



down in the dirt
revealing all your
dirty little secrets
v. **060**
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REM

Martha Deborah Hall

A body in black plastic,
an unzipped bag lowers to the floor,
tears leak out a hole in her forehead.
“I didn’t fulfill my dreams,” she says.
To console the corpse in its odd coffin,
the dreamer asks, “Who does?”

Scars art: page 44.
Cover of a flag photographed in Florida

Harlequin

Melissa Sihan Mütlu

Kelly Van Hauser, a thirty-two-year-old, six months pregnant Essex, Pennsylvania trophy wife, loaded her seven-year-old son, Robbie, and five-year-old daughter, Bridget, into her most prized possession, her silver SUV. Robbie and Bridget reluctantly sat in the back seats, the girl clutching onto the long blond mane of her half-naked Fashion Allie doll.

“Okay you two,” Kelly said quietly. “This time try to behave.”

She closed the door and hopped into the driver’s seat. The rearview mirror was used for a quick check-up of what she liked to call “sunset blond” hair for any sign of dark roots. She straightened out her khaki pants and pink T-shirt and just as the ignition was about to be turned on, Bridget began to whine.

“Mom,” she complained, pulling on her pigtails and scrunching up her pudgy face. “I don’t want to go to Robbie’s soccer game.”

“Butt face!” her brother egged her on, checking his bright red soccer shorts for any grass stains. “Bridget smells like a dog’s butt!” He reached under his seat and grabbed an old and stale french fry, which he used as a projectile to throw at his sister. He watched with glee as it landed on her new pink strappy sundress.

“Stop it!” she cried, looking for her own piece of food to throw.

Kelly let out a sigh. She loved to complain about how “tired” she was all the time from raising two young kids and being pregnant with a third, but never once stopped to think that no one had *forced* her to have any kids. She always made it seem as though *she* was the “victim.”

“It’s enough!” she finally spoke out. “Please, would you two just stop it!”

“But I’m hungry,” Bridget continued to whine. “I want some ice cream.”

Bridget loved junk food. Cheese curls, ice cream, cream filled sugar cakes, chocolate bars, hamburgers, and it showed. Her entire body looked puffy, but she knew as long as she whined enough, she would get her meals of sugar and grease. Robbie threw another fry at her, which caused another uproar. He laughed when he saw her trying to pick it out of her hair. Kelly rubbed her visibly pregnant belly, her index finger touching the protruding navel.

“Please let *this* one be good,” she told herself. “Dennis, come home soon.”

Dennis Van Hauser, her husband, was a fifty-four-year-old cardiac surgeon, whom she loved to brag about. They had met at a party, and as soon as she had been married, she quit her job as a paralegal, and started having babies. She was too overjoyed at the prospects of being married to a doctor, to even think about working. He was in Iowa, at a medical conference and was scheduled to come home late that evening.

Kelly looked down at her two and a half carat princess cut diamond wedding band and smiled. She started the SUV, ignoring the war in the backseat. The day was sunny and warm which warranted that the window be rolled down. She made sure that she hung her left hand out the window just enough, so that the

passerby, or if she was stopped at a red light, the person next to her could get a good look at the diamond.

“The wheels on the bus go round and round,” she began to sing, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel, hoping her children would follow suit.

“That’s dumb!” Robbie laughed, attempting to steal Fashion Allie away from his sister. “I’m seven not two.”

The SUV backed out of the Van Hauser driveway, which led up to the six-thousand square foot Van Hauser colonial, the largest home in the Country Lakes subdivision. Blooming red roses lined the front walkway, and apple trees filled in the front yard. As Kelly drove through the subdivision thinking how much nicer her house was than all the others, the sunlight caught the diamond perfectly, causing it to emit small beams of light. She turned left onto the main road, all the while paying more attention to the sparkling stone, rather than the road. Traffic was nearly non-existent, and she found it okay to let her guard down just a little bit.

“I’m hungry!” Bridget called out again. She smacked her brother with Fashion Allie’s hard plastic legs, letting out a surge of laughter when she saw his reaction.

“Butt face!” he screamed, checking his cheek with his fingers for any sign of bleeding.

Kelly continued to alternate her gaze from the diamond to the road and back to the diamond. As she continued to focus on the sparkling of the refracted light, a dark lump in the road caught her peripheral vision. She quickly looked up, but it was too late. Thump, thump, thump, thump, went the wheels of the SUV over a small raccoon who had tried to cross the street. The vehicle swayed back and forth, while Kelly tried to regain control.

“Cool!” Robbie exclaimed, looking out the back window.

The raccoon was now no more than a puddle of bloody road kill, with one stiff leg sticking into the air.

“Are you alright?” Kelly nervously asked her kids, giving no more thought to the raccoon, which she confirmed got into *her* way.

Both nodded, giggling at the thought of their mother running over an animal. “Oh, can you turn around so we can go look at it?” Robbie asked delighted, his squinty eyes lighting up.

Bridget clapped her hands at the idea, and she, too, kept glancing out the back window, looking at the now distant pile of liquid, innards, and appendages.

“No,” Kelly said, still jumpy from losing control of the SUV. “On the way back, I promise.”

The ride home was as irritating as the ride to the game. Bridget kept complaining about her hunger and how she was “starving.” Robbie was euphoric about being on the winning team and constantly bragged about it. As the SUV turned onto First State Boulevard, Robbie’s conversation went from the soccer game to the dead raccoon.

“Remember,” he said, almost sounding too jovial. “You said we could stop and see the pile of guts.”

Bridget’s face became one big fat smile at the thought. Her hands flew up

into the air, Fashion Allie swaying wildly. Kelly slowed the SUV from fifty-five, to forty-five, which was the posted speed limit. She remembered there had been a row of evergreens at the location of the killing, which were coming up.

“Huh?” she asked herself. “I swear it was just right here.”

She pulled over to the side of the road, staring at a stain on the asphalt, which looked like it could have been blood at one point. Robbie and Bridget had their faces pressed against the window, wondering where the animal had run off to.

“I guess some birds must have taken it away,” she said, checking her face in the rearview mirror for any signs that her tanning bed tan was becoming blotchy. “Sorry kids, I’m sure we’ll see animals on the road again someday.”

The siblings let out disappointing moans, but dealt with it. Robbie still had his victorious soccer game to chat about. The SUV pulled up the driveway and came to a stop inside the garage. Kelly made sure to close the garage door before getting out.

The inside of the Van Hauser home was immaculate. The colours were neutral and conservative, just the way Kelly liked them. Robbie ran up the beige carpeted steps to his bedroom, announcing he was going to go play his video games. Bridget made a dash for the kitchen, reaching into the Dalmatian cookie jar and pulling out a handful of chocolate sandwich cookies.

“Don’t get into those cookies,” Kelly warned, hearing the clinging of the ceramic Dalmatian’s head against the torso. “You’ll spoil your dinner.”

“I’m not mom,” Bridget lied, even though her teeth had already been blackened by the chocolate crumbs. “I’m going outside on the swing.”

Kelly nodded, and said nothing more about the cookies, even though it was clearly evident her daughter had lied to her about eating them. Bridget climbed up the big yellow plastic slide, then slid down it before taking a seat on the swing. The play set had been built underneath a giant weeping willow, and a few of the low branches tickled her eyes. She picked at the long oval leaves, capturing one of the bright blue beetles that crawled all over them. She began to swing, pumping her legs back and forth, and when she felt like she was flying, she threw the beetle into the air. When she finally became dizzy, she slowed the swing back down until it stopped.

“Hey little one,” a soft voice said behind her.

She looked over her shoulder, but didn’t see anyone.

“No over here,” the voice said again.

She turned around and smiled at the sight of a raccoon, who wore a black and white diamond print clown outfit and a small jester’s hat with little gold and silver bells, which gave off a soft jingling.

“I’m Harlequin, the friendly dancing raccoon,” he kindly introduced himself, taking a bow, then doing a pirouette.

“I’m Bridget,” she said back, unafraid of the peculiar creature, since she had just watched *Alice in Wonderland* a few days ago. “Do you know Alice?”

Harlequin put his small hand up to his chin. “No, I don’t think so. Should I?”

Bridget liked the sound of his little bells, and tried to touch them, but he backed away. “Wait right here,” she told him. “I’ll be right back.”

“Okay, little one.”

Bridget ran into the house raving about what she had just seen to Kelly, who was busy mixing up bright red ground beef for cheeseburgers.

“Bridget, what are you talking about?” she asked baffled by the girl’s nonsensical gibberish.

“But mom,” she pleaded. “You have to come see him, he’s so cute. He’s got these little bells that go jingle-jingle-jingle when he dances. He said his name was Harley Queen.”

Kelly humoured her daughter. Bridget pulled her mom by the hand and stopped dead when she came to the play set. She rubbed her tiny eyes, and put her hands up to her chubby cheeks.

“He was right here,” she said, stamping her foot on the ground. “Right here!”

“Okay,” Kelly said. “Maybe he had to go and play with the other raccoons.”

“I guess.”

During the greasy cheeseburger dinner, which Bridget inhaled, but Robbie picked at, she couldn’t stop talking about her new “friend.”

“You’re so dumb!” Robbie laughed. “A dancing raccoon? How many cartoons have you been watching?”

Kelly agreed with her son and thought that Bridget saw some animal, perhaps even a raccoon, and imagined him in a clown suit and jester hat with bells. Besides, it was getting late, and she could tell both kids were getting tired. After dinner, she picked up the plates and gave her husband a call. She learned that he would be home sometime between one and two that morning because his first flight had been delayed. She wanted to tell him to just get on another flight, but she didn’t want to compromise her status as a trophy wife by coming off as too domineering.

Robbie put himself to bed, and fell asleep quickly as most of his energy had been exhausted from the day’s soccer game. Kelly sat on Bridget’s twin bed, which had been adorned with pink sheets. Everything in her room was pink. The walls, the toys, and even most of her clothes were one shade of pink or another.

“Go to bed, okay.” Kelly cooed, kissing her daughter’s forehead.

The distant sound of thunder meant it was going to rain hard tonight, and Kelly knew she had to get downstairs and close the windows. Bridget laid on her back and made sure that the pink sheet went up to her chin. She blew her mother a kiss and closed her eyes.

Kelly sat on her own bed, dressed in her silk red robe. Only her bedside lamp was turned on, which provided enough light for her to flip through a maternity fashion magazine. She used a permanent marker to circle some shirts, not worrying about the cost. The thunder was growing louder and she was glad that she had closed the windows downstairs. Lightning soon followed and a storm erupted. She listened for any cries from her kids, but was relieved that they were still sleeping. The lighting lit up her room with an eerie blue glow, and the thunder made her jump. The wind picked up and branches slammed against the windows like angry fists. The sound of the front door opening and slamming shut sent her into a wave of worry.

She rushed downstairs supporting her belly with her hand and closed it, this time making sure to chain lock it as well.

“Damn it,” she said as the lights flickered then went out all together.

The lightning was the only source of light in the house at this point. The sound of the wind, and branches breaking was overwhelming. She just wanted to get some sleep, then she heard a soft sound. In between claps of thunder, she thought the sound sounded like the jingling of bells.

“Oh no,” she said. “I’m not going to let my daughter’s imagination get the best of me.”

Just as she tried to erase the thought from her mind, Robbie’s bedroom door slammed shut. Soon followed was the slamming of Bridget’s door. She ran upstairs and found her son’s bed empty.

“Robbie!” she called out. “Where are you?”

She found her children huddled together, crying violently on Bridget’s bed. Robbie held his sister close, trying to comfort her. Another clap of thunder sent the girl into a wail.

“Get out!” Robbie warned, gripping his sister tighter.

“Robbie? Bridget? What’s gotten into you?”

“Hey there,” she heard a voice she did not recognize, which was soon followed by the jingling of bells.

A flash of lightning revealed a creature on Bridget’s bed. It was a raccoon, with a black and white diamond print clown suit. On top of its small head was a jester hat.

“What is this?” she gasped.

“I’m Harlequin the friendly dancing raccoon,” he said.

Another flash of lightning lit up his eyes. They looked like orange discs. Kelly slapped herself a few times, instructing herself to wake up, but with each slap her cheek stung and she knew she wasn’t sleeping. Bridget let out another cry, this time irritating Harlequin.

