell thick and fast. As Dario stowed his gear, he remembered the missed call from his brother, hours before. He pulled the phone out again, curving his body to shield it from the rain.

"Well, well," came Carlo's voice. "If it isn't my little brother."

Dario chuckled. "Yeah, yeah. Three minutes is so much older. And anyway, I got the good looks."

"You wish," Carlo said. "Where you been? Tried to call you a couple times."

"Long day," said Dario. "Where you at?"

"On my way home from my interview downtown."

"That was today?" Dario felt stupid for forgetting. Carlo had been talking about it for weeks. He and Dario had always talked about everything, even more so after Dad died.

Dario pictured his brother in a business suit, driving home

from some swanky office building. But no. That background noise wasn't a car radio. It sounded like a cocktail party.

"Hey," said Dario. "Are you on a bus?"

"Yeah," said Carlo. "Damn thing's so crowded, it's standing room only. Shitty driver, too, keeps cutting in and out of traffic and throwing us around. I almost fell on a lady just now. When I get this job, I'm getting me a Honda CRV and driving in from now on."

Dario was hardly listening. His heart was in his throat. "Which bus?"

"You know which bus," said Carlo. "The 22. Just about to cross the Sonora Street Bridge."

The images flashed across Dario's mind, as vivid and horrifying as they had been that morning. The man falling through the dark gray sky, his face wet with rain and stained with blood. Dario's face. The face he shared with his twin brother.

Dario trotted out of the storage area. "Listen, bro," he said, "I need you to get off that bus. Right now."

The rain was soaking his clothes. The day had darkened into a murky twilight. Thunder growled overhead as Dario picked up his pace. He nearly collided with a blond man holding a bottle and a rag in his tattooed hands. He barely noticed as that man quickly moved his full hands behind his back and looked away. Dario took off running toward his truck.

"What?" said Carlo. "I can barely hear you, man. It's start-

ing to rain pretty hard here—”

“Get off the bus,” shouted Dario. “As soon as you can, the next stop, get off! I’ll explain later, but you have to get off that bus!”

“Dario, you’re breaking up.”

Dario jerked open the driver’s side door and hurled himself in, his soggy body hitting the seat with a splat. He cranked the engine and peeled out.

The Sonora Street Bridge, spanning the gorge two hundred feet above the Lobrego River, wasn’t far from the work site. Until today, it had been Dario’s shortcut to work. Another mile and he’d be there. He pushed the accelerator to the pickup truck’s muddy floor.

The truck’s wet wheels squealed around a curve, and then Dario could see it. The huge, ancient bridge, connecting two cliffs. The rain, falling in sheets, the volume too much for the bridge’s overflowing drains. The city bus, barreling onto the bridge, hydroplaning, spinning in a sickening arc, smashing through a barrier. Its mammoth body swung wildly and screeched to a stop in a snarl of metal, but not before ejecting its standing passengers. Their bodies crashed through the glass windshield and fell, tumbling through the leaden air towards the churning darkness below.

A young man falls in slow motion through a rainy gray sky. His face is bloodied, panicked, his throat raw from screaming. His limbs flail and thrash, as if trying to grasp the air, as if refus-

ing to accept that it is too late.

Dario woke up alone, gasping. His eyes darted, recognizing his bedroom, the pale dawn creeping through the window, the sliver of hallway light around the door.

He seized his phone from the bedside table.

Wednesday, April 24. 5:27 AM.

“Wednesday,” Dario whispered. “It’s still Wednesday.”

Quickly he opened his call history and jabbed his finger at his brother’s name.

“Hey, man,” came Carlo’s cheerful voice. “You’re up early.”

Dario fell, limp with relief, backwards onto the bed. His thumping heart and frantic breathing began to calm.

“Hey,” Dario said. “You have that interview today, right?”

“Yeah,” said Carlo. “At two o’clock. You okay? You sound out of breath—”

“Don’t take the bus home.”

“What?”

“I’ll pick you up,” said Dario. “We’ll go for a beer. Okay?”

“Sure, bro,” said Carlo. “Sounds good.”

Dario tossed the phone on the bed, closed his eyes, and exhaled a long, slow stream of air.

Greg and Quentin arrived at the work site at dawn on Wednesday morning, April 24. Though they were junior roofers, they often got there even before the boss. Trevor looked favorably on guys who worked hard and demonstrated commitment to the crew.

They slammed the car doors and headed for the office trailer to clock in and start the coffee pot.

“I heard Dario and Esteban are getting promoted today,” said Greg.

“Nice,” said Quentin. “Another year and that’ll be us.”

Behind the trailer, in the supply area, the blond man with the tattooed arms listened to the young men’s chatter and scowled. He sat alone near a stack of equipment: nail guns, air compressors, harnesses, and a ladder with a name—DARIO—marked on its side in Sharpie.

Nick poured a bottle of oil onto a rag. Slowly, purposefully, he began oiling the ladder’s uppermost rungs.

This imaginative, otherworldly mash-up of mythology and adventure builds life-or-death stakes beyond life itself. Nitkey's keen poetic language and deft plot carry this smart fable that will keep you rooting for its crew of afterlife outlaws til the very end.

The Ferryman's Fee

by Spencer Nitkey

Spencer Nitkey is a writer living in New Jersey. His writing has appeared in Apex Magazine, Fusion Fragment, Metaphorosis, Apparition Lit, and others. Find him online at spencernitkey.com and [@Spencer_Nit](https://twitter.com/Spencer_Nit).

Fifteen seconds.

There's a peace, warm and placid as bathwater, washes over me seconds before a good robbery. The horse hoofbeat of my heart settles. The hours of labor, planning, and anxiety necessary to be a successful robber wash away. Maybe it's the rumble of the train coming down the tracks towards the tunnel. Maybe it's the bank vault sliding open just as you step through the front door of the bank, rifles ready. Maybe, like now, it's Charon's ferry cresting through the fog, the bag of coins and obols dangling from his hip. Whatever the moment, all that's left is action, and the body knows action like a lullaby your mom used to sing you to sleep by. I feel that peace as Charon's hooded, skeletal frame cuts a shape through the haze.

14 seconds.

I came to death with a kink in my neck that still hasn't eased. When you're hanged for robbing banks, they tend not to bury you with silver dollars on your tongue. I exhaled, the local sheriff smiled, the cord snapped, and here I was running my toes through black sand and rubies. Everyone on the shore was looking down, pale in our disbelief that it really had ended. No one expects to live forever, but a lot of us quietly assume it.

The fog roved the horizon like a pack of wolves, and Charon came rowing through it. Skeletal, tall, and hooded, he oared the boat to the dock and stood at the threshold, palm open like a common panhandler.

I came to him, busted and aching, begging for rest after a long, long life, with my hat in my hands. I told him I had nothing. I told him all my life I'd been fighting, fighting the night on horseback, fighting desert bandits and lawmen alike, fighting to eat and live and crawl my way through the wide world.

The ivory white of his skull said nothing in reply. He stared at me with empty sockets, pits of black with no bottom. I stared back and it felt like drowning. I had nothing to put in his hands, but I wanted the rest he was offering. I wanted peace.

The pits where his eyes should have been sparkled. A beam of impossible, ruby light shot from them like a muzzle flash and I staggered backward, blind. When I came to, I was prone in the sand and the ship was leaving. Its bow slid through the curtain of fog and, like a whispered secret, it was gone.

I dug my fists into the strange sand and threw it into the black water after him. I'd chased coin and survival all my living days. Here, I was supposed to be free of all that. Here, I was supposed to rest. What else is death good for? The careless face of Charon echoed through my imagination as I screamed after him. I was getting on that ferry, one way or another. I was getting my rest.

13 seconds.

I was not the only phantom here buried unceremoniously without so much as a nickel.

I met Toshiko after who knows how long wandering the shore, trying to steal from Charon myself. After my fifteenth attempt, Toshiko approached me as I came back to sentience, having just lost myself in Charon's eyes and been transported back to shore once again. She told me I was an idiot banging my head against a brick wall hoping it would come crashing down. I was almost offended until I saw her mouth curve and knew she meant to help me.

"Just cause you're content to wander these shores forever," I said. "Doesn't make me any more comfortable with it. It ain't fair or right."

"I'm not content. I'm just not an idiot," she replied. "I'm watching."

I learned soon that watching meant something very different when Toshiko did it than most.

Toshiko had the best eyes I've ever seen. She must have

been a wonder up top. I stood at Toshiko's side the next time Charon came and watched her watch. We were at least three hundred paces from the dock.

"There," she said. "Charon favors his right leg when he steps forward to collect an obol. See?"

I didn't.

While we watched, we talked. Toshiko told me about her brothers, four of them, who all went to America and never wrote home again, leaving her to care for her aging parents alone. I told her about bank robbing in the West and how tired I was. Toshiko asked if I was tired of living or just tired of living the way I had been, and I didn't have a good answer.

