

RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

LOVE

March 2009

A Penny Dreadful for Nothing

~FOREWORD~

It is wrong to call this a new kind of venture. For, who amongst us has not woken from a hard night's drinking to discover, through a series of Post-It Notes and Twitter feeds, that we have joined rock bands or cults devoted to sand? Starting a web-based magazine is much the same: there is no choice but to charge along until your instrument snaps or your socks wear out.

My priest tells me I should relax into it and have fun. That is what RPM is all about. We want you to enjoy your time here and to keep coming back for more texty goodness. Don't hesitate to email editor@ruthlesspeoples.com to tell us what you like or what you feel could improve. We love to hear from you and we are honoured to adapt to your needs.

And so, with Love & Rockets,

The Editor

RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

~ABOUT RPM~

What do we have here, then?

You are holding the first edition of Ruthless Peoples Magazine, known to its devotees as RPM. RPM is for people who read.

If you can read this, RPM is for you.

RPM is a free, internet-distributed general fiction magazine. We are not tied to any particular genre. We believe that different themes and moods can thrive together in a handy, readable format, and that Story transcends time, environment and clothing.

Having said that, **please** do pay attention to the reader guidance at the start of each story: RPM writers are rugged sorts who can play a little rough sometimes. We will try to alert you to potentially disturbing elements.

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RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

~SUBMISSIONS~

What do we publish?

We consider:

- Short fiction of up to 3,500 words
- Series of up to 3,500 words per episode
- Flash fiction up to 1,000 words
- Poetry of up to 40 lines

But don't submit anything until you have read, learned and come to love our guidelines at www.ruthlesspeoples.com.

What do we pay and when?

Payment on publication.

We pay \$0.01/word for work **except**:

- Poetry gets a flat rate of \$5.00
- Flash fiction pieces between 500-1,000 words get \$10.00

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Webb's Work in the Sight of God

Laurie Paulsen

Localisation:

US English

Reader guidance:

This story contains graphic images and unique religious observance to which gentle readers may not wish to expose themselves.

Webb's hands were scarred, the skin having melted and healed many times over. Father Harrold at the center had explained the sight of them upset people, so he kept them covered whenever he left home. He smiled with a faraway look in his eyes as he fed his pink, smooth-tipped fingers—nails gone, nerves deadened—into his favorite woolen gloves. He was thinking of Heaven.

At the mailboxes in the foyer, Mrs Leevy, Webb's apartment manager, watched pigeons strut on the sidewalk. She stood in a fugue of cooking grease and cigarette smoke, her skin loose and her dark hair caught up in a stubby ponytail. She took hold of his sleeve as he edged past her.

"Morning, Webb." She tipped her thumb toward the cooing birds. "Think I need an exterminator." Her watery eyes flicked over him, her smile shaky.

Webb paused to think, following her thumb towards the pigeons.

"I don't mind them," he said.

"Oh well... maybe I could get one of those fake owls. You know? To scare them?"

She put a finger in her mouth and chewed on a ragged fingernail, waiting for him to answer. Webb felt she wanted something from him but didn't know what it was. He didn't meet her eye.

“You got work today? Catching the bus?”

He nodded twice and then turned away from her, pulling a woolen hat over his crew cut. He stepped from the foyer into the cool morning air outside. Despite the awkward conversation, he was still half in a dream. His gaze passed over the brownstones across the street, the lace curtains hanging in the small square windows, over the slender smokestacks stabbing at the low-hanging clouds. The morning breeze skimmed across his face as traffic swept past, rolling fumes behind. When he reached his bus stop, he leaned against the post and hummed to himself. He watched a few street birds float on the city's updrafts, dipping and circling each other, their chirps trailing in their wake. He did not have to wait long. The bus approached and slowed to a stop beside him. The door unfolded with a hiss, but Webb's attention had been captured by the exhaust fumes as they drifted on the air to be wiped out by passing traffic.

“Webb, you getting on, son?”