“Shut up!” he screamed, waving his arms in the air. “You stupid, ugly, brat! Shut the fuck up!”

Bridget tried to hold in her fear, but let it out again. This time, Harlequin was not so kind. He jumped onto the girl clawing at her face. Robbie tried to beat him off, but received the same punishment. Kelly watched helplessly as this creature mauled her children to death. No more cries were heard, and the lightning lit up the room, revealing the blood stained pink bed sheets. The animal turned around to face Kelly. She just stared at him, bewildered, horrified, and well past the point of a breakdown. The police were not an option, who would believe a story about a talking and murderous animal. Harlequin jumped on top of the toy chest next to the bed, the horrible jingling of his little bells echoing in her ears.

“So pregnant mamma,” he began.

She listened to the demented words, and watched as the lips moved with them. A raccoon, was in fact, speaking to her. Kelly crawled back into a corner, and balled her knees up to her chest. She did not want the perverse animal star-

ing at her pregnant belly.

“Whatcha gonna name that kid?” Harlequin asked, jumping off of the chest and walking up to her.

“Katie,” she sobbed. “I’m naming her Katie.”

“I don’t like that name,” he snarled.

He began to touch her legs, spreading them apart. “Hey Lady, my name is Harlequin, the friendly dancing raccoon. You people, you stupid fucking suburbanites, have no thoughts for anything other than yourselves. You and your Baby Culture, that is. That’s all you care about, how many kids you can pop out, what you drive, and how big your homes are. You ran me over today you bitch, and you know what, I bet you didn’t think twice, only about your own fucking little brats. Those kids weren’t cute and their certainly a lot less cute now. So pregnant mamma, whatcha gonna do about me?”

Kelly began to wail and tried to fend off the animal. He clawed at her stomach and untied her robe. Her protruding navel looked like candy, which he bit off. She screamed and stared at the blood running down her skin. A small fist hit her over the head. Harlequin was quite pleased that he had knocked her out. He quickly got to work and with surgeon like precision, used his sharp claws to cut open and remove the fetus, which he set on her chest. He found some thread and a needle and crudely sewed her back up. The branches continued to slam against the window, and he knew it was time to leave. The sound of his bells were overpowered by the thunder as he left the house.

Dennis came home after the storm had subsided. The power was back on and he assumed his wife and kids were fast asleep. He set his briefcase on the kitchen floor, and took a few bites out of a cold left over cheeseburger. He ran his hand through his short dark hair, which still had a few rain droplets in it. Upstairs he found what had been left behind and fell to his knees. His children had been murdered, and his wife was bloody and on her chest was their third child. He threw up at the sight of the underdeveloped fetus and tried to wake Kelly.

“Harlequin!” she screamed. She felt her belly and realized she was no longer pregnant. “It was a raccoon!” she said, clinging to her husband.

He pulled back her robe and saw the stitches, disgusted by what he thought she had done. “You’re sick!” he told her. “How dare you!”

Kelly was committed to the Loch Mental Facility, located thirty miles outside of Sussex. Dennis visited her once a week, at least until the divorce was final. On his last visit, as he sat in the white room with his wife strapped to the bed, he could not get over what in his mind, she had done. He turned his back to her, and caught a glimpse of her trying to reach out to him.

“It was Harlequin,” she said weakly.

He left her in her prison, and went home, not bothering to even think twice about his precious trophy wife, who once wore a two and a half princess cut diamond ring, and who once had lived in the largest home in the Country Lakes subdivision.

Some Things Are Better Left Unknown

Boyd Lemon

Melissa drank the last of her morning blueberry smoothie at her grandmother's old oak table. She pushed her index finger along the deep gashes her father had made with his pocket knife when he was 12. Melissa couldn't imagine her father so destructive, but he had confessed. She had placed the table under the east facing window of her apartment so she could look out at the park.

She gazed at the season's first snowflakes floating past her window like white feathers falling from a flock of invisible birds, a scene she never would have viewed in Los Angeles. Melissa had moved to Boston four months ago. She remembered the tingling feeling in her chest when her boss at Spectrum Publishing offered her an editor's position in their Boston office. She was unaware of why at first, but she had known right away she would accept. It was a promotion, and they probably would have laid her off if she had rejected the transfer. Anyway, she had thought, at 26, it was time for her to be on her own, away from her father. She had always been dependent on her father. She needed to learn to be independent. And places and things in L.A. reminded her of her mother, who had died a few months earlier. Boston seemed like her destiny. Still, it was hard to leave everyone.

Her thoughts returned to her dad. When she lived in L.A., a week rarely went by when they hadn't shared a meal or gone somewhere. It had been that way since her parents separated when she was ten. She could talk to her dad like she couldn't talk to her mother. He never seemed to judge or talk down to her. Melissa remembered him coming into the Starbucks where she worked while she was in college. She knew he never went to Starbucks otherwise. She smiled, as she thought about him calling her every Sunday since she had moved to Boston.

She visualized her ex-boyfriend, Brad. They had loved each other, but she had heard from him only once since she moved. He said his heart had been broken. So had hers, but she knew this move was right for her.

Her thoughts were interrupted by her cell phone ringing. It displayed "Brad". Isn't it strange how that happens sometimes—you think about somebody you haven't heard from in a long time, and then they call, or you see them. After they exchanged awkward pleasantries, Brad said that a friend of his named Antonio was going to be in Boston for a day or two and had an idea that Melissa might be interested in.

"Would you have coffee with him?" Asked Brad.

"What's the idea?" Asked Melissa.

"I'd rather he explain it to you, Melissa," said Brad.

"Come on, Brad. Why can't you tell me?"

"I think Antonio should be the one to present his idea," said Brad. "You'll understand it better. I'm just asking you to have coffee with him. He's a really nice and talented guy, an older man. This is not a setup."

“Okay,” said Melissa. “I don’t really like the mystery, but I suppose it can’t hurt to have coffee with him.”

Melissa went early to Starbucks near her apartment, ordered a latte and sat down at a table near the door to wait for Antonio. A tall gray haired man with glasses wearing the navy blue suit and yellow tie he had described on the phone approached her.

“Melissa?”

“Yes, Antonio. Nice to meet you.”

“My pleasure,” he said, and sat down across from her.

“Would you like to get a coffee?” She asked.

“No, that’s okay,” said Antonio.

“How do you know Brad? She asked.

“I met him at an exhibition of his sculptures in L.A. We ended up working together on a project,” he said.

“Brad had wonderful things to say about you, Melissa, and I would love to chat, but I think it’s best if I get right to the point.” A glow of perspiration shown on his forehead, though it was a cool day. “But what I have to tell you is of a private nature. I suggest we get out of here and go for a walk.”

“Well, ah...I’m not really comfortable doing that,” said Melissa. “Let’s stay here, please.”

“Okay,” said Antonio. He briefly glanced at a couple seated nearby. “I don’t want to alarm you, Melissa, but I don’t know of a gentle way to put this. I...I believe I am your father.”

“What?” Melissa yelled in a muffled tone. The couple turned and stared. Her face was flush and her knees shook. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Are you crazy? My father lives in L.A. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Please hear me out, Melissa.”

“No, you listen to me. Not that it’s any of your business, but my father told me when I was conceived. It was on October 23rd, 1979, the night before my mother left for New York to attend an exhibit of her paintings. When she returned she found out she was pregnant with me? I don’t even know why I’m telling you this. Who are you, anyway? What do you really want?”

The couple stared again, as did a young man who had arrived with his laptop. Antonio spoke softly. “Melissa, I was the manager of the gallery where your mother’s paintings were exhibited. I met her on October 25th, 1979. And without going into detail, I have reason to believe that you were conceived that night.”

“No way!” said Melissa. “My mother never cheated on my father and certainly not on a one night stand like that.” Shortly before her death Melissa’s mother had told her she’d had an affair long ago, and that maybe she should have married that man, instead of living out her life alone after divorcing Melissa’s father. That man must have been Antonio, thought Melissa.

“Well, I have to tell you, Melissa. It was not a one night stand. There were many other nights like that. I loved your mother very much. I thought when she divorced your father she would marry me, but she wouldn’t. She told me

when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Then I heard from a business associate she had died. I was devastated, and I flew to L.A. last year for her funeral.” When he mentioned the funeral, a vague image of a stranger sitting in the back penetrated Melissa’s consciousness. “That was the first time I saw you,” said Antonio, “and your image has haunted me ever since.”

“If you thought you were my father, why haven’t you ever contacted me?”

“I would have never done that while your mother was alive. She swore me to secrecy. I loved her too much to go against her wishes. And I’m certainly not so crass as to approach you with this at her funeral. I wanted to talk to you about this, but I didn’t know how to find you. My business associate that knew your mother didn’t know where you lived. I talked to a private investigator about how to find you, searched the internet and did some other things to no avail, and then I met Brad.” The couple leaned toward Melissa and Antonio’s table. The young man closed his laptop.

“How in the world did my name come up between you and Brad?” Melissa asked.

“We were putting together an exhibition in Santa Monica. We’d worked late and went around the corner from the gallery to have a drink. We chatted, and I asked him if he had a girl friend. He told me he had one, but she had moved to Boston. He mentioned your first name. I know Melissa is a fairly common name. I don’t know why, maybe fate, but I asked him your last name. When he said ‘Armstrong’, I literally gasped. Brad asked me what was wrong. So I told him what I’ve just told you. What I propose is that you give me several strands of your hair. That will be enough to have our DNA compared, and then we’ll know.”

“I can’t believe this,” said Melissa. “I’ll have to think about it.”

“Please, Melissa, we must know.”

“I have to go now, Antonio. I’ll call you when I make a decision.”

Melissa held back tears until she plopped down on her couch. When the tears stopped, thoughts raced through her mind like a runaway truck. If Antonio was telling the truth, her mother could not have known who her father was. The incidents were too close together. Should she send Antonio strands of her hair? Should she have her DNA compared with her dad’s and keep Antonio out of it for the time being? Could she have the tests done without her father finding out? What would she do if Antonio was her father? She tried to remember what Antonio looked like, but it didn’t matter, she thought. She looked exactly like her mother.

She called Brad. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me what Antonio wanted,” she said, without even saying hello. “That was cruel to let this stranger tell me he might be my father without any warning. You should have told me so I could have been ready for him and not so shocked.”

“I’m sorry Melissa, but I thought this should be between you and him. I had no idea telling him your name would create such a mess.”

“Yeah, I know. I don’t know what to do, Brad. I love Dad, whether he’s my father or not, and it might literally ruin his life if he finds out, not only that I’m not his daughter, but Mom was unfaithful to him early in their marriage. I could have

a DNA test of him and me done and leave Antonio out of it. I would do it without Dad's knowledge and decide later whether to tell him, if it turns out he isn't my father. Maybe it's enough if I know. Or maybe it's better if nobody knows."

"Melissa, I think you have to find out who your father is. You can't go through the rest of your life wondering. And if Walter is not your father, he has a right to know that. But, most important, if Antonio is your father, he has a right to know, and wouldn't you want to try to establish a relationship with him?"

"I don't know, Brad," said Melissa. "I'm not sure I care that much about Antonio." Brad nearly shouted, "How can you say that, Melissa? If he's your real father... I just think you couldn't live with yourself if you don't know the truth about such a basic thing as who your father is, when you have the opportunity to find out. And I don't think it would ruin your father's life. You and he would go on being close, like you said, whether or not he's your father. If Antonio is your father, I think you'd establish a relationship with him. He's smart and talented, and he seems very compassionate. Everybody would be a winner. But if you don't find out, you and Antonio, if he is your father, will both lose something important. If you find out he's not your father, nothing has changed."

"And if I don't find out, nothing has changed. I just know if it turns out Dad is not my father and he knows it, our relationship will never be the same. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Well, there's nothing more I can say," said Brad.

"Same here, so, I'll talk to you later, I guess, Brad. Good bye."

Melissa's dad called on Sunday. "I have good news, dear," he said. "I'm going to be coming to Boston on business in a couple weeks. I don't know my itinerary yet, but I'll let you know as soon as I know." She tried to sound normal. "Oh, Dad, that's wonderful." She had finally stopped calling him "Daddy." "We'll have a great time," she said. "I miss you."