Here's what I learned about Charon from Toshiko's watching: Charon came. He sidled his ship up to the shore and extended a plank into the sand, waiting on the ferry. He did not leave the boat. Strange things flowed through the Styx: trees, automobile bumpers, the roofs of homes, train carriages, and metal that peeks just barely above the water. Only Charon's boat was allowed to float. Shades entered one at a time, and Charon took their coins (or sometimes dollar bills, Toshiko told me) and slid them into a bottomless pouch that looked no bigger than a fist no matter how full it got. Toshiko counted 815 coins and the pouch didn't even bulge. Charon has a slight limp, barely perceptible through his clangor of bones, and he favors his right leg. Charon's grip is firm and final. That was all we knew.

"That shade pretended to drop a coin in the bag. Sold it

well too. Subtly tapped the side of the pouch with her pinky to make it feel like the weight changed—” I saw the blurred outline of a shade near Charon. I wouldn’t have even known she was a woman if Toshiko hadn’t told me.

“It didn’t work. Charon noticed.”

I watched the shade nearest Charon flicker as he grabbed her arm. It looked as uncomfortable as it felt. I’d stopped trying to beg my way on board only to suffer the ruby light that erased me. It’s not like sleeping when you lose time down here; it’s something worse, and Toshiko said no one has gotten through without payment.

The shade who’d tried to trick Charon vanished. The instant she reappeared, far on the other end of the shore minutes later, Toshiko pointed her out immediately.

12 seconds.

I met Agratha, the woman who’d tried to pickpocket Charon, watching her try the same tricks she tried on him on some shades. They didn’t grab her, but whenever she tried to reach into their pockets, she slipped through them like neither of them were made of anything other than fog.

I approached her as she paced the shore. She told me to back off when I slid near. She’d been trying to hum a tune since she’d gotten here and couldn’t produce a single note or melody, and couldn’t whistle either. I’d never thought about it before but I hadn’t heard any music this side of the Styx. I tried to hum and couldn’t.

We shared a brief moment of heartbreak—hadn’t death

been enough?—and I invited her back to where Toshiko stood. She said yes. We were three. Technically, a crew now.

Agratha was loud and boisterous, once she loosened to you. Toshiko told a joke about rabbits, bear shit, and toilet paper, and Agratha laughed so loud that half the beach turned to look at us. I wanted her to be my friend. There may not have been music, but a laugh like hers was a real close second. She was angry, too, which made me like her even more.

She asked us so many questions and barely answered any of ours. She said she died in a prison cell near Russia. She came in with a whole pack of shades, none of them looking each other in the eyes. I assume whatever happened was worse than what she said, and she didn't say much. She died for an idea. I could tell by her posture.

Toshiko says she was a law-abiding citizen who was gunned down in an alley and dumped in a river on account of a misidentification. I don't believe her. Eyes only get that tiercel with practice, and she doesn't have a military posture. But, if a crew can't have secrets from each other, then they're not a very good crew. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that none of us had died with a goddamn coin in our pockets.

I died for no good reason at all.

11 seconds.

Charon's boat slowed as it neared the shore. The oar sent ripples through the black, starless water.

We made sure we were waiting behind the new shades, all eager and confused and liable to beg, barter, and bully if they were empty-handed.

Toshiko stood forty paces to my right and about fifty back, where the shore of the dead rises into impassable dunes. She watched Agratha, and I watched her.

Agratha was gonna pickpocket Charon. Well, she was gonna try. None of us thought that'd work, not even Agratha. Part of me hoped she was all we'd need. Still, you don't live as long as I did robbing if you make a habit of relying on hope. We expected Charon's ivory hands to clamp down on her wrist the second she reached for the bag. That's where I would come in. See, we knew two things about Charon. He limped and, since he grabbed our arms and sent us back to shore when we were trying to steal, we could touch him without passing , unlike the other shades. So I was going to tackle Charon (and Agratha, if Charon kept holding her) and both of us were going to go splashing into the Styx. That's when Toshiko would grab the undefended pouch, take one coin for each of us, maybe throw a few to the crowd if there was time, and then when we were all back to normal, wham-bam-pigs-in-a-can, we'd have payment.

10 seconds.

The water began to still. Agratha was in line now, blending in as best a woman as intimidating as her could. For a while, we had tried scrounging up a bigger team. Agratha and I had whispered about maybe something like a revolution, all of us

worthless shades storming the ferry. Her eyes had burned when we talked about it and I began to suspect her secrets.

Toshiko never dreamed like that. She'd seen the eyes of the other shades. She knew they weren't interested in an uprising. They just wanted rest. Life was hard enough. Death, even this half-death, was no place for more work.

Rest, I thought, was something we had to earn. Withering on the shore, watching the haves get instant relief while the have-nots slowly rotted wasn't rest. It was the same bullshit that upstairs had been filled with. I hadn't abided it well up top, you know, being a robber and all. Down here, I couldn't stand it, not even for a minute.

9 seconds.

Agratha inched forward. There were only a few shades in front of her now. The peace. Later than normal this time, but good enough. Everything sharpened. For the first time since dying, I felt at ease. It didn't matter whether we succeed or fail anymore; there was only action.

We'd practiced dozens of times, letting Charon send Agratha, Toshiko, or me back to shore with a wave of *déjà vu* and nausea. We knew Charon's habits. We were ready.

8 seconds.

Three shades stood between Agratha and the ferryman. I looked back at Toshiko and she frowned at me. In her periphery, she noticed me looking at Agratha instead of her. I shrugged and

kept my eyes steady now, waiting.

7 seconds.

I'd said I died for no good reason. Truth is, I don't think anyone dies for a good reason. The last job I had, the one that got me hanged, was a side job. Those tend to be the ones that get you because they're the easiest. When it's easy, you lose focus. It was a small local bank of a small nothing town I was passing through. Some thirteen-year-old kid was serving drinks, and sipping his own as he did. He sidled up to my table toward the end of the night and wouldn't stop talking about his daddy's bank and how little security it had, and how they're so lazy they leave the safe cracked open during the day to avoid opening and closing it, and say, he'd been trying to get the funds to get out of here and head towards California, and he could give me all the info I'd need if he got a cut.

I figured what the hell. It'd been a minute since I'd felt that rush of peace, and while I wasn't exactly hurting for cash, I also wasn't totally pain-free either. Mostly, I wanted that bathwater warm. If I also ripped off some small-town banker, all the better.

Next thing I know I'm looking at the kid in a crowd as I'm being led to the gallows. He was pale to begin with, but he looked like he was dead himself as he watched me. When they fitted the noose around my neck he mouthed something; I think it was an apology. I stared into his eyes, then shut mine as hard as I could. I didn't want him to watch me die. Didn't want to haunt him any. I opened them back up and looked at him again. He was clos-

ing his eyes and I was grateful. I remember thinking that I was grateful. Then an inhale. Then a long, ceaseless slamming shut. Then I was here, without a penny or a prayer of crossing the Styx without one more heist.

6 seconds.

Toshiko nodded and I took off from the shore. I walked fast but didn't run. Thankfully, shades are easy to slide between. No one except the three of us was in any kind of rush at all.

5 seconds.

Agratha was one shade away from the swindle. It was her turn. Everything collapsed into this one moment. I felt Toshiko's eyes move to me. I heard her footsteps as she began to approach the shore from behind me. I felt the tension in Agratha's shoulders. I felt the weight of my entire restless life, all leading to this ashen and forgetful shore.

4 seconds.

Agratha stood behind the shade and, even watching her every move with perfect attention and focus, I barely noticed the fluttering, subtle movement of her hands. She reached for the pouch as I moved toward her, Charon, and the dark river.

3 seconds.

Agratha wrapped two fingers around the top of the pouch while Charon was reaching for some other shade's coin. Agratha's body tensed as she prepared to lift it. The thought occurred to me that she might do it. I was let down for a moment. We all like to

be heroes when we can.

2 seconds.

Charon's hand appeared—not moved but appeared—around Agratha's wrist. She froze. I watched the red of his eyes brighten. Agratha tried to pull her hand back but couldn't. His empty eyes glowed, and Agratha began to shimmer as if she was being viewed through a thin puddle of water. She rippled into and out of existence. It looked as uncomfortable as it felt. I sprinted towards the two of them, only three strides away.

1 second.

My vision focused until Charon and the vanishing shade of Agratha were all I saw. They were targets in the sights of a rifle. I crashed into the both of them and held as hard as I could. I could only hope Toshiko was behind me, wrapping the coin purse in her hand as the three of us, Agratha (made solid by Charon's grip), Charon (so cold his touch ended all feeling in me), and I (peaceful, finally) fell off the side of the ferry, tangled in each other, and sank beneath the surface of the river Styx.

0 seconds.

The water greets me less like a shock and more like an old friend. Its touch is familiar, embryonic, maybe. The instant we meet the water, I am alone. You can have no company in the river Styx, is my guess. I try to swim, to find either Agratha or Charon, but I don't move anywhere. The liquid black ensconces me. I try a few more hurried kicks and paddles before I realize it's pointless. I let the dark enfold me. The liquid does not stick to my skin

but soothes it.

A woman, I forget her name, once wiped the sweat from my forehead with a silk handkerchief. I told her I loved her and she laughed. She said I just liked nice fabrics. The water feels like that handkerchief. It brushes across my skin and holds me. I am submerged but I don't think I'm wet. There is a reason I'd dived into the water, but my memories are sinking faster than I am. A thousand soft, tiny hands embrace me. It is quiet enough to hear my own heartbeat, the rasps of my own breathing, but I don't have a heartbeat, and I don't breathe. I'm dead, I remember faintly, without much care.