Webb looked up to the bus driver. He flexed his hands, the cheap wool tight against his skin, and pushed himself away from the post.

“Yeah. Thanks, Mr Hogan.”

Webb's work boots clomped up the metal steps to enter the bus.

Webb dropped coins into the meter and sank into the closest seat, letting his meaty shoulders slump. His glasses slid down his nose and he nudged them back up with his knuckle. They fell again and he let them be, wiping instead at the perspiration at his

temples. He caught sight of Mr Hogan's face in the passenger side mirror; the driver's expression was mainly neutral but the corners of his mouth were turned up with a glimmer of amusement. The two of them exchanged a nervous look, but then Hogan turned his eyes away to attend to his job. The bus doors closed and the engine roared. Webb's eyes drifted to the sudden puff of exhaust fumes and, within a few moments, the bus and its occupants rolled back into the flow of early morning traffic.

At the downtown metro center, Webb exited the bus and made his way to the Woolworth's on the corner of Main and Franklin. He grimaced at the sweat trickling down the sides of his face and under his collar. He could feel his short hair dampening under his hat. But what was worse was the stinging feeling in his hands. The nerves that remained reacted badly to salt, itching and burning with a will of their own, but he resisted the urge to take off his gloves. Those were the Rules. He did not question the Will of God. The Rites weeded out the unworthy, those who sought reward without Sacrifice.

Webb believed in Sacrifice.

He told himself to be grateful, and he was.

He stowed his sack lunch in his locker and hung his coat on the rack inside the employee break room. He punched his time card and lumbered through the first level of the department store, through sporting goods and menswear, toward the loading dock area behind the swinging doors. He always felt uncomfortable going through the public displays of merchandise. The boxed cologne, the cable-knit mohair sweaters, the fountain pens encased in pillows and satin; those were for others, not him. Webb accepted his place. Every day he reinforced God's Directives in his mind and blessed his fortunes, his tears of

gratitude burning behind his eyes, though he couldn't let them out. Not yet.

As he passed the cosmetics counter, he heard the department supervisor, Monica, working on one of her regular customers. Webb glanced over, but didn't pause to watch. He knew better than to attract Monica's attention.

"I wish you could see just how much larger your eyes look, Mrs Palmer," Monica chattered to a customer as he passed. Her slender arms extended over the counter as she applied eye shadow to the older woman's lids. She worked with short, swift strokes over the woman's face.

"Trust me," she said, her teeth showing behind her smile. "You'll look vibrant. And—lucky you! I'll throw in a free gift. Let me wrap all this up, and you'll be set."

Webb continued on, trying not to look or listen, his chest tight until he finally passed through the swing doors into the dock area, with its gray concrete floor and the empty metal beam ceilings.

He pushed through the swinging door and then sighed and loosened his shoulders. He eyed the stacks of boxes slated for delivery to the house wares department. His palms still tender, Webb opted for finishing the stack of invoices left from Friday's shift. He dug out the papers and he lost himself in his work, tapping manifest codes into the database, careful to hit the correct keys with his gloved fingers. Webb worked, a hunched gorilla in glasses, his lips moving as he read the numbers to himself.

A hand tapped him on the shoulder. He turned to see a set of sharp fingernails, lacquered to a deep blood red. He stared at them; they were very attractive under the fluorescent lights.

“Webb, didn’t you hear me?” said Monica. She flipped her hair in a frustrated gesture, her green eyes staring just past Webb’s left earlobe.

“Bags?”

Monica shifted her eyes to his, her look flat. “Yes. Gift bags. We need them. Take care of it.”

“Bags, right.”

“And don’t walk past my counter when you come in. Better still, stay off the shop floor altogether. Use the dock entrance.”

“Dock entrance. Right.”

She turned and walked off. Her hair bobbed up and down and her stiletto heels clacked on the concrete floor. He found himself mesmerized by the sound; it reminded him of bugs, of insects.

That’s what she is, Webb decided.

Her limbs were quick, her skirt suits trimmed her body into tight segments—thorax and abdomen—and her eyes were oversized and hard.