During the next two weeks Melissa hoped that the answer to her dilemma would rise from the recesses of her brain and her heart and become clear. She prayed. She agonized. She rationalized. She even consulted a psychotherapist, but no clear answer presented itself. She couldn't sleep the night before her dad was to arrive. The morning was long, and she continued her mental debate.

She took the subway to Logan International. The clear, cool Boston fall afternoon contrasted with her befuddled mind. Her dad was at baggage claim standing at a carousel. Tears flooded her cheeks as she ran up and hugged him for a long time. "You've always been so emotional, Melissa, and you still are, I see. In that respect, you are your mother's daughter."

Melissa hugged him tighter. No, I'm your daughter, she thought. How could I ever tell you there's any doubt? I don't really want to know anything different either. Some things are better left unknown.

"I love you, Dad," she said. "I'm so glad you came." He lifted his suitcase off the carousel and towed it behind him. They walked out to the clear, cool Boston fall, arm in arm.

We Stand

Robert Mitchell

Patronicus stood on the crude stone wall, his cloak wrapped tightly about his body. He faced into the northern wind with trepidation, left arm strapped to his enameled shield, his right hand holding a long spear upon which he leaned.

He gazed out over the darkened moor, devoid of any foliage over six inches in height. He had made sure during the day that the area he patrolled had no concealment for the barbarians, because his life depended upon it.

At this section the wall was barely four feet high, though the merlons at various points gave a height of over six feet. He took shelter behind one. The chances that a barbarian arrow could reach across the hundred yards that separated the wall from the nearest concealment were small. Still, he had no intention of tempting providence.

Every night it seemed the Picts sent infiltrators across the moor, eager to slit the throat of unwary Romans. Just last week someone had gotten to poor old Falco, as a guard found him dead cold when the morning watch had changed.

Now, in the wee hours of the morning, a light fog was rising. The intermittent torches almost did more to conceal anyone approaching as to reveal them. Patronicus would not be caught unawares, his body buried in Britannia, instead of the family crypt far away in southern Italia.

Patronicus heard a subtle rustle. Sometimes wild animals crept through the moors at night. One must be sure that the sound from the darkness was an intruder, and not a hare sampling the new sprouts of grass. There it was again, he thought. Patronicus hunkered lower against the stone, his eyes peering over the landscape, seeking out a moving shadow that would portray the real danger of his guard duty this night.

For several minutes all was silence, not even a breeze to stir the few blades of grass that spread out before his vantage point. Then, he discerned a black shape moving against a slightly darker background, and something splintered against the rock a foot from his bronze helmet.

Patronicus screamed, "Alarm, alarm!" He saw other shapes moving in the dark expanse before him. "Sound the alarm! Light the fires!" Indeed, Patronicus stumbled ten yards down the wall, grabbed a burning torch, and lit the nearest fire. The oils rags burst into flames, and then the wood underneath caught almost immediately, casting a yellow light across the moor, revealing blades of grass, and hideously painted men who ran silently towards the wall by the dozens.

Other men were now shouting, fires being lit. Someone sounded the warning horn. The men of the local Centura were scrambling from their bunks in the wood huts. But, it would take time for them to arrive. Patronicus must buy some of that time.

He saw a dark shadow directly ahead. In the dim light it was a far cast for a spear, but he sent it flying anyway. He heard a scream and saw the figure crum-

ple and move no more. By some luck he must have made his mark.

Patronicus ran to the closest stock, grabbed another spear, saw a shape, aimed and cast. The running man didn't stop. He cast another, and then another. He heard many screams of pain around him now, other guards casting their spears into the darkness at the oncoming bodies.

"Archers! We need archers!" shouted Patronicus. Some were arriving, but he feared they would be too late. The Picts might breach the wall, and it would be hand-to-hand combat.

Then, he heard the hideous cries from the moor. The barbarians realized their attack was discovered, and hoped that fear would now replace the advantage of subterfuge and stealth. Perhaps it might in the common soldier, but Patronicus and the others in his tent group were Roman trained soldiers. There were no finer in the world.

Soon Patronicus proved that as a figure loomed in front of a crenal, a sword swinging towards his face. He raised his shield and fended off the blow, then drove his spear into the throat of his opponent. The man toppled backward, blood adding to the paint that already covered his body in odious patterns. Another Pict replaced him in moments, and he was again engaged in combat. This one was an excellent fighter, and knew well how to handle a sword.

But, Patronicus held him back, and as he engaged him, another guard came to assist, and reaching over the wall, thrust his shaft into the man's side. The Guard drew out the spear, red in the flickering light. The barbarian lay crumpled at the base of the wall.

"Thanks," said Patronicus, but the man was gone, down the line to help another.

The Centura had closed ranks, and were engaging the Picts at the wall. The barbarians screamed and died, sometimes literally throwing themselves onto their spear points and blades. And, then, it was over. No more attempted to cross the wall. A few figures scurried back across the moor to the woods beyond and disappeared into the darkness.

Patronicus leaned against the wall, panting, with bloody spear still grasped tightly in one hand. Rome had held, he thought. Hadrian's wall had held. And, as long as Roman will remained, Britannia would not fall to the barbarians of the night.

Sidewalks and Shadows

Roger A. Singer

Weak spirits,
Dry on empty
With shallow gaze,
Bitterly roam
Without direction,
Angry, defeated.

Concrete pathways
Pass beneath
Wandering feet
Like murky waters,
Slipping to gutters,
Draining, falling.

Overcast skies
Lay darkened
Like thick veils,
Pressing shadows
Hard as stone,
Walking, crying.

Skin Deep

John Ferguson

Blood poured from my arm as I walked through the emergency room doors. The white cotton towel that I had wrapped around my shoulder had fallen down in to a slump on my forearm; blood soaking into it created a twisted pattern of dark red and white. The plump dyed blond nurse behind the counter shrieked for help, as she jumped up from her comfortable overstuffed cloth chair. I could see her running around her counter as more help burst through the door heading for me. I had lost so much blood that all I could do was lean on the nearest bland green waiting room chair as the room became a dizzy vision.

I must have passed out, because I woke to orders being shrieked by a masked figure, and a flurry of activity around me. Masked people surrounded me, grabbing me and poking and prodding me with metal tools and needles. Some skinny woman saw that my eyes were open and attempted to talk to me but the only sounds that came from her mouth were mangled words. As the activity calmed down around me, people started leaving the room. A cold room, as hospitals always were, only a now unmasked doctor stood in front of me with a police officer standing next to him. Some large nurse was adjusting the heart monitor next to me when the cop started to speak.

"I'm Officer Phillips. Can you tell us what happened", he spoke staring straight at me.

I knew at that moment that I could not tell them the truth. I would never see the light of sanity again; a Thorazine drip would become a way of life if told them the events of the last week. I stared back at the cop, hoping this was all a dream and they would just disappear back into my mind.

Looking at the doctor with a puzzle, the doctor took his eyes off me, "He is much to traumatized, and he hasn't said a word since he walked into the ER. He may even be suffering from a trauma induced amnesia. Let him rest tonight and come back in the morning. You might get better results."

As they all filed out of the room, I was left alone in silence except for the constant beeping of the EKG machine. My arm hurt, not just a simple quiet hurt, it hurt like it had been ripped off and sewed back on. As I sat looking at the bare room, only the foot of the metal bed and EKG machine were visible. A small television hung on the wall. I still felt dizzy like I was about to hurl whatever I had left in my stomach. It was then that the same large nurse waddled back into the room. She wasn't tall, she was obese, not the kind of obese you get from having a kid or just not exercising but the kind of obese you get from grazing on a continuous stream of Ho-Hos and chocolate because you have no life to call your own.

"The doctor has ordered a regular schedule of morphine to keep you comfortable. He said you won't lose your arm, but you will have a scar," she said inserting a needle she had pulled from her coat pocket into the IV plug that I had been stuck with when I was passed out. "I had the kitchen bring you up some food also. You might be hungry by now. It should be here in a bit."

I said nothing; I just looked at her with empty eyes. I didn't want to respond.

I wanted to keep them in the dark as long as I could so I could figure out what to do about this mess.

As she checked the EKG machine and wondered out of the room, it started to all come back to me like a bad nightmare you wish you could forget. It started in the hot jungle of Guatemala, still a blur in my mind or was it the morphine starting to kick me in the head. I had traveled there when a discovery had been made deep in the jungle. An Incan city had been found buried by time and the forest; I was just a stupid college student working toward a doctorate in anthropology. The university offered to send me to the jungle because Incan culture was subject of my long awaited thesis. It was the whole, “use the graduate student to do the dirty work, so we don’t have to pay them” situation.

The trip into the jungle was like any horrible experience. The insects slowly ate you alive from the time you arrived until the time of your departure or they managed to consume you whichever came first. I spent a month in the Incan city, taking rolls of pictures, but no great finds were made. Before I knew it the trip was over and it was the last day, the porters were tired of being here despite the pay, they were ready to get back to their families as I was to get back to a comfortable bed and a hot shower. It was the last day that I found the cave, sitting off a hundred yards from the edge of the city; it was opened towards the city. Searching the cave turned up an empty hole in the ground until I discovered a passage going off to the right only twenty feet inside the entrance. As I entered what was to be the last chamber a great room opened up and was filled with evidence of civilization. The room was a simple room, filled with decorated walls of long forgotten words and symbols, which surrounded a hand carved stone table that sat in the center of the room. Four pillars rose from the floor at equal distances about five feet from each corner of the stone table. Notches had been carved into the pillars in a circular pattern around the pillars along the circumference of the pillar half way up the pillar. Worn spots could be seen on the pillars and on the table as though this room had been used often.

Images of some being had been carved onto the walls in the spaces left without words and symbols. A simple image of a short hairy creature which looked like someone had drawn from a science fiction comic book. An ugly creature that gave an air of familiarity as well as cuteness as it was shown in many different positions around the walls of the cave room. Walking around the room twice I marveled at the simple layout of the images on the walls, I finally remembered I was holding a camera. I shot the rest of the film I had brought on the trip. Making sure the location was entered into my GPS as the jungle has a way of hiding things quickly I set off towards home. I was glad to finally be off the insect’s menu.

I dropped off the film to be developed on the way home from the airport. Lisa, the cute little redhead at the photo center was coming on to me like a banshee out to rape her victim. She was only a freshman at the university, twenty and full of life she demanded a lot of attention. She had an unusual attraction to me, I was too tired for her games tonight, and she pouted a bit at being too tired for wild sex.

“Are you sure you’re too tired tonight? I could help you relax...” Lisa said lean-

ing over the counter and grabbing my left hand. Pulling me towards her she put my hand on her right breast and squeezed it, I could feel the heat coming off of her.

"Tomorrow night. I already feel like I have been consumed enough this month. Give me one night in a bed without being continuously munched on by insects and you can come over tomorrow night," I said pulling my hand back and giving her a smile of lust. It was hard to turn her down this time. A month without sex and being eaten alive does take its toll on a man.

I didn't even unpack. Shower then bed. I was tired. It was two o'clock in the afternoon when I woke up. Fourteen hours of sleep will either make you feel great or like someone has worked you over with a baseball bat. Crawling out of bed I slowly made my way to a hot shower to ease the muscles of my back and legs. It wasn't long after that and a bite to eat that I was at the photo center getting the prints. Lisa was already there in her little work uniform, smiling at me she came around the counter and gave me a big hug and deep kiss.

"I get off work around ten, I will be at your house by ten-thirty," she said with a smile as she gave me another kiss.

My arms around her narrow waist, she gave me another long kiss. It was hard to let go of her as she pulled away to get my prints.

"The prints turned out really good. You did much better on the lighting this time," Lisa voiced in the tone of a professional, as she got my prints.

She wouldn't hand my prints to me from across the counter, insisting on bringing them around for another hug and long kiss, "I'll see you at ten-thirty."

I headed to my office at the university, Dr. Paul Stevenson the professor that was over me in my research and my mentor for my doctorate wanted to see the prints as soon as I got back.

"These are all from the one cave", Dr. Stevenson asked as he thumbed through them from behind his large oak desk. The desk seemed overly large for such a small man. Almost fifty, his balding head and goatee fit him well for the role of a professor. He kept lowering and raising his head as his small bi-focal glasses looked over the photos.