Is this death then? One great, dark plunge. I hope this is death. It feels nice. The darkness begins to set into my skin. It weaves through me. With each stitch, I am more relaxed, more comforted than the moment before. If this is death, I wonder what all the fuss is about. If there is a white light, I don't know if I'd move to it. The dark is so peaceful.

I am fully submerged in the dark when I hear a melody, raspy and sweet. It stirs the place my heart once beat. I turn to find it, twisting like a falling cat through the black. As I pivot, I see the outline of someone beneath me. It is the outline of a strong woman. She materializes, the dark splits, and I recognize her. It is Agratha, and she is singing.

"Is that the song?" I ask, surprised to find my voice able to move through the river.

"I can sing, Ambrose. There is music again," she hums loud-

er. I could melt into it. Agratha has her eyes closed and is smiling a smile so wide, I can hardly believe it's still Agratha.

Through the music, I hear the faraway rumble of something. It is hearing, first, then touch. Vibrations move across my body, ripples in the water. It cuts through the music.

The distant noise thuds at regular intervals as it crescendos toward us. There is something familiar in its steel screeching. A scent overwhelms me, a hard, earth-torn smell, like walking through a forest after it's finished burning. There is a light, too, I think, though in the depths it is hard to tell. I turn my back to it as long as I can. Don't I deserve peace?

It presses towards me, this noise, this burnt smell, this light. I can't avoid it any longer. I turn around and the whole length of the metal juggernaut is upon me. It rises up from the depths and barrels by me in a sweep of chrome, soot, and screaming brakes.

It's a train.

I swivel in the water to face it as it barrels by me. Its wheels spark and skitter.

Agratha doesn't open her eyes despite the din.

"There's a train!" I shout. "We can get out of here!"

"I don't think so," she says, closing her eyes again and smiling. Her voice swims through the water, steady beneath the train's churn.

"Come on!" I say. "Don't you want to see the other side?"

"No," she says. "There's music here. I think I'll melt into it."

“Please,” I shout. “You can get out of here. We fought for this!”

“I fought for rest, and I think I found it. I’ll float for a while now, make my music and see how that suits me. Maybe, if I’m lucky, I’ll dissolve right into it.”

With one last laugh, moving muddily through the water to my ears, she sinks beneath me with a smile on her face. I shout after her again, but she’s gone. Her song goes with her.

I don’t have time to mourn her. I will not sink into the Styx, I will take what I’ve won and cross the river.

I turn to face the oncoming train and see an arm and face peering from one of the carriage sides. Toshiko. Her eyes are wild and her hands are caked black with soot. “Grab on, I’m taking us to shore!” she shouts.

I reach. The long black was always a compromise.

That’s the thing with living, you do it so long you never really get used to being dead. Toshiko’s hand touches mine and grips me. We hold each other as I am dragged along the dark. I bring my other hand to grab her but something stops me.

From the dark, Charon’s long, skeletal fingers entomb my arm. Everything ceases. The train’s motion stops. Toshiko blurs and then fades. The noises erase. I turn to face my captor. I remember enough to know what comes next: the ruby-shining eyes, time slipping from me like water off rubber, and waking up back on the cursed shore.

Instead, this time Charon’s empty, peering skull simply

looks at me. Denuded of his spectral robes, Charon is all bone and darkness. The black water begins to outline where muscle and flesh would be, spiraling and molding around him, suggesting a body where there isn't one.

"Someone must ferry the dead," the voice says.

The skull shimmers despite the dark, a quick iridescence that dances across the bone of his face.

"We just wanted to rest," I say.

"You had no payment," he replies.

"So what? Dying shouldn't be a rich man's game."

"It's not about wealth."

"Then what?"

"It is about leaving your life behind," Charon says. As he speaks, the ivory white of his skull begins to drip with a mask of red blood. Sinew, veins, and tendons began to crawl and rope from the bone.

"You cannot pass into death without leaving something behind. Life has momentum and loves the material. The coin carries all that momentum. When you hand it over, you're letting go. That's all. You have to let go to reach the other side," he says. Great knots of muscle braid from tendon to tendon as the skull reconstitutes.

"The other side," I scoff. "I never even bothered to wonder what was on the other side. Is it golden fields? Dancing demons?"

"I have no idea," the man, no longer Charon, not really,

says. The twisted musculature of his face opens and closes his mouth. From the dripping red mess of it, patches of olive skin begin to rise, islands puncturing the red ocean's surface. Slowly, his face coheres.

"I have never seen the other side. I am only the ferryman, and I too am tired."

I want to ask him how long he's been Charon, but I stop myself.

Soon he is whole. A man swims before me, gripping my arm. Despite the skin and muscle and shape, his eyes remained two black, dripping pits.

In the frozen dark, unmoored from time and even, yes, death, I remember Toshiko's hand on my other arm.

"I could have left my life behind," I say. "There are other ways besides a coin."

"I do not know them," he says, "and I do not believe you do either." His face is full and vibrant as if he had just finished living. All that remains of the former ferryman are the ruby-starred pits of his eyes.

"Then let's learn them," I say.

The ferryman thinks for a moment. Then nods.

With his grace, the train's movement renews. Toshiko drags me, and now Charon too, through the Styx alongside it. Toshiko, Charon, and I heave and pull with all our might. Toshiko successfully hoists me onto the side of the train, and I hoist Charon up with me.

“Who is this?” asks Toshiko.

“This is Charon,” I answer. He nods.

“You are...” Toshiko says.

“Renewed,” finishes Charon for her. “Where did you find this beautiful creation?” Charon whistles as he speaks and kneels down, running his hand along the metal of the train. His eyes are wide with wonder.

“When Ambrose threw you, as soon as I grabbed the purse, it bubbled up from the Styx. I thought the whole river was boiling; once the smokestack breached like a whale, I figured someone should hop on board. It took me to you both.”

I look at her sideways, but if she is joking or lying, I can't tell.

“Where's Agratha?” Toshiko asks.

“She... she did not want to come. She was content to rest in the Styx,” I say, putting my head down.

Charon smiles an eyeless grin.

“She learned how to let go,” he says.

As he speaks, Charon marvels at the boiler room where we stand, running his fingers along the tubes and soot.

“She's stunning.”

“She's a train,” I explain.

“I have never seen one before,” Charon says. “I have not seen anything for a very long time. Only heard the clicking of coins and

the sussor of the River. This train hums and vibrates with beauty.”

“Would you like to see it now?” Toshiko says, in a soft voice I have never heard from her before.

“Of course,” says Charon.

“Then take my eyes, then,” she says, knowing something that I don’t.

“Toshiko!” I shout.

“Ambrose, I am tired of seeing it all. I have had a lifetime of eyes that peer too far. They’ve seen mostly death: through a rifle sight or hopelessly watching my friends gunned down as I screamed warnings on the radio. I would like to feel and smell the underworld for a while, I think.”

“You know what giving them to me will mean?” Charon says.

“Of course. There must always be a ferryman,” Toshiko says.

I watch as Charon rises and stands, looming above Toshiko. With a breath, he passes his hands in front of her eyes. I step forward, but Toshiko puts her hand out and I settle. When Charon’s hand leaves her face, Toshiko’s eyes are gone. In their place, black sockets, as deep and bottomless as the Styx. I catch a hint of ruby spark from them.

I turn to look at Charon then turn quickly away. I cannot look at Toshiko’s eyes on another’s body. Those eyes had first met mine on the shore that eternity ago, when we were both young shades, the life still steaming from us.

Charon starts crying. It is all so much, he keeps saying. It is

all so beautiful.

Toshiko is smiling. She seems impossibly happy.

“Where will you go now?” I ask Charon.

“I will wander the far shore, I think, and learn what I can of death from those recently acquainted with it. I will learn how to let go, like Agratha. Then, when I am done, I hope that Toshiko will be kinder to me than I was to you.”

“Where will I go?” I ask.

“It depends on how quickly you learn to let go.”

With that, he leaps from the window and splashes into the Styx. Where I had frozen and sunk, he paddles and kicks. Soon he crosses the chasm of night and shakes himself off, like a dog, on the far side. One body among the multitude of wilting, waiting souls. I peer after him.

“Will you join me?” asks Toshiko.

“We fought so long for rest,” I say.

“Was that all we were fighting for?” Toshiko said again.

I think of Agratha, who had spent her quiet life fighting for something so large and powerful she never once spoke of it, even when it killed her. I think of the steady beat of horse hooves against the plain, dust and cracked earth in every direction, the far mountains raised like a challenge along the horizon. I think about the scent and smear of cash between my fingers, and the tinny ring a rifle leaves in your ear after it fires. I think of the kid who wanted adventure so badly he got me killed. I think of loneliness and the

crackling sound wood makes as it burns. I think of sleep. I close my eyes, dip a hand out of the carriage window and run my fingers through the Styx until I feel Death simmer up my arm.

I look back to the far shore, then back at Toshiko. She is already bent over the furnace, shoveling coal into the monster's mouth.