"Yes", I replied holding back another yawn. I was still tired but I was on a schedule. I had to have my thesis finished by the end of this semester.

"You will need to include a selection of these with your paper," he mumbled as he stared at the photos, "Do you have any ideas as to the meaning behind the cave and drawings?"

"Not yet, so far it is looking like some type of sacrificial room. I have more research to do on it and I need to go back and look more into Incan legends. I should know more by the end of the week," I replied back thinking more about sleep and sex than I was a thesis.

"Come by Monday and let me know what you have found out. Don't mention your find to anyone right now. Your thesis will have a lot better impact if you bring forth the discovery and the thesis at the same time."

"Okay, that isn't a problem I won't have much time to talk to anyone about

it anyway. I'm running out of time to get finished so I will be staying on campus a lot in the next few months." With that I left. Dr. Stevenson was a good professor, but he had a dry personality like someone who was so burned out they just go through the motions of living.

On the way home I noticed they had opened up a new tattoo place just down the street from campus. I had been thinking of a tattoo for the longest time. It had become a college fad to get a tattoo in your senior year. I still couldn't decide what to get, the tattoo flash art that always hung on the walls was to standard.

"Pain Station", I mumbled to myself as I entered; a fitting name for a tattoo and piercing salon. It was a larger shop than most, lining the walls was thousands of tattoo designs. Centered in the room were two dark brown leather sofas. It was still early in the evening so the place was empty. Some skinny guy sat behind the counter at the back of the shop, some kind of gothic music filled the air with noise as I caught the smell of incense. As I approached the counter I noticed the guy was heavily tattooed and had several piercings. The black tank top he had on showed both of his arms and shoulders covered with tattoos. His long hair was back in a braided pony tail. Earrings lined each ear and flesh tunnels stretched out his ear lobes in a mutated fashion.

"Can I help you," he asked looking up from a catalog. A heavy gauge nose ring came into view, the ring must have been a double zero gauge. It reached down to his upper lip and moved as he spoke.

"I just got back into town and noticed this place had opened up. Thought I would check it out," I replied.

"My name is Rick," he replied with a smile and reaching out a hand. "Thinking about a tattoo or a piercing?"

"Paul," I said shaking his hand. "Actually I have been thinking about a tattoo. Haven't really decided what to get though, the art work I have looked at before in other shops just doesn't interest me."

"Have you thought about custom art work", Rick asked getting up from his stool. "We can draw up anything you might like and in any size."

"I heard custom art work is a lot more expensive than the stuff on the walls."

"Not really. It will run about the same, colors and design will affect the price much more. You can bring in designs in any format, we draw it up and you decide what changes and how big you want it, colors are your choice too."

It was then I knew what I wanted. The design I wanted would be unique, I even had it with me, providing part of the weight that was causing the strap of my back pack starting to cut into my shoulder. Sitting my backpack on the counter, I pulled out the photos from the cave. Flipping through to find a good one of the creature that had covered the walls, I pulled it out of the stack and handed it to Rick, "Can you draw up a tattoo of this?"

Rick looked over the photo, "You just want the figure in the middle, correct? Not any of the writing?"

"Yeah, just him," I replied stuffing the other photos back into my pack.

"No problem, how big do you want it? Do you want the same colors also?"

Rick asked.

“About five inches height, would that get a lot of detail,” I asked. “Same colors also, if possible.”

“Detailed wouldn’t be a problem at that size. I could probably match the colors pretty good.”

“How much would that run?”

“One hundred fifty,” Rick replied after a few seconds. “If you wanted it done today, I would cut you a deal and do it for one hundred even.”

“How long would it take?”

“About an hour or so”, Rick said looking at the photo again.

“Okay,” I replied with a smile. It was hard to pass up the bargain of a cheaper tattoo.

“Give me a few to draw this up and we will get started,” Rick said heading to the salon in the back room where all the tattooing was done.

Ninety minutes later and a hundred bucks lighter I left the Pain Station and headed home. My left arm hurt like it had been stung by a thousand hornets. Rick said the upper part of the arm was a less sensitive place to get a tattoo. I didn’t believe him, if it hurt this bad I shudder to think what more sensitive areas were like under the tattoo needle. Bandaged up, Rick gave me a long list of do’s and don’t’s for the next six weeks. I didn’t have time for the don’ts, I had a paper to get finished and sitting in an office on campus writing a thesis wasn’t on the “don’t” list.

I woke up from my nap in a startle, Lisa was standing over me undressing, “How did you get in?”

“You gave me a key last month right before you left silly,” Lisa said removing her top, “you didn’t want me to have to wait outside anymore if you got home late.”

Yeah, I had given her that key. A month in the jungle had caused it to slip my mind.

“What is the bandage for,” Lisa asked with a smile as she slid into bed next to me.

“I got a tattoo on the way home from campus,” I smiled starting to wake up.

“And you didn’t wait for me to go with you,” Lisa pouted, “I had been wanting to get one, didn’t want to go by myself. What did you get?”

“I got a tattoo from one of the photos I took. Rick, the guy at the tattoo place said to leave the bandage on until morning.”

Lisa pouted again, “Got a tattoo and I don’t even get to see it until morning. What makes you think I will be here in the morning,” Lisa started to smile again with a devilish look in her eyes.

“You will be if you want to see the tattoo,” I replied grinning back at her. Reaching out I pulled her close and gave her a deep kiss.

Morning came much too soon. I was on my way to campus again before I knew it. Lisa had already decided she was coming over again when she got off work. I had something to work towards today, at least something to keep me awake thinking.

Research on the cave was going slow. I had spent all day going through previous writings on the Incan culture. Nothing in the writings mentioned the creature. It was getting late; the clock on the library wall was already showing nine

thirty. Lisa would be at my house in an hour. Packing up I headed home with the goal of starting fresh in the morning.

Lisa was already at my place when I got there. The smell of food filled the apartment.

“Surprise,” Lisa shouted. “I brought Thai takeout.”

I smiled.

Walking over she gave me a big hug and deep kiss before she led me to the dining room to eat.

“I didn’t think you would eat at all today. You get so tied up in your work, you need to eat if you’re going to keep up with me,” she said giving a wicked smile.

“I’ve got to get this thesis done soon. Dr. Stevenson is going to get irate if it isn’t done by the end of this semester,” I said opening up a box of take out.

The night went quick. Lisa was in her normal take charge moods and led the way to the bedroom. I wasn’t catching up on my rest. Research all day, used like a whore all night, I shouldn’t complain though. Lisa was falling in love with me, and I was starting to feel things myself.

Morning came in the quick usual way it did yesterday. It wasn’t long before I was on the way to campus again. I hadn’t even paid much attention to the tattoo still fresh on my arm. Rick said I would get so used to it being there I would soon forget I have had one. He was right, but I didn’t think I would forget it this soon.

A quick stop by Dr. Stevenson’s office gave me a new path to follow in my research. He suggested I try looking in some of the older texts, even some general texts of magic, demons, and religions dealing with death. My research for the day still proved fruitless as the sun was starting to set. It wasn’t until I was walking back to my desk that I past a black book. I passed it and went on to my desk, but something told me to go back and find it again. A quick search of the aisle and the black book was in my hand. An abnormally heavy book, the cover was made from black leather. Inset on the cover and spine in gold letters was just one word, “Necrology.” Flipping open the book the pages were turning yellow with age. The printing date and author was not listed inside, the book went straight to a table of contents. Retiring to my desk, I started thumbing through the book. The book listed all manner of creatures, demons, and spirits, talking about the origins, how to call them, and how to banish them. It was starting to look like another one of those Grimore books used back in the Middle Ages for magic and witchcraft, when I found it. A hand drawn picture close to the end of the book, it was the figure I had found on the wall in the cave. I flipped back to the beginning of the chapter and started reading.

Let it be known to all, who ever calls forth Gurrot should make proper preparations. Those who do not shall become those preparations unless another means can be found to banish Gurrot back to his slumber.

After only the brief message in a broken middle ages English the rest of the

chapter faded off into the language of Latin. Not having time to decipher the Latin I took the book and decided to go home for the night. Grabbing up the rest of my stuff I noticed that the library was unusually quiet as closing time approached. The absence of people brought a silence that was deafening to the ears. My skin started to tingle as I felt a cold rush of air race down the main aisle. I decided to pick up my speed and get down stairs, as I did I saw movement down the aisles as I walked past them. The library attendants were already starting to turn off the up stairs lights as I reached the stairs. I turned and looked back down the main aisle and saw nothing but was sure I saw someone else moving on the floor.

As I reached the counter and checked out, the last of the people were heading out the main entrance. On my way out I mentioned to the attendant that I thought I saw someone else on the second floor as I was coming down. He said he would check it out and I headed for home.

Lisa was already at my apartment when I got home and greeted me as soon as I walked through the door.

“Hi stranger, I was wondering when you would get home,” Lisa said walking to the front door and giving me a hug and kiss. She had on only a larger purple night shirt with Snoopy on the front in a Joe Cool pose. “I’ll go order some pizza.” She walked away while she said it.

Sitting my backpack down by the sofa, “I’m going to go take a hot shower while we wait on the pizza.”

She just smiled back as I walked past her on the way to the shower; she was already ordering the pizza on her cell phone.

The night went very quick after the hot shower, a couple of pizzas, an hour of love making and I was sleeping with Lisa curled up naked next to me. I woke to the sound of something scraping on wood. Looking at the clock it was brightly showing 2:00 in the blue glow on the LEDs. The scraping sound continued, it sounded like it was coming from the front door, I got up. It must be the neighbor’s cat again, the cat would often want in here at my apartment if the neighbors had went to bed before they let him back in.

The scratching was getting louder as I reached the front door. Undoing the locks, I crack the door so the cat could walk in. It was only after a few seconds did I even look out the door to see where the cat was. Still half asleep I looked up and down the hall and didn’t see the cat anywhere. Convincing myself I must be dreaming I locked the door and headed back to bed.

During my shower the next morning I noticed that the tattoo was once again hurting. The skin around it had turned red.

“Rick,” I said approaching the counter at the tattoo parlor.

Rick looked up from the piercing jewelry he was putting in the glass case, “Hey Paul, what can I do for you today? Ready for another tattoo so soon?”

“No, I need you to look at the one I already have,” I said reaching the counter.

“Sure, lets go into the back room,” Rick said coming out from behind the counter.

Rick asked me to sit down in his chair while he put on some latex gloves,

“Ok, so what kind of trouble are we having?”

“It was fine until I woke up this morning, I noticed it was red and hurting,” I said sliding up my sleeve to expose the tattoo.

“It looks infected,” Rick said gingerly touching it with his gloved hand. “Have you been putting the antibiotics on it like I told you to do?”

“Yes, every morning,” I said.

Walking over to a cabinet, Rick pulled out a box, “Quit using the stuff I gave you and start putting this on your arm twice a day. It is another antibiotic but a lot stronger than what we normally use.”

“Ok,” I responded as I sat in the chair.

Rick opened up the box and took out the tube inside, “I’m going to put some on before you leave and then you should before you go to bed tonight and then twice a day for at least a week.”

As I left the Pain Station, the tattoo had begun a dull ache which grew in intensity as the day went on. I had managed to get the Latin in the “Necrology” book translated, but what I discovered had made little sense.

“See what I mean, Dr. Stevenson,” I asked not comfortable in the hard wooden chair the doctor had in his office for students.

“Yes, it shows that the Incans were involved in a lot more religious areas than previously thought,” Dr. Stevenson said thumbing through the translation.

“They must have believed heavily in this Gurrot to destroy the prisoners they had captured during conflicts they had with different groups throughout the region,” I commented trying to adjust to a comfortable position in the chair.

“They would tattoo their prisoners with an image of Gurrot and then they would release the prisoner to go back to their own homes. Then they would evoke Gurrot and he would hunt them like animals to dispatch them,” Dr. Stevenson replied reading as he spoke.

It wasn’t until now that I realized I was marked for death. The tattoo of Gurrot on my arm ached with the slow dull ache of infection, the flesh crawling beneath the tattoo in waves of pain.

“Yeah, it must have been horrible to know you were marked for death and it was only a matter of time,” I said thinking about the tattoo.

“It would give a feeling of dread and fear to them; then going home to their families knowing they it was only a matter of time before they would see their family member killed,” Dr. Stevenson said. “You think it would definitely give the whole tribe a second thought about attacking the Incans.”

“I need to get going, I hope to have the thesis done in a couple of weeks,” I said rubbing my hand over my shoulder where the tattoo was, the pain only intensified. The pain in my back from the chair didn’t help.

“Okay, bring the draft by when you get it finished and so I can check on it,” Dr. Stevenson said handing back the papers.

Leaving the office, I had the rest of the day to myself. Lisa was at her parents for the next couple of days. Rest and work was going to consume my time while she

was gone, Lisa would demand attention when she got back. As I headed to my office in the lab, my left arm began hurting more and more, the pain became unbearable at times. My office in the lab was nothing more than an empty broom closet, but the school had provided it with a small metal desk and chairs. It was quiet, that was the important part, not many students came onto that floor except in the mornings when labs were being held; so I would have it to myself the rest of the evening.

I must have been much more tired than I thought, raised my head from the cold metal surface of the desk when I heard a sound coming from the hall. My head still full of the dreams, my hands found my face to rub my eyes open. Jerking at the sound of a primordial hideous shriek emanating from the hall I ran for the door expecting to find someone in trouble. Nothing; the hallway was empty. Closing the door to the hall, I made my way back through the lab to my office. I was only halfway across the lab when another shriek emanated from the hall followed by the sound of glass breaking. I froze in the middle of the lab, turning around I could hear grunting and the tapping sound of clawed feet impacting the tile floor. Another shriek again sounded from the hallway as a pounding against the door shook the hinges and shaking the wall.

I went for the door that connected to the other lab; it had a door which leads out to the hallway. The door exited into the hallway around the corner from the other lab, I crept to the corner and peered around it, I saw a small figure standing at the door pounding at it with hairy fists, and it suddenly stopped and sniffed the air. Whirling around it saw me and started running down the hall in my direction. I turned and ran down the hall.

Running down the hall the solution to my problems presented itself with the added fear of being at the end of the hall; out of options save for only this one. The hall ended abruptly with a lab door on either side of the hall. Both labs belonged to the biology department. They both connected to each other by way of a freezer that had doors in both labs, used by professors in the summertime to help keep specimens in storage while still having easy classroom access, both doors could only be locked using a metal pin on the outside, since the doors were already inside locked classrooms the school saw no need to use padlocks on the metal freezer doors. My only chance to avoid becoming a victim was to try and trap Gurrot inside the freezer. Opening up one lab door I ran to the freezer and made sure the pin was pulled out, so it could be opened from inside the freezer. Coming back out of the lab I heard a shriek just down the hallway around the corner, he was coming, and I didn't have much time. Shutting the class room door, I opened the other one and ran to the freezer. Opening the door I could feel the cold air start to fill the room like a flood pouring over me. As I turned to go back to the hallway grunting could be heard just outside the classroom. I backed into the freezer pulling the door slightly closed and around the boxes left in the floor. Working my way to the other door I quietly pushed the latch to open the door. As the warm air from the class room started to pour into the crack another shriek was unleashed. This time it was coming from the class room I entered

the freezer from. Gurrot must be in there, I could hear grunting now coming from the classroom as I started to squeeze through the crack I had made in the other door. As the last of me stepped out of the freezer, a large clawed hand, dark brown and knobbed wrapped itself around the edge of the other door. As the hand began to pull the door open, a small figure came into view. It was the figure I had come to know as the figure I had seen on the cave wall, and searing in pain on my left shoulder; Gurrot. Gurrot came much more alive seeing me at the other end of the freezer and started running towards me. Before he could get to me I slammed the door shut and shoved the pin into the door handle to lock it. The door began to shake as Gurrot reach the door; his large hands began to pound against it. I ran for the hallway as a shriek was let out, running into the other classroom the pounding was louder, still coming from the freezer. I quietly went to the freezer as Gurrot let out another shriek. The pounding began once again in a fit of blood lust, as I slammed the freezer door shut and shoved in the pin to hold the door locked. The pounding quit abruptly as it began once again at the door I just closed. As Gurrot pounded against the door he let out another shriek, it was then I noticed the hinges on the door start to loosen. I ran.

Racing for home, my mind was fluttering with thoughts of terror and fear as I tried to formulate a plan to rid myself of this accursed tattoo before Gurrot tried to dispatch my life once again. My lungs were starting to burn and my ribs ached, but I was finally home. I tore through the apartment looking for anything that might aid me removing the tattoo, it wasn't long before I was looking at the only help I could find, staring back from the kitchen counter was a pack of gauze and tape from the first aid kit, the sharpest knife in the apartment a large butcher knife, and a small vise that uses a vacuum clamp to hold it in place. I grabbed a couple of white kitchen towels and threw them on the counter. As I stood there in the kitchen, still trying to catch my breath, a low and incessant shriek came from the distance. It could only mean Gurrot was free from the freezer, I didn't have much time. Surveying the tools before me, it hit me that I didn't have anything to burn the tattoo in once it was removed. Reached into the cabinet above me, I retrieved a large stainless steel mixing bowl, and below the sink the charcoal lighter fuel I kept for the grill and a lighter. Once again in the distance that incessant shriek could be heard, but only this time it was growing closer. The book said that once the tattoo was destroyed Gurrot would return to his slumber. I looked at the large butcher knife the memories poured back into my mind of all the times I have used it to cut meat, now I use it once again but yet unique purpose. I pulled my shirt off letting it drop to the floor; the tattoo was hurting like a hot branding iron had been stuck to my shoulder. I set the vise up and actuated the vacuum so the vise was sitting on the edge of the counter. Picking up the knife in my right hand I sat the blade just above the tattoo on my left shoulder, just then another shriek filled the air, Gurrot was almost here, the bringer of death is coming for me. Fear, pain, and terror filled my mind as I began to slide the knife back and forth cutting into my skin. As a flap of skin grew larger as I slide the knife back and forth the blood began to pour from the

wound. A sweet smell filled the room, despite the pain I continued to cut back and forth, I soon had to lay the knife down. Just like cutting a layer of fat from a hunk of beef, the loose skin was causing problems with the cutting now. I laid the knife down and opened up the clamp, I leaned down and used my right had to slide the skin from the top of the tattoo into the vise. Carefully I closed the vise, I had to clamp it tight enough so it wouldn't pull out, sharp intense pain shot through my arm and I tightened the vise down on the still living flesh. The pain was so intense fear of passing out before I had finished rolled through my body and I began to shake. My right hand reaches for the knife once again, but my hands are shaking so bad that I had trouble gripping the knife. Pulling slightly against the vise the skin grew tight and I began to cut once again. The blood on the knife made for a thick lubrication as the knife slide back and forth. I jerk around when a shriek came from the hallway; he was here outside the door. I hurried to cut the rest of the tattoo loose, the pain grew worse with each slice. My mind reeled with pain and a faintness that comes when you have lost a lot of blood, fear poured over me that I might pass out before I could get the tattoo burned. My arm burned with a searing pain like I had been branded as I finished cutting the last of the skin loose, I grabbed the skin in my left hand and released it from the vise. A loud slam came against the front door as I threw the skin into the steel bowl. Dousing the skin with charcoal lighter fuel I threw in a match. The bowl came to life with fire and the fuel and skin started to burn. Another slam came to the door and a great howl and shriek filled the apartment. Gurrot was here, death has come for me. The apartment filled with the wretched smell of burning flesh, there was nothing left to do. I grabbed one of the white towels and wrapped it around my arm as tight as I could mangle. As the flesh in the bowl started to bubble and shrink the wails and slamming against the door increased in desperation, Gurrot knew what I was doing, he was trying to get to me before he lost his prey. Fibers of wood could be heard breaking with each slam against the door, and then it stopped. A black mass, that was all that was left in the bowl as the flames died down, then a long low shriek started in the hallway, as it grew the room started to vibrate and then silence.

I don't remember the walk to the emergency room; being only two blocks away I didn't see a point to call an ambulance. The yelling and people running around me seems only a bad memory now. The pain medication made me sleep a lot; I haven't seen Gurrot anymore. Since I am no longer marked for death all I can only assume is that Gurrot returned to his slumber. The only time I thought I was still being stalked was late, the second night I was in the hospital, when I awoke with warm wet lips pressed against mine, waking to Lisa's face, she scolded me for what I had done and asked why, but like with the police I avoid the subject. Lisa hasn't left my side since she got back from her parents, she moved into my apartment the same day I got out of the hospital. I finished my thesis and now work for the university as a professor in anthropology. I have never told anyone the reason I cut the tattoo from my arm, and I never will.

Vishnu Afternoon

Mark Scott

Before I went to Texas, I was one of the vice presidents at Sporting Arbitrage, which means I was more or less a traveling bookie. Two guys named Jesus were fighting in Austin, and the boss-man told me to bet ten thousand of his money on Chavez to beat Dejesus before the fifth round. No delays, no substitutions, he told me. A car dealer he knew would take all ten G's of his action.

I thought Jesus of Jesus would win or at least go ten, being way too fast and shifty to get knocked out. "He'll lose," Boss-man says. "His name is all wrong."

As far as names go, I actually knew a guy once named Richard Richardson. Don't people think? Anyway, it was my first time in Austin, and I stopped at a place called *Saritas*, that I thought was Tex-Mex but turned out to be Indian. The hostess gave me a menu and said her name was Indiresch, which sounded to me like some Commie goddess they worship in foreign countries and parts of California. I didn't hold that against her. That's the way I am—open minded. She looked mighty fine in those pajamas she was wearing, silk pants with yellow moons down by her calves. Her backside rippled under the silky fabric, as taut as a black leopard when she showed me to my chair.

That bet on Chavez was weighing on my mind as I ate a big plate of rice and lamb, covered in cream sauce. Damn, if I bet my way and lost it would be my ass. The hostess with the most-est was sashaying around, with all that long black hair and a red dot on her head. It was distracting me from my figuring.

To my right a table full of giggly young women, talking all college-smart about the *syllabus* over at the U of Texas, caught my eye while I was adding up the action I had on the early fights. All six girls had jet-black hair, dark brown skin and eyes, wearing blue jeans, cut-offs, flip flops and assorted skimpy garments. I stood to go get more food from the buffet and realized I had a raging hard-on like nothing since high school.

Indiresch saw my plight and came over to the rescue. "May I bring you another dish, sir?" Her teeth sparkled so white against her cherry-red lips that for a second I wondered if the food was doped to make me see colors that bright.

"Um, that would be great."

"I see you like our Indian lamb. Shall I get that for you?"

I mumbled a yes and she brought a plate filled high. "It's very tender," she said. "Are you in town on business?"

"Yeah, that's right, business." She asked me some stuff about how long was I in town, had I flown in... It felt good but a little funny to have a top notch gal chatting me up, like I was her colleague. It was funny on account of this was Texas, and I thought they were hicks, from what the Baltimore bookies said.

"Are you a salesman?" she asked. "I see that you have your accounts receivable book."

"I'm not exactly a salesman. Hey, would you like to sit down a while? It looks

like the lunch rush is over.”

We talked a while. I said, “Ma’am, I know that red dot on your head is a sign of religion and it may not be a proper thing for me to ask, but this evening—”

“Are you busy the rest of the afternoon?” She looked at my credit card. “Mr. Edward Mann?”

“Call me Eddie, Indiresch.”

She walked over to lock up the cash register, her flip-flops clapping and her dress swooshing around so I could see all the way up to Vishnu land. Me being a successful fight bookie, and on top of that my savvy of the finer things in life, people get surprised to know I’m a high-school drop-out. I keep my hair cut in a spiffy style and get a shoe-shine and manicure on a regular basis, so a lot of times the ladies think I’m a college man.

My uncle, the one from Detroit who got me into this business, drummed it into my head that keeping the book right is what separated a good betting establishment from one that’s broke or paying vig to a New York family. It wasn’t just the ledgers of who owed how much, it had details of the fighters, trainers, referees and all manner of things that go into a good “dope book,” as he called it. That afternoon the dope book was telling me to bet on Dejesus every way I looked at it.

“Day-Hay-Zooz?” Indiresch said. “How certain are you?”

“Pretty damned sure.”