I have said my life was running and work, but that wasn't true. It was taking. I took so much. Even here, since arriving empty-handed, I have been trying to take. Agratha gave, which is why she died, and perhaps why she was able to let go. Toshiko watched, so she gave her eyes. What had I given the world, given others, in my whole life?

"Come," she says. "Let's get to work."

I think of life and all the souls that it wastes. I think about the peace I'd desperately chased for my entire life, and how once I had it, floating in the Styx, I didn't really want it.

I'm not ready to let go. But I'm ready, finally to give.

I, too, grab a shovel.

Lawrence came to death screaming. As a shade he screamed for a while longer, throwing himself against the limits of the shore, trying to grab or punch or kick the other shades and finding his hands pass through them. He came to death with nothing but an echo of bullets in his chest. He sighed after a while, who knows how long, and sat in the black and red sand on the shore as the midnight river lapped at his feet. For some time he sat, accepting his death.

His ears perked up as a familiar sound blared from far across the river. The steady, rhythmic chugging of a steam engine train crescendoed until it burst through the low fog in a brilliance of chrome and smoke. The engine of death slowed as it neared the shore, pulling up alongside it.

Out of the front carriage, two people stepped onto the shore. One long, tall woman, with great black pits for eyes, stepped down and opened a small bag. Behind the skeleton, another person exited the train. He had a familiar, mischievous face. A very old shame flickered like a candle in his chest, but no recognition came. He looked, to Lawrence, like death. He began to shout.

“All right y’all restless dead, listen up! We need anyone with an obol, that’s Greek for coin, currency, denaro, dollar bill, etcetera, to line up in front of Toshiko here. She’s the one to my left. The rest of you, empty pockets and whatnots, those without an obol, will need to form a group, doesn’t have to be a line, in front of me over by the second carriage here.”

Lawrence checked his pockets and under his tongue. He wasn’t surprised to find nothing, but he was disappointed and a little scared. They tend not to bury those who die in shootouts with law enforcement with much of anything except the lead they filled ’em with.

He floated with the large group of penniless dead towards the second carriage.

When everyone had been separated into their two groups, the ones with coins began depositing them in the skeleton’s small

purse. As they dropped their coins in, Lawrence watched as their shapes changed; a black curtain seemed to be pulled off them, and the oppressive weight of either death or, more likely, life, lifted off as they stepped onto the train.

When all the shades with obols had entered the carriage, the familiar figure began to speak to the crowd again, quieter this time.

“Don’t worry. You’re not getting left behind. It’s easier for those who are buried with coins to leave their lives. Life gets attached to material things; it can’t help it, so I’ve been told. So if you’re buried with a dollar, letting it go is an easy shortcut to the other side. Living has a lot of momentum. Thankfully, we’ve got a train to outrun it with, but it’s going to require a little bit of extra work for y’all.

“So listen up. This train is going to start moving pretty soon and we’re going to start running right along with it. It’s going to move for a long time along the shore and you’re going to have to really run with it, ok? You’ll sprint as fast as you can, for as long as you can, and when you feel like you can’t run any farther, couldn’t possibly move another inch, you’re going to run a little bit more. You’re gonna feel weighed down by your too-long and too-short lives. You’re gonna smell momma’s lamb, think you hear grandpa’s fiddle, recognize your wife’s perfume, hear your child’s laughter. You’re going to want to stop and take it all in, but you can’t. You’ve got to keep running. Then you’re gonna grab the train and pull yourself up. Not a lot of time now, so sorry, but let’s get to going.”

The train horn blared and it began to inch forward. Lawrence walked with it, then jogged, then ran as it picked up speed.

He was sprinting soon.

“Come on! Come on!” the man shouted. He had already lifted himself onto the train and was shouting at the sprinting shades as he pulled slightly ahead of them.

One by one, shades began jumping for the train. Most grabbed a hold and pulled themselves on board. Some passed right through the train, falling onto the ruby black shore and laying there.

“We’ll be back soon! You’ve got to let go,” the man shouted back at them. “You’ve gotta give.”

Lawrence still felt the firm hand of his father on his shoulder. He still heard his sister laughing with her friends from three houses away. He smelled the bank interior he had spent his childhood darting through. He ran faster.

The smell of baked beans and campfires slipped behind him as he sped.

He looked up at the familiar face and remembered.

Guilt flooded him from all angles.

The dead man. Lawrence hadn’t opened his eyes until after the snap of the cord. But he saw the corpse hanging there. He had killed him.

Lawrence stumbled.

“Keep going!” shouted the man.

“Do you know who I am?” Lawrence cried up at him.

“Of course I do. I ain’t let go yet either. You can, though. Let go,” he said.

“I’m sorry!” Lawrence said.

“Sorry is pretty much the opposite of letting go.”

Lawrence was the only shade still running. Everyone else had given up or hopped on board. Up ahead the shoreline ended in a steep, onyx cliff face.

“I’m so sorry,” he said.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” the voice said. “That’s what I’m still learning.”

“But I wronged you,” Lawrence said.

“And now you’re dead. Can’t wrong anyone else and can’t fix what you did any longer. Only thing left to do is let go. Or start giving to others. Let’s see if you’re ready.”

The candle of shame was a fire as raging as the steam engine now. Lawrence panted and looked ahead.

Ambrose held his hand out, waiting for him if he decided to take it. Lawrence kept running. The black wall loomed. He didn’t know if he was ready. He reached for Ambrose’s hand and leaped.

The dark, callous innocence of a child's imagination has inspired writers from J. M. Barrie to Ray Bradbury, and in "The Snow Ones," O'Neill builds on this tradition adeptly, creating a chillingly suspenseful tale of the horrors that overwhelm one ordinary family.

The Snow Ones

by Paul O'Neill

Paul O'Neill is an award-winning short story writer from Fife, Scotland. As an Internal Communications professional, he fights the demon of corporate-speak on a daily basis. His works have been published in Crystal Lake's Shallow Waters, Eerie River's It Calls From The Doors anthology, the NoSleep podcast, Scare Street's Night Terrors series, The Horror Tree, and many other publications. You can find him sharing his love of short stories on X (formerly known as Twitter) [@PaulOn1984](#).

Emily's tapping at the patio window again. She sings in a low, mesmerised lilt that drifts its way through the kitchen where I'm hiding. Her sleepy melody swarms my brain. First sign of the snow tumbling down and all she does is stand at that door, eyes too shiny. I'd hoped we could make it through Christmas without this. Stupid snow.

"Snow Ones are here," her voice mists through to me. "No need to be afraid, friend. It's just me. You know me. Do you have a home of your own out there in the cold?"

I place my elbows on the kitchen counter, bury my face in

my hands. My nostrils fill with the spice of Jack Daniels in the glass below me. There's something about the worsening of our family situation that makes me wanna down the whole bottle and not care about what happens next. Guilt plagues me for hiding in here, but I can't handle this level of creepy on my own.

I can imagine our five-year-old daughter, little palm pressed against the glass, breath steaming the window every time she lets out a merry giggle or wondrous gasp.

Something's wrong with that girl. It only happens when the snow comes.

It first happened when she was just ten months old. A wee thing with heart-stopping dimples. When the snow littered the back garden for the first time in Emily's life, she crawled over to the patio and licked the window, giggling incessantly. I'd never been able to make her laugh like that.

She'd crane her neck, haul herself to a shaky standing position and stare up at nothing. She'd giggle away for hours, making the hairs on the back of my neck do a cold dance. That first winter with her, the snow fell like Christmas card snow for weeks on end. She creeped me out so much I started seeing impossible footprints crunched into the snow on the other side of the patio door.

We forgot about the whole thing until she did it the year after, calling her visitors the "Snow Ones."

Daddy, Daddy, Snow Ones are here.

Come to Emily house for warm.

They silly. Big old snuffy noses.

The only thing my wife and I could do was laugh it off. Make fun. When Scotland bared its winter teeth, we'd joke around. When's the Snow Ones getting here? Oh, looks like the Snow Ones are coming. That was back when Valerie still had a laugh in her.

I itch at the centre of my forehead, take a gulp of the Jack. Those first three winters with Emily had me certain we'd have to take her to a head doctor. But the next year, the snow never came. All that global warming, we joked. No Snow Ones.

No escaping the snow this year, though. It's been falling non-stop the last three days. It'll be a white Christmas. Would Emily even notice her stacked presents if she spends her whole day at the bloomin' window? What's wrong with her?

"Dad? What you doing through there? The Snow Ones want to see you."

All my alarm bells go off and the rest of my drink goes down the hatch. I seethe a breath through my teeth, tasting how cold the air is. Why don't you go upstairs? I want to tell her. Go play a game of why's Mummy crying in bed again? Anything to get Emily away from that window and the things in her head.

"Daddy?"

"Coming, lollipop. Just... gimme a minute."

She takes up her ghostly humming again. The sound of it bothers the space between my shoulder blades. She's tapping at

the window, chortling away. Each tap on the glass makes my neck tense.

Another flash of the ten-month-old version of Emily came. How had she grown so fast? How could the fairy tale time of her infancy warp into this cold, empty wasteland?

“Those Snow Ones started it all,” I whisper, eyeing the ceiling.

Valerie would be curled up in bed, streaming tears into the pillow, doing nothing to wipe them away. Just let them fall. Just let it all fall apart, why don’t you?