“You are *too* tense, Eddie.”

On the way to her house she asked me if I knew about Carmen Sootra. I said I didn’t but I knew all about Carmen Basilio who twice fought fifteen rounds with Sugar Ray Robinson.

“No, Eddie, I mean *Kama Sutra*. It’s a book about love and sex. What are your thoughts on that?”

We drove through Austin and I couldn’t tell the hippies and students from the bums on the street. We were driving through swarms of all three when suddenly she pulled into the driveway of her little casita that had all manner of vegetation crawling over the sides and roof-top.

“Love and sex? I’m in favor of both.” I was getting more that way every minute—I’m here to tell you. On the shelves and coffee table were all manner of books, and I figured she would want to know how I opined on whatever topic was weighing on the mind of the nation. But she pulled out a big picture book instead.

“Well, Eddie, welcome to my humble abode.” Like I said, I keep my hair real nice and put a high-dollar cream in it, which is how I account for my success with the ladies. That plus my self-education efforts often as not have the ladies eating out of my hand. But Indiresch had taken a fancy to my belt and kept looking down there. It’s true I pay a little extra to get the best leather.

If you can put in your mind’s eye large-color-graphic cartoons having all kinds of wild sex, you’ll know what I looked at for the next half-hour or so. Indiresch had eased into my lap and started kissing me in such a gradual manner that I didn’t even think about us being buck-naked a short time later.

Often when you open a nice pretty package it doesn't look as good without the wrapping. That was not the Indiresch case at all. The mound surrounding the treasure downstairs was shining like blue-black jade. She used both hands to guide me, and let out a little yelp when it was all the way in. Her legs were strong and she directed the tempo until I came the first time. Without more than a couple of minutes in between, I was rolled onto my back, Indiresch like a jockey on a colt. She teased her outside with the head a while before she slid down and arched back to take it all in.

Twice in an hour was already a record for me, but she told me that anyone who knows the three Vishnus can be liberated from material entanglements. Just as she said it, she put her hand around where her mouth had just stopped for a break. I was having a good feeling about these Vishnus, you know what I'm saying? Man, I coulda gave up beef on the spot for the sake of any one of the Vishnus.

We were lying on the bed eating kus-kus or some kind of rice crispy bird food when her little brother the math whiz kid, professor in training, shows up. By the time the sun had receded in the west-Texas sky, he had me going with his exponential equations and all manner of things to convince me to bet on one-minus the probability of some crap, and the next thing I know I'm on my cell phone making the call.

Well, I ought not to have done that. No longer am I welcome in my home town or with my prior employer. But now Indiresch and I are coming up on page 23 of the Kama Sutra, and I'm told 23 is a prime number.

The Gate

Mel Waldman

I am lost and I wander through the Waste Land.
In the distance, I see The Gate. Perhaps, it is my exit
from this dark labyrinth which encircles me like a noose.

As I approach The Gate, I have 2 visions. I imagine 2
inscriptions over the majestic structure. The first one is
familiar, stolen from the dark Gate of Hell.

“Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.”

The second one says: “Welcome to Paradise!”

Weary, hungry, and thirsty, I approach the looming structure
of grandeur. Will I pass through The Gate alone? I rush slowly...!

Dead Cat Walking

Vickie Clasby

She ran with great speed down the slight incline of the gravel walk to the blacktop playground, her hair whipping behind her. Gaining velocity as she ran, she reckoned she was moving faster than her legs had ever carried her before. Beginning her third week at the new school, she felt invisible, like a specter moving among the other children who already had friends and did not seem to need another. "Oh, they'll notice me now!" was her last conscious thought as the toe of her well-worn saddle shoe caught the edge of the blacktop, starting the process which would end with her prone figure, ten feet from the edge of the playground, lying in a bloody, tangled mess of arms, legs, shoes, hair, and shame.

Lying on the unforgiving pavement, she slowly came to realize what had happened in that split second in which she had dared to dream. She was not dead, although in that moment she wished to be. She had merely hoped to be noticed, perhaps even admired for her speed, yet the eyes of her classmates appraised her from a distance like a dead cat on the side of the road, with no sympathy, only mild curiosity. The physical pain of her injuries had not yet registered, but the embarrassment enveloped her, stealing her breath and holding her pinned to the ground like a captive butterfly.

When she turned her head and angled her neck, she could see three boys pointing at her and laughing behind their hands. The one named Larry snorted loudly and said, "She looks retarded!" And the other two laughed as if this was the funniest statement they'd ever heard. Several girls in the crowd whispered to each other, but none came to her defense.

Realizing an offer of assistance was too much to hope for, she quickly took stock of her injuries. As she moved her legs around and sat up on the ground, she noticed her knees were both scraped beyond recognition, as were her elbows. The toe of one shoe was nearly destroyed, and the other shoe was missing entirely. Her chin was scraped, as were her palms, in addition to her knees and elbows, from apparently skidding several feet after touching down. She carefully rose to her feet and retrieved her shoe from its position near the edge of the blacktop where her hope of acceptance had been dashed. All eyes were on her, intensely watching her movements with as much interest as if the dead cat had risen and begun to walk.

Three quick blasts of the whistle signaled the end of recess. She smoothed her short skirt, pulled her damp hair out of her face, and began the long, lonely walk back to the building, trying to act as if she were not hurt when in fact she was destroyed. Her teacher, Mrs. Adkins, took one

look at her and sent her immediately to the nurse.

She spent the rest of the afternoon in the infirmary, enduring the painful extraction of the bits of asphalt from her wounds. Mrs. Frank, the school nurse, admittedly tired of the usual stomach aches and sore throats, attacked the job of cleaning her up with enthusiasm and a marked lack of compassion. By the end of the day, her wounds were professionally bandaged with soft, clean gauze which immediately began to turn red as her scrapes continued to bleed.

When the bus rider bell rang, she slowly made her way to the front of the school with the throng, painfully mounted the steps onto the bus, and sat alone like a leper. Her wounds throbbed with every beat of her heart. At home that evening, her mother mourned the loss of the saddle shoes.

Later that week, her mother announced the family was moving, again, for the second time that year. Another school in another town. Another playground, another chance.

For the first time in her short life, she was not upset.

An Abstract

Mike Amado

The functional units of the renal organ
Exploded in a death-like rot. I lit the wick.
I held my breath, unraveling afghans in honor
Of the new life promised by Doctor Death . . .
Doctor, blow it out.
Is dis-ease that important
That I should auger bit my brain with fear
And "live" scarred to prove your point?

Too many wrecking balls
Clog the world with bombardment;
Business as usual: tearing down,
Never loyal to the macro,
Disobeying the micro -
Tangled flies amid death-web.
Holding back is auto-attack.

Gun goes off . . .

Off come the gloves,
I found my inner carpenter
And commissioned restoration -
Making the solution out of
Breaking the problem.
Vicious vistas of human viscousness
Are not what I see in wall-cracks . . .
Green valley floor expanding;
Extemporaneous flowering of
Yellow-like poppies,
Orange-like yellows, watered by pipes
Piping blood, pumping rain and White Light that
Foil the abnormal into fertile soil.
Serving the macro, obeying the micro -
An instrument trained like peripheral eye . . .

I

Stain,
Engage,
Release.

I'm here for my work;
My life's music . . . it's no Opera.
Does it matter not a Sonata?
Not an opus, but adhesions of a moment?
In three chords, the rebels' trinity,
A momentary collapse of reason.

Is one dis-ease more important
than another if both deliver poems
In death-throes?
No reason
Exists to say
That symptoms exist
More than I.

He had to be spitting every five seconds. His head just hung to the side, but he was perfectly conscious, because he would continue to spit, over and over, into the corner of the subway car. A small pool of saliva grew, glistening in the florescent light.

Clarence was becoming nauseous. He couldn't understand why people did that. It was their own spittle. Was it that horrible to have to swallow it? Then again, judging by the appearance of this guy, maybe it was. His clothes were torn and dirty. So was his face. He was slumped in his seat like a bag of trash. Who knew what kind of mucus was dripping down his throat. Finally, the train stopped at Wilson Avenue, and the bum made a great effort to lift himself up and stagger out of the car.

Clarence was all alone on the subway now. It felt to him as if he'd been riding it all night, although it really had only been about an hour. He lounged across his two seats, headphones in his ears, riding the train around the city. He had no where else to go. He couldn't go home. His mom would begin ragging on him again about the usual things, mostly his lack of a job. His girl had dumped him earlier in the month, for pretty much the same reason. His mooching just wasn't so cute anymore.

So now he sat here on the train, like he did so many nights. Looking over his sneakers at the passing world for something, anything interesting to come by. Maybe a subway seat wasn't the best place for sneakers that cost almost two hundred dollars but Clarence wouldn't dare wear anything less. Even on the subway, where he spent most of his time.

He searched the pockets of his leather jacket. He was hoping he had left a pack of cigarettes in there but unfortunately, he had used those up yesterday. He was miserable. He was hoping that somebody more exciting than the mucus man would step on just so he's have somebody to bum smokes off of. The train stopped at Hoffman Street. Nobody is ever on the platform of Hoffman Street. At least, not usually.

But this time, somebody caught his attention. It was a small, old man. He had to be ninety. It was cold out, but the man had no coat on. He was only dressed in old brown slacks and a thin button down shirt with suspenders. He was hunched over and, with his long nose and thinning hair, looked like some kind of funny bird that somebody dressed in their grandfather's clothes.

It wasn't the man that Clarence was watching, however. It was what he had with him. He was pushing onto the train the strangest case that he had ever seen. It was bigger than the old man himself. It rolled on three small wheels, though the man still had to budge it with all his strength. It was some sort of dark ruddy wood, black and worn in some areas. The case could've been as old as the man was. The seam ran down the entire side of the box as if it split to open, though one side was wider than the other side which was apparently the lid. It had several latches running down it, though no locks. Its shape was the strangest thing. It curved around and over itself, sort of like a big wooden "S" with an extra hump in the back.

Clarence couldn't imagine what was stored in there. Some kind of musical

instrument, maybe. The man wheeled it over to the corner and sat down in the seat next to it as the train closed its door and took off again.

He looked at the case and the man. The man stared at the floor.

“Hey.” Clarence called to the old man.

He sheepishly looked back.

“What’s the hell’s in that case ah yours?”

The old man grinned weakly.

“Oh, I don’t reveal what’s inside to just anyone.”

“Why not? What’s in there?”

The old man’s head shook a little bit. Clarence couldn’t tell if he was trying to laugh or not.

“Only certain people get to see what’s inside here.”

Clarence was starting to feel a little annoyed. Actually, he’d been annoyed all night and some old geezer treating him like a punk just wasn’t sitting too well.

“Oh yeah?” Clarence spoke though one side of his mouth, as he was making up his mind about what to do. “So, ah, whatever’s in that box, pretty valuable, huh?”

The old man looked at the box, then back at Clarence. His eyes couldn’t open wide enough for the boy to see his pupils. Just two dark slits, like on a mask.

“I suppose if you did look, you would find what’s inside to be valuable.”

“But ya ain’t gonna let me see.”

The man shook his head, still smiling.

“C’mon.”

“I’m afraid, you’re better off not looking in the box.”

Clarence nodded with a snort. “Okay, sure.”

The train continued through three more stops, though nobody else stepped on or off. Clarence looked at the clock on his cel phone. Pretty soon, the subway would shut down for the night. What a crummy night. Just this old creep and him, riding the rails. And that case, and whatever is so damn important that he can’t see.

It couldn’t be anything really valuable, Clarence reasoned. The strange shape wouldn’t allow it. It was doubtful he was keeping money in there. Gold? Jewelry? It was a specially made box. Something very strange had to be inside.

“Probably his dead wife” He thought to himself.

“No, he said I would find it valuable too. Maybe he’s just crazy”

Clarence snapped back to reality and looked at the old man. The case was slightly open. All the latches were undone and it was cracked open. Not enough for Clarence to see. The old man was peaking inside like he was checking the contents.

When he saw the boy watching him, he quickly closed it again.

“Okay, that’s it!”

Clarence hopped out of his seat and stomped over to the old man. The man lost his smile and backed up, blocking his body against the case.

“Alright, open it!”

“No.”

“I said open it, old man, or I’ll open yer skull.”