Emily’s giggles make my skin want to turn inside out.

“Te he,” she says. “That’s nice. I missed you. It’s no fun when snow doesn’t happen. W-What do you mean? Really? Is that so? Come on in, then. You look so cold.”

The glass of Jack slips out my hand. It clatters on the counter, spitting foamy droplets. It’s gone too far. I should go tear her away. Get black out blinds. Shut her away from those imagined Snow Ones. Tell Emily to grow the hell up. She’s almost five, for God’s sake.

A click sounds, then the ear-catching squeal of the patio door as it slides open.

“Emily?”

Those doors are heavy. I have to set my feet to pull them sideways. The fingers of winter blow their way to me from the frigid day outside.

“Sweetheart? You know not to go out there. What you up to?”

Nothing but the sound of the wind howling into the house.
It reaches me, casts me into a shiver.

“Emily?”

My heart floods with relief when I hear her shift about.

“Come on in, then,” she says. “What you waiting on? You what? Need me to say it aloud? Oh, okay. You can come in. You’re very welcome here.”

I feel something primal in my gut urging me to march through, check that my flesh and blood is okay. My chicken feet stay rooted to the ground.

“W-Who you talking to? Emily?”

“The Snow Ones, Dad. They’ve been too cold for too long. I’m helping cause I’m a good girl. Oh, can we make them cocoa with the marshmallows?”

“We need to have a long word about these things you’re seeing. They’re not—”

A heavy thud slams my words dead. Cold leaks its way into my chest. I can almost taste the silence.

She could be out there getting kidnapped by a weirdo who’s jumped into our garden, and I’m sitting here just mucking about in the kitchen. Grow a pair, man. Get out there. Sort this mess once and for all.

I march through on legs that feel like I’ve just stepped off a boat.

She’s standing in her usual spot, dressed in a pink, woolly jumper. As cute as any daughter anyone could ever dream.

“How did you open the door?” I say, tasting the ghost of her strawberry shampoo in the space between us.

Outside, the snow tumbles down in cartwheeling shapes. Against the bank of white in the sky, the flakes are like black, angry beasties.

Emily raises her hand, points to nothing beside her. “I undid the lock, and he helped budge it.”

“Emily, this needs to stop. There’s—”

There’s snow in the house. Two footprints right where Emily is still pointing. They look like a cross between a bird and an alien monster. Four splayed toes, each with sharp ends.

The same tracks appear at the patio’s steps, right outside the window. Just like the ones I saw all those years ago. The ones I stamped out when Emily was little, telling myself I was going mad.

“This isn’t possible,” I say.

Emily lowers her hand, starts humming to herself.

I gaze into the space above the white footprints. Something burns into me with a predatory glare.

“Tell it to go away, Emily.” My voice is wafer thin. I clear my throat. “I don’t know what you’ve done, but this needs to stop right now. Make it go away.”

“Away?” She twists round, gives me all she’s got with those big brown eyes. “That’s not fair, Daddy. He’s our guest, he’s our guest. I’ve said he can come in. That’s all they’ve ever wanted.”

“They?”

A sloppy noise is followed by a splat. The thing is moving. Shuffling slowly. Each footprint carries less snow, but I can still see its impossible impression on the laminate floor.

I step back, arse hitting the wall.

It moves again. Closer.

I reach out for something, anything, to beat the thing away. Plastic noises tumble about as I lift Emily's Playmobil vacuum over my shoulder like a baseball bat.

"Emily. Slowly. Come here. Get away from it."

"You big silly. He won't hurt me. Promised."

Its slow steps aren't coming directly for me, I realise as I let out a long breath that was aching my lungs.

It's passing by me now. Cold radiates, biting into the skin on my bare forearms. My teeth want to chatter. Its breaths are a click, click, click of a monstrous insect. I can feel it leering at me.

Its footprints have dried up now. I hear its slow, thudding steps, but no longer see them.

"W-Where's it going?" I whisper. "Emily? What did you do?"

The living room door creaks open. The thing is walking through it into the hall. As it steps on the stairs, the entire house moans with the weight of the invisible beast.

Emily places her hand in mine and I jump at how cold she is. Her lips are purpled. Her breath puffs out white when she giggles.

"What does it want?" I say.

“It sniffs Mummy. Says he can help her. Says he can help all of us.”

More creaking of the stairs. I realise I’m still clutching the multi-coloured vacuum-cleaner, but I can’t think of any other weapon to use.

The floorboards bow above us with the creature’s weight. I’m too late. I’ve just let a nightmare thing enter our house and watched it slide past on its way to the person I miss the most.

There’s a crashing sound. The toy vacuum clatters to the floor. Valerie curses, mumbles something, then lets out a noise I’ve never heard anyone make. Not even in horror films.

Emily giggles, squeezes my hand.

“You... you’re laughing. How can you laugh? What are you?”

I fumble my phone out of my pocket and curse when I can’t hold still long enough to let it read my thumb print. Valerie lets out another scream and I drop it. The shriek from upstairs cuts off with a gargled, wet yelp.

I lean down, pick up the phone, begging my frantic thumbs to calm down enough to call the cops.

“Look,” Emily tugs my other hand, “they’re all here.”

“What?”

“The Snow Ones. Come in, come in.”

“Stop it, Emily. Tell them they’re not welcome. Tell them!”

“Oh, you look so cold. It’s not fair. Come on in, my friends. I’ve waited so long.”

The wind picks up outside, whistling through the open patio doors.

The brittle sound of something crunching snow aches my ears.

I see their footprints.

They scrunch snow as more of them make their slow way up the steps outside.

“Emily? Tell them to go away. Now, Emily. Right now. Please?”

Sludge and ice explode around a fresh footprint inside the house.

“This one’s here for you, Daddy.”

“Coffee” is a terse but effective mood piece. The sensual, evocative crime story is a hallmark of the pulp tradition, but poignant endings are much rarer. Rashbaum’s narrative manages all of it, telling a story of two lifetimes in a span of a thousand careful words.

Coffee

by Burt Rashbaum

Burt Rashbaum’s publications are Of the Carousel (The Poet’s Press, 2019) and Blue Pedals (Editura Pim, 2015, Bucharest). His fiction has appeared in Meet Cute Press, Caesura, Typeslash Review, Collateral, American Writers Review: The End or the Beginning (San Fedele Press, 2022), The Jewish Literary Journal, and Spank the Carp. He lives in Colorado, playing keys with the front-range band The CBDs.

I painted her toenails. She let me do this. We were naked, our clothes on the bed. The guns were cleaned, waiting. Ammo on the floor. Red polish on my fingers. Stacks of twenties on the dresser. Her toes smelled like the whiskey on my breath. Cigarette smoke drifting to the ceiling.

“Don’t tickle so much,” I remember her saying, like it was yesterday.

“Quiet,” I said, holding her foot.

She wanted to look good, but she always looked good. She bought nylons, seams up the back, a flower print dress. They were laid out neat next to my suspenders, my pants. I got distract-

ed, a fly on her ankle. That's what tickled her. I followed it up her leg, kept going with my eyes while it flew off. This distracted me more. I couldn't paint.

"Stop that," she said, feeling my distraction.

"You stop it," I said.

"I'm not doing anything," she said.

"Oh yes you are."

"We can't do anything until it dries," she said.

"You just lie still a while," I said, putting down the tiny brush, "give 'em air so they dry good. I'll do the rest."

She hardly moved then, and when I finished my inspection, you know, her toes were dry and red, and we slept deep on those sheets, our clothes now on the floor with the guns, the ammo.

Now my hands shake, there's freckles on my skin, dark liver spots. I spew phlegm when I get up, from all those cigarettes. I always think I'm not alone when I first open my eyes, then I blink, try to breathe, and realize forty years have eaten me alive and what's left?

Scarred lungs, fewer teeth, a stranger staring at me in the mirror. I don't shave much. I hate the electric thing buzzing away, but can't hold a razor any more. I'd cut my own throat.

I didn't want to kill anyone. But these things happen. I thought we'd just keep going. I thought she'd be in my bed forever. I don't know what she thought.

She told me she'd wait for me, but no one told her she'd die first, of some cancer while I rotted away, nothing to keep me go-

ing but the thought that she'd be there when I got out. The world went by me on the television. No one ever aged in the newspaper, but their clothes changed. I don't understand the funnies anymore. I read 'em, but it's a waste for me.

I got arthritis where I got shot. My shoulder. Can't hardly open a beer when it rains.

Sometimes when I'm done pissing, I zip up and then feel a few more drops sliding down my leg.

What would she say to that?

We had us a '39 Plymouth. Red like her toenails. She loved those square headlights, used to say the road lit up like a movie screen. That was easy to steal. Small town asleep, no cops, no sheriff. I hope it's still out there. Who's to say it isn't? When I get a whiff of leather sometimes, when my wallet feels damp from the sweat on my ass right through my pants, and I take it out for some bills, I get a whiff and I swear I can smell those seats in the back where we'd lie and whisper after we'd bounce those springs and talk about the next one, the big one, the one that'd let us quit.

The tires got shot out from under us, I drove on rims to the middle of a field, no place else to go, we left it there when it all came crashing down. I wish I could have said, "Have it towed somewhere, okay?" But I knew it'd be a long time before I'd ever get back there.