“I will not open it for you.”

“Get the fuck outta my way!”

Clarence swung his fist out, knocking the old man to the floor. Clarence looked down at him. Has struggled to move but wasn't too hurt. Just a little bit of blood pooled under his nose. Clarence felt sorry for a moment then shook it off.

“You'll regret this.” The old man yelled to him. His voice was scratching by the attempt to speak with some volume.

“Uh huh.” Clarence undid the two latches the old man had reset before he was approached. Clarence took the handle that was on the one side and flipped the case open.

And inside was nothing.

It was just an interior of the case, thickly padded with a grey velvet like material, though still matching the shape as the exterior.

Clarence relaxed, slowly turning back to the “crazy old-“

He clenched. There was a sharp pain in his leg. He looked down and saw the old man pulling an old empty syringe out of the back of his thigh.

“What the hell...are...you” Clarence felt woozy. His vision blurred. Suddenly, he was out.

He slumped into the seat that the old man previously occupied. The old man himself was on his feet now. He shuffled over and slowly but surly began pushing Clarence into the cavity of the case. He fit quite snug. His head slumped forward into the front curve while his hands were folded behind him to fit into the extra hump in the back. The old man positioned Clarence's knees forward, and pushed his lower legs up behind him so they could fit into the lower curve. When he was completely in, the old man shut the lid and reattached all the latches, making the case air tight. He saw that his stop was nearing. He pulled a few padlocks out of his pocket. They matched the bronze latches which he applied them to.

The train slowed down and the doors opened to the next platform. The old man struggled but once again was able to push the case, this time out of the train, leaving the subway car empty behind him.

And he was gone

Christian Ward

The answering machine clucks to the rhythm of her tapping foot, its red light shining into the photo album of her mind, snatching a scene:

Her standing in front of a cottage, hanging out a line of washing. A son inside, playing with his childhood.

The tick of a clock drags her back. A sheriff explains the situation in words bland like snow. Tapping her watch on the table doesn't make him reappear.

Tapping her wedding ring makes a dog come running. But it lost his scent a long time ago and wanders around, hungry for meat.

Anyone Worth Knowing

Farha Hasan

When I arrived the party had already started.

It was my first time in New York and I had spent my day checking out college campuses. My head was filled with graduate programs, admission requirements and application deadlines. Precariously I made my way from one end of the city to the other - trying not to get lost in the labyrinth of tunnels and matrices that was otherwise known as New York City's subway system.

That night, I arrived at her building flustered and disoriented in *high heels* (which I never wear) and my best strapless dress. A rush of cold air hit my body as I walked into the lobby giving me goose bumps - making my skin feel wet and clammy. I have to admit I was quite nervous. It had been a long time since I had seen her. She had always remained a mystery to me.

The concierge in his stiff black suit contrasting dramatically with the ornate lobby reluctantly let me in (probably wondering how I got invited in the first place) as I reeked with the smell of 'eau de pauvre etudiant.' When I reached the penthouse it was Shabana herself that answered the door.

"Sidra, you're here," exclaimed my aunt.

The sober hallways had done little to suggest the spacious interior and I was left breathless as I entered a house of glass. For there were no walls but windows extending from the floor to the ceiling. I felt like I was floating above the water gazing at a city that was ablaze with the light of a thousand burning ambitions.

I smiled at my aunt taking in her image like a cool drink. I never knew she was so beautiful. Her smooth skin glistened like silk beneath her black halter top, and a thick black choker adorned her long elegant neck. Yes, my father's youngest sister had come a long way from the two bedroom apartment she occupied with eight siblings, on the wrong side of the tracks.

"We haven't thrown a party in ages, so you've arrived at the perfect time," said Shabana giving me a hug. I gave her a nervous smile wondering what everyone would think of me, hoping my pedestrian background would not emerge too quickly or too prominently.

The other guests were clustered around the room in herds casually grazing on the hors d'oeuvre being passed around by waiters - creamy artichoke and spinach tartlets, salmon wasabi skewers and citrus infused crab cakes. My mouth began to water. I must have looked as hungry as I felt because the next thing she said was, "You must be starving. Help yourself to the appetizers. The poached pear brie and stuffed oysters are to die for. There are also platters of sushi scattered about the room," she added signaling towards the help.

"Thanks," I said sampling one of each.

I had to admit she had done well. She looked perfect, everything looked per-

fect. Yet something nagged at the back of my mind, something I couldn't explain - a stiffness in her smile, a crinkle in the side of her eyes, a carefully concealed worry line. I began to wonder...*wasn't this the life she always wanted?*

"Come let me introduce you to everyone," said Shabana taking my arm and guiding me around the room. Shabana chit-chatted endlessly, with people of different ethnicities, accents and languages, occasionally pausing to ask me questions about relatives, when a flamboyant looking man caught my eye. Out of all the guests he seemed the most in his element, as if he were born to attend these parties. He smiled at my aunt as he saw us approach.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Funny, you should ask," she said. "That's one of my husband's oldest friends."

"Imran, have you met my niece Sidra?"

"No, I haven't. It's a pleasure," he said. Although he was clearly Pakistani I could detect traces of a British accent indicating that he was not born in this country like I was. Imran politely inquired about my research before turning his attention back to Shabana. They chuckled at some private joke and he gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"He's way more flirtatious when his wife not around," she said.

"Why... Doesn't he like her?" I inquired.

"Oh, he *does* like her, perhaps a little too much. You see Imran made the mistake of falling for someone a couple notches above him on the social ladder. Though, I think he's starting to regret it. *She never comes to these parties...* Now Imran spends much of his time trying to live up to his in-laws.

"Oh, how awful," I said.

"Don't feel too bad sweetheart, fortunately he's in hedge funds and he's raking it in," explained Shabana in the mater-of-fact-way you speak to a younger, slightly retarded sister.

In many ways Shabana *was* the sister I never had - *and the teenaged daughter my parents never bargained for*. She wore too much make-up, she smoked too much pot and she never did well in school... though she always had time for me and thus left an imprint on my life that was difficult to erase. I understood better than anyone why she craved excitement. The town she came from was as grey as steel and as devoid of glamour as the factories it was based around. My parents hoped she would give college a chance. She left the day after graduation, *she never came back*.

We never thought she'd make it in New York. About a month after she left, we got a kitschy postcard containing a cartoon of King Kong climbing up the empire state building, holding a buxom blonde in his hand and grinning slyly at the camera. She had signed with a modeling agency... *It sounded pretty sketchy*. They took all her money. She didn't get any auditions. If she hadn't been so broke she may have come home. Instead she ended up sharing an apartment with

six girls and waiting tables - we hoped she would be o.k.

In time she would be better than o.k. I would be sitting in front of the T.V. flipping through magazines (when I should've been doing my homework) and I'd come across a model that bared a striking resemblance to my aunt - wedged in between a beautiful blonde and a beautiful red head. Even though I was ten at the time I knew it was her. She had the same wild eyes - *like an animal that had been caged too long*. Those eyes would become her trademark and eventually launch her career when she became the face of a hot new cosmetics company.

Excited by my discovery I called my mother.

"Mom...mooomm." She could never hear me when she was in the kitchen.

"Mom, look," I said. "It's auntie."

My mom came out of the kitchen looking tired after putting in so many hours of overtime. She looked at the picture squinting a bit.

"Are you sure?" she said in disbelief.

"Oh my God it is her..." she said and now I could hear the disapproval in her voice and then it hit me, my aunt was in an ad for Hanes underwear - exposing skin was a big no, no in my traditional family.

I had not thought about that day in ages, not until I saw the woman on the balcony wearing the tight cocktail dress and oozing the glamour and confidence of an underwear model. She was surrounded by a group of people. Moving towards them I caught snippets of conversation. They were talking about a movie that I couldn't quite place, though I recognized the names of some well known producers and directors and that's when Shabana leaned over and whispered in my ear.

"She's had some pretty crappy parts in some really big movies, but it's enough to get her into all the Hollywood parties," and then said a little louder, "her last movie was with Robert Deniro." The woman looked up from her conversation giving me a dazzling smile, looking every bit the diva.

"Wow, you've met Robert Deniro?" I said. "I love his stuff. He's a legend."

"Bobby, he's great..." The woman replied nonchalantly, "love working with him. Come down to the set sweetie, I'll show you around sometime."

I smiled and looked at my aunt. Shabana did not seem impressed. There was something about the way two women interacted that made me wonder if they were really friends. As a child I had memorized all of Shabana's looks and gestures. I still recognized a few. Shabana gave her that frozen plastic smile she saved for irritating relatives. The woman also addressed my aunt coolly but Shabana seemed unfazed. The anxiousness of her youth had solidified into something that resembled confidence and resignation.

I suspect now that the many writers, academics and playwrights invited that day were largely for my benefit though they seemed to pale in comparison to the Hollywood types. Shabana, though she never cared for education herself always did what she could to encourage mine, taking me around making sure that I was

introduced to those affiliated with Columbia or Princeton or NYU.

"Sidra, honey," she would say Shabana. "Since you're checking out grad schools, you should definitely meet Anne." She's a professor at Columbia. You've got to tell her about your interests."

Shabana would be right. Anne would be exactly the type of person I needed to talk to and I was about to go thank Shabana for introducing us when I bumped into a very elegant looking woman.

"Oops I didn't see you," I said.

"That's alright," she said coolly while she dusted off her designer outfit that prominently displayed labels from head to toe. I had noticed her and her husband mingling; they seemed to be best friends with just about everyone here. They were both obviously glamed up for the party, especially the woman – heavily make-uped and heavily jeweled. I gave the woman one of my sweetest smiles but she walked off unimpressed.

"That's Seema," said Shabana giving me a sympathetic look.

"She seems pretty stuck-up," I commented.

"She and her husband Sohail are huge yuppies. They spend a lot to keep up appearance but unfortunately they don't have the means to back it up."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean their luxury condo is rented, their high-end cars are leased. If they actually lived on what they could afford, I don't think they would be much better off than you."

"You definitely have an interesting group of friends – a little intimidating but nice all the same," I said.

Shabana took her time to respond. When she did her voice had more bitterness in it than I had anticipated.

"They're really more my husband's friends than people I associate with. Don't let them intimidate you... by the way, where is my other half? Oh, *there he is* in the corner talking to all the entrepreneurs and venture capitalist trying to pitch his next great idea."

I looked over to see a handsome man, a little understated in a discussion with a group of people. Although they hadn't interacted much during the party, when she looked at him I could tell, *she loved him... once.*

"He throws these parties because it's a good way to make money. He's the consummate social climber," then she added, "...and I'm his trusty sidekick, so don't feel bad if you don't always fit in sweetheart - *in many ways neither do I.*"

Pillow Talk, Excerpt From An American Poem

Joseph Reich

jason rabinowitz was real cute
all the girls had a crush on him

what's he doing now?

i think he was studying
to become a rabbi or monk

he may have gotten into drugs
he was one of those rich kids...

Uncle Milt's umbrella

Benjamin Green

Wouldn't you know it? The sun break was only a temporary reprieve from the rain that had been pelting the city for a couple of weeks. The gutters were struggling to drink it all down, but the leaves of fall choked their mouths, and created large pools of standing water.

Milton Berry didn't bring an umbrella this morning, because the sun was shining. Chalk it up to crazy optimism. It was only a light drizzle right now, but he was a couple miles from home, and the rain was getting heavier by the minute.

A DeSoto Firestreak drove by, throwing up twin roostertails of grey water. He managed to sidestep most of it, but some grit splashed across his trenchcoat. He had a brief urge to shake his fist at the offending driver, but realized it would be an empty gesture, at best. At least his suit hadn't gotten all messed up.

Then he heard the sounds of singing to his right. What made that unusual is he was walking past Restful Acres cemetery. Why would people want to sing in a graveyard? Especially in weather like this?

Still he was intrigued. The gate was wide open, and he went inside. To his amazement, there was a group clustered around the tombstones, and they were singing. He recognized it as 'The old rugged cross'.

His first impulse was to turn, and run out of there. This looked like serious lunacy. However, everyone looked so normal, and they all had umbrellas. Maybe there was a logical explanation for this behavior. Maybe they were having a memorial service for somebody that had just died.

Fortified in that justification, he marched over to see what was going on. They were singing 'Bringing in the sheaves' as he approached. "What's going on here? Are you having a memorial for somebody?"

They turned to look at him. Their stares were curious rather than hostile. A middle-aged woman approached. "No, sir. We came here to sing to the dead."

He looked at her as if she had just announced they drank blood. "Sing to the dead?"

She nodded. "Some people talk to their dead relatives. We decided that it would be nice to sing to them."

Milt thought it was crazy at first, but the more he thought about it, the more sense it made. At the worst, it was a harmless eccentricity.

The woman looked at him, and asked, "Would you be willing to join us?" Then she added, "You don't have an umbrella!" She handed him the one hanging on her arm. "Here. Use mine."

Now that he had it in his hands, he felt obliged to join them. It came in the nick of time. The drizzle thickened up into a misting that would have soaked anyone who was out for an extended period of time outside. It was turning into real rain, and was promising much worse.

He began singing with them, and found that he enjoyed it. The rain became a downpour, and they huddled even closer for protection against the elements. They sang familiar hymn after familiar hymn, and he began to think about his church attendance.

Since he'd been confirmed, he'd been rather lax about getting up to go on Sundays. Most of the time, it seemed like too much of a bother to make the effort. Maybe he ought to renew his commitment with his faith.

After exhausting his store of remembered hymns, the group stopped to introduce themselves. Milton found out that the middle-aged woman's name was Terri Adams. She said, "It was nice meeting you, Mr. Berry, but now we have to go."

He received a nasty shock when they all disappeared. He was singing in a cemetery full of ghosts! The thought caused chills to ripple down his spine. Then the thought occurred that it had not been such a loss after all.

A check of his watch revealed that he'd been at it for two hours. If he'd spent that much time engrossed in singing hymns, he must have gotten something out of it.

He had gained a renewal of a sense of purpose, and a recommitment to his faith. Plus, he now had an umbrella. It was a real nice one. Showed some real signs of craftsmanship. He wondered when Terri would come back for it.

The years went by. Kennedy was elected president, the country exploded with the Vietnam War, Watergate, Reagan was elected president, and the Berlin Wall fell. Of course, all during that time, Terri and her friends never came back, and she never came for her umbrella.

He was aware of the envious looks the kids, and later the grandkids cast upon it. He knew he would have to come up with an addendum to his will about who would get it, but he kept putting it off. He just didn't know who to give it to.

One night, he was lying down, and a blood vessel burst in his stomach. Because he was an octogenarian, sleep deepened into unconsciousness, spiraling down toward death. "Milton! Milton! Wake up!"

His eyes flew open, to see Terri smiling at him. "do you still have my umbrella?" He nodded. "Good. Go get it, then. It's time to go home."

He looked at her befuddled. "Home? I'm already home."

She smiled, and her face lit up with a beatific glow, which made her even more beautiful. "This isn't your home anymore. It's time to leave this vale of tears."

Milt turned around, and saw his shrunken form on the bed. It looked all wrinkled and used up, but he felt a powerful wave of nostalgia for it. He turned back toward her, and said, "I'm afraid. I don't want to die."

She rewarded him with another smile, and stroked his brow. He felt his fear melting away. "Now grab my umbrella, and let's be on our way."

Two days after the funeral, the grandkids were ransacking the house, looking for the umbrella, under the guise of cleaning out the house. Of course, it was nowhere to be found. The wife of one shrieked, "It has to be around here somewhere!" There was a soft titter, but nobody paid any attention.

The boy's skin was very pale. Arms turned down, thin strips of black wrapped around, mapping where the skin didn't meet. He was very handsome and Murmur was glad. It was so much more romantic when beautiful people died. The lips looked white, burned and raw. Her father said the boy vomited continuously from the bleach. Murmur wondered if it turned his blood white, spread, making all but the marks on his arms like snow.

"A waste of life," her father said. "Maybe he had talent too, Murmur."

Murmur was sure he did. It was always the saddest people who had talent. Her father was a coroner and sad most of the time, thought everybody died young. He named her Murmur when his wife was asleep from the drugs. Sometimes, she still was. Murmur's father believed it a very beautiful name, read a long time before it was the most fragile word in the English language.

Murmur felt she ought to be something because of her name. She wanted to do it quick too, before she got old and couldn't die young anymore. Dying wasn't so bad, she thought. Dying young was the most noble thing you could do. Gave people motivation. They wanted to do everything you didn't have time to.

Her father wasn't supposed to let people view someone they didn't know, but it was a dark night and no one alive was around.

"See," her father said. "See."

Murmur did see and was sad. The boy's eyes were open. Faded. The silver of the gurney stabbing lights in the pupils. She wondered if anything had been lost. What had been meant. The white made her skin feel tight, her father's hand on her shoulder a weight too close. The boy would give her dreams. Dreams she'd spend whole nights waking up from.

Falling into a dream was always an unpleasant sensation for Murmur. She'd often feared the real world would never return, leaving her floating somewhere with no up and down, no right and wrong, only hazy memories amounting to nothing. It was only when she woke up that the dream seemed preferable, easy and safe. It took her a few hours to resign herself again, to forget what relief she'd given up by opening her eyes.

"I wanted you to see the difference," her father said suddenly. The dark made everything sudden. "The difference between you."

Murmur's palm stretched over her heart like struts. Arms tingled cold, thin blue veins crossing and uncrossing, tendons sharp and white.

When she closed her eyes that night the boy was everywhere, sheets curled around her like thin strips of black.

"Murmur," her father called. "Murmur, wake up." The dark of his body deepened under the door, steps weighing the floor down. "You're okay, Murmur. Wake up."

It was all so familiar now. Her eyes had given up long ago, only touch and temperature within her grasp. She wondered suddenly, in the dark, why the boy

bothered drinking bleach. Why he let himself die twice, a redundancy of pain. It didn't take much for people to die. It never took much at all.

Her head nodded involuntarily at her father's entering, a sliver of light running across the bed, clutching the shadows of her shape. The mattress fell into its worn spaces, grooves of cotton like climbing holds.

It was all about waiting. Finding a focus that blurred the edges of her vision. The boy. A fresh snow fall sinking deep within him. Silver stretches of cold underneath the slashes of black. Eyes frozen, mirrors, lights flashing pale on the surface. It was all about waiting.

Murmur struggled, tangled in sheets like hands, feeling the rhythm of her heart under the skin. He was heavy and suffocating, moisture sliding down the veins of her arms. Hair jagged against her face, slicing smears of sweat across her forehead. The room inhaled and exhaled her father's heaving, a confederate, shutting out sounds, protecting the rest of the house. It wasn't over until his hand released her mouth, clammy and shaking. With her skin stretched tight, Murmur waited for the seam to break, maps forming in red and white, a legend tearing in her eyes. She was a Kirlian phantom, split in two.

Murmur watched the door close, the weight retreat, her body littered with fingerprints, depressions molded into her form. It was decided. She would give people dreams. Someday soon, a slab of white on a silver sheet, a map to see the difference. It didn't take much to die. It was all about waiting. Someday soon, a snow spreading through her, her father watching, the only one alive around. Murmur would give him dreams he couldn't wake up from.

Yes, yes, yes

Adam Graupe

I once knew a man who was unhappily married for twenty years.

They had two kids during the first two years of marriage. Things soured.

He did not want to pay child support and alimony so he waited, brooded, and planned.

The day came when the youngest child turned 18 and he filed the divorce papers.

Within a month he married a woman. She looked, behaved and even dressed identically to his ex wife.

We are all guilty of it, running from one problem to another our whole lives.

The judge asked him the usual questions "Yes, yes, yes" answered the groom "I do."

All A Boy Could Give

Bob Strother

It was only natural that Petrov Bashmet would love his mother. She had raised him by herself since he was three years old. When he was five, and asked about his father, she knelt and ruffled his silky blond hair.

“He went out for a pack of cigarettes,” she said. “He is still gone.”

They lived in a duplex just off Chicago’s Devon Avenue – a Russian neighborhood that was last in a line of immigrant communities stretching from west of the lake almost to Evanston.

Elena worked six days a week at Crawford Metals, a small manufacturer of wire newspaper racks and shelving. The work was hard and Petrov recognized the fatigue in his mother’s face every night when she came home. One morning he had cried and begged her not to go.

“It’s all right,” she said, smiling down at him. “I do it for love – my love for you. It’s all a mother can give.”

Over the years, he had returned that love as best he could, never once forgetting her birthday, Mother’s Day, Valentine’s or Christmas. She had lined the top of her clothes chest with his meager, heartfelt offerings – cards he’d made from construction paper, dried flowers, and dime store jewelry.

She bought a new dress for his high school graduation and had arrived in time to claim a seat on the front row. Seeing her face wet with tears of joy, his heart swelled with love and gratitude, and he almost cried as well.

Petrov met Denise a few weeks later while working the service counter at Burger Haven. She sidled up in ripped jeans and a cutoff tee top that revealed a small silver stud in her belly button.

“I’ll have a chocolate shake and small fries,” she said. Then, staring at his name tag, “You don’t really look like a Petrov, you know? I think I’ll call you Pete.” She winked and smiled, and he felt a sweet pain boil up from somewhere deep inside him.

At the movies that Saturday night, they sat on the back row and played a frenzied game of tactile tag that left them both hungry for more. Soon, Wednesday afternoons – Pete’s day off – became “their” day, and his bedroom, their trysting place.

Summer gave way to fall, and domestic manufacturing to cheaper off shore production. On a Wednesday afternoon in late September, Crawford Metals closed their doors forever.

The door to the duplex slammed shut and Pete’s heart almost stopped.

“Petrov,” his mother called out. “You finally get your wish. I will work no more.”

“Quick!” Pete said to Denise. “Get your clothes on!”

Denise had one foot in her jeans when Elena knocked softly, then opened Pete's bedroom door. "Petrov, are you sleeping?"

The older woman's face contorted with rage. "What is this? Who are you – you whore! What are you doing?" Elena rushed the girl, slapping at her wildly while Denise struggled into her clothes. "Get out! Get out of my house, you tramp!"

Denise escaped through the front door and the house became eerily quiet. Petrov could not meet his mother's eyes.

"It is not your fault," Elena said. "Men are weak – easily corrupted by women like that. Your father was the same." She sat down on the bed beside Petrov and took his hand in hers. "Do not worry. In time, you will find a pure love, someone who will love you as I do." She narrowed her eyes and turned toward the door. "Not like that one."

For two weeks, he left Denise messages that went unanswered. Finally, he waited on the sidewalk in front of her house until she came out.

"I'm sick without you," he said. "I have to see you."

Denise shook her head. "What's the point, Pete? Your mother hates me – thinks I'm a whore. That's not going to change. I can tell."

"But I want to be with you ... always."

"I love you, Pete, but..." She shrugged, then turned to go inside. At the top of the steps, she looked back and gave him a sad smile. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

The route home took him by McWhorter's, the dime store where he had so carefully sorted through dozens of bins to find his mother the perfect gift. He stopped briefly to look in the big plate glass window. After a moment, he went inside.

He opened the door to the duplex quietly. Since losing her job, his mother had taken to napping in the afternoon and he didn't want to wake her. The door to her bedroom stood open, and from the hallway, he heard the rhythmic sound of her breathing.

Elena struggled weakly when he placed the pillow over her face, but her efforts were short-lived. She *was* tired, Pete knew. His mother had worked hard all her life. She had lived for him ... and now she would die for him.

When it was over, he took a small, cut-glass brooch from his pocket and gently pinned it to her dress. He never forgot her special days and surely this was one of them.

He and Denise would be together now. How could they not? He had given up a mother's love for her. It was all a boy could give.

Untitled Haiku

Shaun Millard

Jumbled fiscal plans;
running her tongue along teeth,
flirting with such class.

Side Effects

J. Williams

Warning:

This drug may produce intense vomiting
Diarrhea, nausea, migraines,
Bone weakness, heart palpitations,
Blurred vision, dry mouth,
Sweating, nervousness,
Rectal itching, loss of hair, loss of smell,
Impotence sterilization,
Kidney infection and bloating
But you'd be rid of those
Annoying sleepless nights that you don't have now,
But you may develop later if you didn't take this pill twice daily.





down in the dirt

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