They took her in one car, me in another. I bet there's rust, I bet kids play in there. I bet the windows still work. Bet those springs still have some bounce.

I'm tired, is what it is. Hands shake, don't know when I'm done pissing, teeth falling out. I'm not whining. I wouldn't care if she hadn't left me like she did, alone, to find out from a friend of a friend of some fucking friend that she was gone for good. I'm no dreamer. I know she'd be old too, tits probably sagging to her knees, probably hairs growing out of a mole or two, who knows? False teeth. Wrinkles where she was smooth. Too much makeup. Hair dyed.

But y'know what, I'll tell you. I'd still want to lie with her, still want to paint her yellowed toenails, still find a way to make her moan my name in the dark, no matter how much we were falling apart.

Sometimes I can't tell which is the dream and which is now. I'll think I hear her in the other room, making coffee on the hot plate.

I fell asleep last night with a cigarette going. Rolled over and burned my ass. I don't know what's going to happen when it's really time. I tell myself I'm ready. I'm tired of being alone, is what it is. I won't do anything stupid, but it's not like I've never done anything stupid.

This morning I found myself laughing, but there was nothing to laugh at. At first this made me laugh more, and then it made me cry. I could've smashed myself in the face with a hammer, crying like that.

I've seen guys die alone. I mean, I was there, but you could see it in their eyes. You could see desolation there. Going as far back as the dead of night. Give you the willies if they caught your stare.

It's okay. I ain't one of them guys. I got my pants on right.
I'm here in my easy chair, I can feel my face break a smile, and I
smell something good.

She's making us coffee.

Weird tales are a long-forgotten mainstay of the pulp magazines. Roy's spooky, tongue-in-cheek yarn would be right at home in such publications, telling a not-so-simple story with a megalomaniacal villain, the likes of which made the old pulps so memorable.

Brain in a Jar

by Matthew Roy

Matthew Roy (he/him) recently moved from a small town to a big city, from a rambling farmhouse to a tiny apartment, and from a major corporation to an up-and-comer. He's writing more. He's making changes. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in CreepyPod, Dark Recesses Press, Eternal Haunted Summer, Last Stanza Poetry Journal, Penumbic Speculative Fiction Mag, The Quarter(ly) Journal, The Sprawl Mag, and So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library. Find him at <https://matthewstevenroy.wixsite.com/matthewroywriter> and on X (formerly known as Twitter) @mattroywriter.

Disconnect. Detached from everything.
Nothing.

Alone. But, curiously... alone with my thoughts.

Nothing surrounds me. Nothing to see, not even darkness.

I try to move, flex my fingers or toes, wave my arms, kick my legs, turn my head. There is nothing, not even the sense of numbness. Nothing to move. Nothing to hear or touch. Nothing to taste or smell or feel.

I try to shout and nothing happens. I try to make a sound

and cannot.

Is this death? Am I dead?

I have never believed in heaven or hell or any sort of after-life. Never thought much of what would happen when I died.

This can't be it, though. If I'm dead, how can I think? My thoughts feel lethargic, drugged, foggy. But still, I think.

What happened?

Think.

Try to remember.

I had older brothers. I remember that. Laughing faces and arms stronger than mine.

Once, when I was a child, they locked me in our family's root cellar. (I must have lived on a farm or someplace rural).

I remember darkness all around me, all-consuming and oppressive. Terror. I felt terror. I beat on the door, screamed my voice hoarse, cried and dry-heaved in panic.

This is like that, but worse. Not even the cold or the damp or the mildew smell. Not the wooden stairs or wooden door or the splinters lodged in the palms of my hands that my mother, having chastised my brothers, plucked out one by one with tweezers.

This is nothing. Absolute and endless.

Try to remember what happened.

I thrashed against my restraints, my movements getting weaker by the second as sedatives flooded my bloodstream. The masked surgeon stared at me, his eyes obscured by dark glasses. I shouted at him, my words increasingly slurred.

“I didn’t agree to this, Meursault! I didn’t agree to this! You monster!” I tried to shout. “Anton, please...” But even as I cried out, I could hear my own voice coming out like mush. Nerves deadened, my head sank back against the gurney as tears rolled out of my eyes and down my numb cheeks to pool in my ears.

Meursault was impassive behind his glasses and surgical mask. I heard a smile in his voice as he said, “Oh, but you absolutely did agree to this, my old friend.”

He bent down, his face inches from mine. With a gloved hand, he brushed the damp hair from my forehead.

“You did indeed,” he said.

He turned his back to me and busied himself with his surgical instruments. He had no assistant in this matter: that was normally my job. I heard metal clank on metal as he worked and I cringed inwardly as I imagined the sharp, invasive tools he handled. I couldn’t feel my face anymore, but my eyes watered and I imagined more tears were rolling down my cheeks, leaving wet trails in their wake.

“Think of what we are about to accomplish, Farragut!” Meursault cried out as he turned back to me. He cradled something heavy in his hands, but I couldn’t turn my head to see what it was.

“Think what you are about to accomplish,” he continued. “Your name will be spoken alongside other pioneers. The Montgolfier brothers. Lewis and Clark. The Wright brothers. Yuri Gagarin. Neil Armstrong.”

There was an electric whine from somewhere. Some power tool starting up. It rose in grinding pitch and intensity. My teeth ached at its sound.

Meursault was still talking.

“Think of all those trailblazers, those who were the first to do something grand. You will be the most famous of them all...”

He rolled his thin shoulders and hefted the device he was holding, bringing it into my field of view. It was where the high-pitched whine was coming from.

It was a powered circular saw, its razored edge a spinning blur.

“You will be the first man to have his brain removed from his body and live.”

Breathing was difficult, but ragged breaths came as my heart hammered in my chest. Meursault nodded toward something else outside of my field of view. I couldn’t see it, but I knew what it was: an immersion tank. Where my brain would sit, attached to electrodes and nutrient pumps. It had been our plan to test the apparatus; I hadn’t known I would be the test subject.

“I know you’re having a difficult time breathing,” he shouted above the whine of the saw. “No need to worry. You won’t have any need of your lungs or pulmonary system in a few minutes.

Nor your heart or liver or kidneys, or anything else really. I've worked to perfect the nutrient and filtration system in that tank. You've nothing to worry about." He leaned in close and the blade screamed inches from my ear. I couldn't turn away from him.

"You know, I'm not even worried about shaving your head or disinfecting the point of incision," he mused. "No bacteria or harmful germs are going to be able to survive in that tank."

The whirring blade came closer, passed above my field of view, and its sound suddenly changed, its grind somehow deeper, a churning noise behind it. My head began to rock, pushed back and forth. Though I was numb and couldn't see what was happening, I knew.

Oh God, I thought, He's sawing through my skull.

So that was what had happened. My brain was now submerged in Meursault's tank: a brain in a jar. How long had I been here? What had happened to my body? If I could, I would have shuddered to think of that soulless meat, that empty shell left sitting in a cooler or on a gurney, set aside, or worse, disposed, cremated, dumped in the mass grave behind Meursault's castle.

What now?

Time passes, though without any frame of reference, it is difficult to tell how much.

There are periods in which I must sleep, when the regions of my brain must rest and repair themselves. But without eyes,

without a sense of body, without a circadian rhythm, I struggle to tell the difference between waking and sleep, except for the times I dream. And even then, I cannot tell the difference between what may be dreams and what may be hallucinations. Sometimes I feel heavy phantom pains, muscles and skin and limbs that feel like they should be there, but are not.

There are sixty seconds in a minute, which makes thirty-six hundred seconds in an hour, right? So, in a day that makes eighty-six thousand seconds, no... eighty-six thousand four hundred seconds in a given day. Yesterday (?) I started counting, trying to keep track of the seconds, minutes, and hours. God, even the days.

I counted like I did when I was a kid: one Mississippi, two Mississippi, and so on.

Not an exact science, I'll admit.

I made it to one hundred thousand Mississippis before I broke. I'd have cried if I'd had eyes and tear ducts and tears to shed. If I'd had a face for those tears to run down, and shoulders to shake.

I tried counting Mississippis again today (tonight?). I made it to nine thousand one hundred. And I made it to nine thousand one hundred again. The third time I hit nine thousand one hundred, I wanted to scream. I screamed inside this shell of my own mind.

I can't even kill myself.

Time passes.

"Farragut," comes a distorted voice from somewhere, nowhere, everywhere. It is both inside me and surrounding me.

“Farragut.”

Have I gone insane?

“You haven’t gone insane, Farragut. It’s Doctor Meursault. It’s Anton. It took longer than I’d anticipated to establish communication, but I am here. We can communicate.”

How are you here? How can you read my thoughts?

“I’ve rigged the apparatus to give me something like a print-out of your thoughts. Listen, this experiment has been a resounding success so far.”

I wouldn’t call this a resounding success, Meursault.

“Oh, but it is. Bereft of a body, and yet you still live. Electrical activity, concrete thoughts, your brain is functioning within normal parameters in the immersion tank. Now it is time for the next phase of the experiment.”

God, I feel nauseous.

I blink and the world is bleary. I keep blinking, trying to clear my eyes. They won’t clear. I recognize the sickly yellow color of the walls. That, and the electrical hum of background activity tell me I am in Meursault’s laboratory. But I can’t discern details around me.

I’m upright. The padding behind my back and the weight across my chest and pelvis and legs tells me I am strapped to a gurney that has been tilted to approximate me standing. There is a steady beep of a heart monitor spooling to my right.

I try to ask, “What’s wrong with my eyes? Why don’t they work?” But the words come out as a croaked mumble. Fortunately, Meursault’s electrodes or receptors must still be attached to my brain, for he is able to understand me.

Meursault is out of my line of sight, his voice coming from somewhere behind me.

“Because they are different than the ones you were born with,” he says. His voice is unconcerned, as if this should have been obvious, or as if he’s shrugging when he says it. “You’re getting used to them, your newly-connected nerves. Your brain is learning to process what those eyes see.”

He pauses.

“Hmm, though maybe the subject had cataracts.”

“The subject?” I ask in a drooling slur.

Meursault didn’t answer.

I lift trembling hands to my face. Though my vision is still terribly blurry, it is immediately obvious that these are not my hands. The size is wrong, the shape off. The skin is waxy and, upon closer inspection, necrotic. Underneath the reek of formaldehyde, they give off the smell of rot. In my long years of service to Meursault, I have learned many things. One of which is what a decomposing body looks and smells like.

“Christ!” I shout, and for the first time, the noise that spills out of my borrowed mouth actually sounds something like a real word. “Anton, did you put my brain into a corpse?”

I drop the dead man's hands and they slap wetly against the thighs of my new body. Meursault wanders back into view, a dark smudge against the yellow walls. He shines a blinding pen light into my eyes.

“Hmm, your pupils aren't constricting,” he says.

My head swims. Meursault looks at me.

“What are...?” he manages before I spew vomit on him.

Spasms rock my body and I hear the heart monitor beeping wildly. Meursault glances at it and curses. He drops his pen light and grips my borrowed head with both hands. The world spins.

“Farragut, listen to me,” he says. “It's very important that you—”

The world goes blank.

There was a series of bodies after that, the results the same each time. Some of the bodies were fresher than others. Sometimes they were still bloody. Meursault had been up to grisly work in his quest to successfully transplant a human brain into a new body. All of the bodies failed, my brain failing to adapt. As my mind struggled to adapt to new limbs and new nerve pathways, with conscious action and autonomic response, I tried to re-learn how to do the most basic of tasks.

I felt myself going crazy.

“This isn't working,” Meursault concedes as he saws into the grafted skull of my latest failed body.

There is a long period of lonely nothing after that.

“Farragut,” he says, “I’ve made a new body for you.”

Another stitched-together corpse?

“No, I’ve run a hundred trials with the lab animals. I can’t match a brain with a new body without deterioration or massive organ and tissue rejection from the host body, or myriad other complications. It’s... it’s not what we anticipated, Farragut.”

Jesus, Anton. Just put me back in my original body... where’s my body, by the way?

He doesn’t answer.

Anton, where’s my body? Why can’t you put me back in my old body?

“That’s... not a sustainable option.”

What are you talking about?

“The necrosis—why, the rot—your body wouldn’t sustain you. It’s too badly decomposed. The damn thing is practically a mummy by now.”

Anton... how long have I been in this tank?

No response.

How long?

“It has been... some time.”

How. Fucking. Long.

“It has been eighteen months.”

I have no response. A year and a half in this tank, my brain

cut from my skull and kept in a jar. And as far as the rest of the world—as far as my family, everyone I ever knew save Meursault—as far as they know, I am what? Dead? Missing?

Where had the time gone?

Meursault is still speaking.

“It’s been a busy eighteen months, Farragut. This new body, it isn’t anything organic at all. It is something else entirely. A machine-body that should last forever, that can be upgraded, built upon, give you a life back in this world.”

A robot body now? Christ...

“It will still take many weeks before we are ready for the implantation, and many more weeks for you to adjust. I think the sensory overload that came with the previous bodies can be mitigated by only connecting a limited number of nerve bundles, a few nerve pathways at a time. Basic senses, limited locomotion, learning to crawl before you can walk, so to say.”

I am a monstrosity.

I will hand it to Meursault: he does nothing small, does nothing without panache. My robot body is a towering amalgamation of steel and cable, my metal hands capable of crushing rock, my tread tearing up stone.

“WHAT KIND OF WAR MACHINE HAVE YOU TURNED ME INTO?” I ask, my ersatz voice warbling through blaring speakers. I will admit it is easier to communicate in this

body, as it reads my thoughts and translates those to sound, rather than me having to attempt to speak through an unfamiliar, organic mouth.

“Well, I only had the resources to build one robot, so I thought, ‘Why not make one capable of defending this castle?’”

We run through exercises. Walking, talking, lifting objects. Gross and fine motor skills. Eventually, I am able to grip an egg in my powerful, iron hand without breaking it.

We stand at the castle gate. I have followed Meursault out here. Lightning flashes across the sky.

“WHAT ARE WE DOING OUT HERE, ANTON?” I ask.

“I am running low on resources, Farragut,” he answered. “We are about to procure more.”

I realize then a purpose of this robot body that I had not considered before. Meursault had built me as an enforcer, as a weapon, a brute to steal the resources he needed to continue his work.

Lightning forks across the sky and a thought occurs to me.

“IS THIS METAL BODY SAFE IN THE LIGHTNING?”

“Oh, absolutely,” he replies. “You should be properly grounded.”

Lightning strikes nearby, throwing dirt over us and into the moat below. The flash does something to my optic units.

“MEURSAULT, I CAN’T SEE.”

“Hmm, maybe the lightning is more of a danger than I’d

thought,” he muses.

There is a crash and I feel my circuits overload. Somewhere, I hear Meursault cursing and I feel a sensation of falling. I am upside down and I hit the muddy waters of the moat far below us and everything is nothing again.

How long has it been, Anton?

“A long time, Farragut. I’ve lived many years here alone with only you to keep me company. How alike you and I have become.”

I hardly think your loneliness compares to being a disembodied brain in a jar.

Once, I’d worried about angering him, that he might kill me, or worse, leave me alone to go insane inside my tank. But I no longer care.

“You make a valid point,” he concedes.

We spoke many times over the years, but our talks grew increasingly infrequent. He described how the castle was crumbling into decay around him, and he grew more distraught and distant as he aged. He fretted that authorities would come for him.

“Farragut, I’ve failed,” he says after a long time of silence. “My life’s work, our work... it has not panned out the way I’d envisioned. I’m going to do what I can to save you though, to preserve you for future generations, when the science is better, when men know more. They will revive you in a way I could not.”

Anton, what are you about to do?

“There are cold storage tanks beneath this castle, powered by nuclear batteries that will last a thousand years. You will be safe down there until men of the future can finish my work. I’m going to freeze your brain.”

Time passes, presumably.

I am cold.

For the first time in a long time, I feel sensations. I would have thought this would be comforting, welcome, but I have grown used to my nothing, senseless existence.

I shiver. My body is slick with fluid. The lights are too bright for me to open my eyes.

“Mr. Farragut, can you hear us, sir?” It is not Meursault’s voice. The accent is strange. I have traveled the world and never heard an accent like it before.

“Wha... What?” a voice croaks from my drooling mouth. It sounds so much like my own.

The characteristically cocky Don Juan gets his comeuppance in this light romp through the bedrooms and back alleys of 17th-century Spain. Travieso-Diaz's straight-faced narrator relates a slapstick fiasco that's savvy, snappy, and just plain fun.

Don Juan, Derided

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Eighty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies and paying magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. Some of his unpublished works have also received "honorable mentions" from a number of paying publications. A first collection of some of his stories, The Satchel and Other Terrors, was released in February 2023.

*Madamina, il catalogo è questo
Delle belle che amò il padron mio;
un catalogo egli è che ho fatt'io;
Osservate, leggete con me.
In Italia seicento e quaranta;
In Almagna duecento e trentuna;
Cento in Francia, in Turchia novantuna;
Ma in Ispagna son già mille e tre.
Mozart, Don Giovanni, Act I*

An important part of my job was to defend my master when he was attacked.

There had been many attempts by fathers, brothers, husbands, and other male relations of Don Juan's female victims to exact retribution for his transgressions. I helped him fend off those

attacks. This duty posed little peril for me, because Don Juan was an accomplished swordsman and nimbler than a mountain cat. We were seldom at real risk of harm, though I must confess that a couple of times I came close to wetting my britches.

In addition to guarding him from physical danger, it was my responsibility to defend Don Juan from the invidious tales cast about by women whose honor he had compromised. I kept a running catalogue of Don Juan's dalliances, including how many times he had encounters with a given lady, where, and when. On occasion, I was forced to draw on the catalogue to set the record straight as to what he did and did not do.

Despite my pleas for discretion, Don Juan pursued just about all women he encountered: young and old; single, married and widowed; poor and rich. He plucked young girls from convents and often went after the guarding nuns as well. If a human being wore skirts, he would attempt to get inside them.

People ask how I could have stayed in the employ of such a scoundrel. My answer is difficult to formulate. He demanded loyalty, but gave little in return. It was always "do this, Catalinón," or "Catalinón, fix that," with no showing of gratitude. Indeed, he treated me rather poorly, and more than once pointed to me as being responsible for some crime he himself had committed. In all honesty, I followed him because of admiration for how he got away with all his evil deeds. I was under his insidious spell, like a scarab caught in a spider web, watching helplessly as fly after fly was consumed.

In the spring of 1620, we found ourselves narrowly escaping from Seville, as Don Juan had just slain a Comendador of the Order of Calatrava, the father of one of his attempted conquests. I believed his near escape would put a brake on my lord's pernicious behavior, yet only one week after our flight he was again on the prowl. He was now operating out of a farm he rented in Cazalla de la Sierra, close to Seville but out of the reach of his pursuers.

After a while, having exhausted the female population of Cazalla, Don Juan turned his attention to La Cartuja de Cazalla, a nearby nunnery whose novices became targets for his appetites. At the nunnery, he met Clara de Ulloa, the disobedient daughter of a nobleman from Málaga, who had been placed in the convent against her will by her father. Clara was expected to become a nun and thereafter lead a life of quiet devotion.

I was always reluctant to voice my concerns about my master's behavior, but on the matter of Doña Clara I felt compelled to warn him about the lady's temperament. I had served as go-between in arranging for Don Juan's secret meetings with Clara and could attest first hand to her fiery disposition. "My Lord, it would perhaps behoove you to exercise caution in dealing with Doña Clara. She is as spirited as an unbroken colt."

"That's the way I like them," replied Don Juan scornfully. And then he scolded me: "You better stick to your duties and let me handle my affairs, of which I am perfectly capable. Otherwise, I will find myself a less intrusive servant."

After several meetings, Doña Clara and Don Juan decided she would leave the nunnery and move with him. He promised he would marry her when they settled down.

Don Juan enjoyed a few days of passion with Doña Clara and then got tired of the dalliance. I was present when he advised his paramour that it had been good while it lasted, but it was time for them to part ways. He would give her a purse of money and send her back to her family in Málaga.

Doña Clara refused to be discarded. She berated Don Juan for his duplicity, accused him of having stolen her honor through false promises, and insisted that the only possible solution would be for him to marry her and restore her good name, since her virginity was no longer capable of being repaired.

Don Juan tried to reason with Doña Clara and appealed to her common sense. He offered her even more money, which infuriated the lady to no end. "I am not a common whore that can be bought for a few reales," she fumed. When his efforts at bargaining failed, he gave her an ultimatum: "You are to leave this house by tomorrow, or else." To which Doña Clara, in an icy tone, responded: "Don't threaten me. Marry me, or you will pay!"

Don Juan then lost his composure and replied in a loud voice: "I have made arrangements to bring friends here tomorrow to remove you by force if you refuse to go voluntarily."

"Bring them on!" shouted back Doña Clara, slamming the bedroom door.

Somewhat later, I answered a soft knock on the door to the apartment to let in Don Juan's new conquest, the main reason for sending Doña Clara back to her family right away. Doña Ana de Pantoja, barely out of her teens, was the daughter of one of the wealthiest merchants in the Spanish Empire. I conveyed Doña Ana to my master's top floor study, three rooms down from the conjugal bedroom to which Doña Clara had retired. Don Juan was waiting for Doña Ana, a glass of claret in hand. I tried to make no sound as I closed the study door and returned to the servants' quarters.

Early the following morning, I was standing outside Don Juan's townhouse grooming his horse in preparation for a trip to Ronda, where he was to meet with certain lowlife elements. He would bring these people to Seville, seize Doña Clara by force, and with their help deliver her—preferably in one piece—to her father's house in Málaga.

I had my arms full with a bucket of water, a large brush, and a saddle and was busy with my work when a loud noise drew my attention to the upper floor bedroom window, which all of a sudden opened violently, revealing a stark-naked Don Juan. Behind him I could hear a torrent of insults in the familiar voice of Doña Clara. At almost the same time, the front door opened and a trembling Doña Ana, dressed only in a sheer, see-through *négligée*, ran out of the apartment and onto the street.

Next second Don Juan was jumping out of the window,

falling into the bushes that encircled the front of the townhouse. It was not a big drop, but Don Juan flopped to the ground in a most ungainly manner. His body was now covered with dirt and scratches from the shrubbery; as he got to his feet, he was favoring his left ankle. Without waiting a second, he began to run as fast as his injured ankle allowed. He reached the street, took a few steps, and turned into an alley a short distance away.

The door to the townhouse, already wide open, was filled with the figure of Doña Clara, dressed in night clothes. Her face was contorted with anger; she looked like a Fury from hell. In her hand she brandished a long, sharp butcher's knife. She began running in pursuit of my master, screaming obscenities that would have made a mule driver blush. The insane look on her face chilled my blood.

Soon, she entered the alley where my master had disappeared moments earlier.

I experienced a rare moment of rebellion. My duty, as I mentioned, required me to go after the pair and try to protect Don Juan. On the other hand, I was smarting from my master's dismissal of my warnings about Doña Clara and his curt dressing down. At the end, anger gained the upper hand. For once, let him take care of this problem by himself.

I ran after Doña Ana, gently led her to our next-door neighbor's apartment, and knocked on the door. Luckily, the knock was answered by Sebastián, the majordomo, a man I knew well

and on whose discretion I counted. I explained the situation in a few words and asked him to give shelter to the shivering young woman until someone could retrieve her, which he agreed to do. As I turned my back on them, Sebastián was escorting Doña Ana to an antechamber off the main living room.

I then began running in the direction of the alley. As I entered the passage, all I could see at first was Doña Clara, stooped over something huddled against the brick wall at the alley's end. I drew in closer, stepping softly not to draw attention to myself. I was finally able to discern the figure of the naked Don Juan, folded in on himself and trembling with fear, as Doña Clara lifted the knife and lowered it towards my master's genitals.

He let out a screech, which was followed by a cackling, demented burst of laughter by the lady. She turned around and ran out of the alley, passing by me as I pressed my back against a wall. She was clutching something in triumph in her left hand, knife still held high in her right.

I forced myself to look at the figure on the ground. There was no blood, only a quivering mass of frightened manhood. I looked towards his bare private parts. His member, which when erect was of above average proportions, was so shrunken with fright as to be almost invisible. The thick clump of pubic hair that had framed his manhood had been neatly severed. Urine ran down one leg: he had soiled himself.

I helped my master to his feet and led him out of the alley, trying in vain to suppress the urge to titter at the pitiful figure he

cut. A crowd had gathered at the alley's mouth; the bystanders were less circumspect, and some were doubling over with laughter.

It took all my self-control not to point out with a smirk: "I told you so!"

I returned to our next-door neighbor's apartment and, while waiting for the arrival of Doña Ana's relatives, heard from her an account of what had happened. Don Juan had used all his powers of persuasion to convince Doña Ana to come to his apartment that night in a hired cab, alleging he was suffering from a severe attack of gout and, because of these painful circumstances, he could not leave the apartment, yet could not wait one more minute to join Doña Ana in a blissful embrace. After her arrival, Don Juan had plied her with wine, and later brandy, and had ultimately made love several times to the intoxicated girl on a large divan that rested against the studio's back wall.

They both had slept until shortly after sunrise, when they had been awakened by a loud knocking on the studio's door and shouting from a female voice commanding Don Juan to show himself.

Don Juan blanched, mumbling, "I meant to send you home before dawn, but I passed out myself. Quick, hide under the divan, I'll try to get rid of her!"

The moment Don Juan opened the studio's door, an indignant Doña Clara exploded into the room, screaming: "Where were you all night? Were you trying to hide from me? Didn't you

hear what I told you?” Her barrage was cut short as she looked in the direction of the divan and saw the half-naked Doña Ana trying, unsuccessfully, to hide under the furniture. Doña Clara shrieked and ran out of the room.

“Quick!” ordered Don Juan. “No time to explain. Go downstairs and get out of the house before she returns!”

“Who is she?” mumbled Doña Ana, bewildered.

“It’s my crazy aunt!” cried Don Juan. “Go, and I’ll explain later!”

As Doña Ana rushed downstairs, she saw Don Juan’s “aunt,” who was approaching from the back of the apartment, wielding a large kitchen knife. Fortunately, Doña Ana got to the front door before the other woman could reach her and burst out into the cold morning air. She was ashamed and humiliated, but Don Juan was to fare worse.

To this day, the alley that witnessed Don Juan’s ordeal is known to the locals as Callejón de las Carcajadas, that is, “Alley of the Guffaws,” because those who witnessed the naked nobleman running for his life from a woman holding a butcher knife and the ludicrous scene that followed break into uncontrollable laughter at the mere mention of the incident.

Don Juan was so mortified by the scandal that he made me report that he had been driven to hell by demons summoned by the statue of a Comendador he had slain days earlier. He then dismissed me from his employ and gave me a paltry severance purse.

Last I knew he had grown a beard and taken a ship to La Habana, where he remains in obscurity (or, at least, beyond my reach).

He may someday come back to Seville, his hometown and the scene of many of his adventures. I have included in the running catalogue this accounting of his humiliation and may make it public if he returns.

Seville, 1621.