If she had the chance, she would kill me and eat me.

She snaps his head off with her mandibles. His glasses fly away and skate across the cement. His head rolls blind while she grips his shoulders and drinks from the font of gurgling blood at his neck.

He froze, a stab of fear lancing through his gut. God would disapprove mockery, even at Webb’s own expense. If he wanted to be God’s truest son, he would have to work hard to achieve it. He stilled his mind, saved his work on the computer, and slid off the hard stool. He walked sideways for a few steps, picking at the seat of his corduroys where a circle of his fleshy behind had fallen asleep.

That evening, after returning home, Webb removed his gloves. The fabric stuck on the scabs at first, then tore them open as he tugged. He stretched his healing scars, bending his fingers, slowing down at the tearing burns. He wiped at the fluid leaking from his healing wounds with a clean dish towel. Another trial he bore, and gladly.

He made a microwave dinner of macaroni and cheese and sat on the gold shag carpet in his living room. He leaned back against the wheezy sofa. Mrs Leevy had told him that the carpet was original. He remembered how proud she had been of it when she had given him the tour before he moved in. Webb hadn't offered an opinion; he had already decided to take the place. He had liked how tidy it was. The walls were all white, which reminded him of church, and he kept them bare, even though he stored several framed paintings of God in his closet. Webb had painted them. They leaned against each other, face to face so they could keep each other company in the dark. Webb selected one to come out each Saturday night to participate in the sermon. Tonight, one of the larger portraits was set against the sofa alongside him.

The painting's oranges and yellows lay in thick, mad clumping strokes, and toward the bottom of the canvas, reds. All swirled in a maelstrom of passion and vigor and longing, a bright white center glowing out from the weave of the canvas. The Voice came from there. It didn't always speak to him, but when it came, Webb would be nearly finished with that night's work, and close to passing out. If it was pleased, the Voice of God would praise Webb's constant faith, his vision and true heart.

Webb assembled his altar. He put the wide clay dish he'd fired in art class at the center. He brought out the box of wooden matches, the stained towel, the butter knife.

He looked at his hands. The scars, with their furious reds and redemptive pinks swirled across his fingers and palms, were mirrored in the painting next to them. Lines swooped in an intricate design, the grooves repeating across his skin, the colors adding depth and texture to the appearance of flames upon his flesh.

He picked up the lighter and flicked it on, holding it steady against the side of his other palm. He sucked in his breath as the heat sank into his hand, sharpened to a pinpoint stabbing as the layers of his skin scorched and then melted. Lights danced before his eyes. Before the side of his hand liquefied and dribbled from his tendons and bones, Webb set the lighter down and picked up the knife. He pressed the metal into his hand, guiding the bubbling wound with careful strokes. He spread his mortified skin like butter. Blood seeped through where it tore open; he tapped the towel against it, allowing a moment for absorption before continuing. He smiled now as he worked, marveling at his control, at the gifts God had given him. He had used to cry out.

When he finished his hands, he would begin working farther up his arms. God had a plan, he knew. Webb needed to prove himself worthy first, but when he did, God would reward him. This was sacrifice. Webb lifted his face to the ceiling, his eyes closed as he finished the benediction. He sighed, trembling love coursing through his body. He felt a little dizzy.

He smeared petroleum jelly over the fresh verse, his latest psalm, and tucked them into sandwich bags so he could clean his tools and return the canvas to the closet. He held each implement by its edges, reluctant to contaminate the blade of the knife or the wheel of the lighter with unsanctified thoughts of the mundane. He was getting better, but his focus still wavered after

his sermons. The power swept through him and fluttered his soul, even now. Each day, though, he came closer to achieving divine consciousness, pure with God's Will and Delight.

The springs creaked when Webb sat on the edge of his mattress. He folded his glasses and switched off the light. He lay in the dark and stared, opening his eyes as wide as he could to let in any stray energy lingering from the night's work. Webb didn't feel anything happen, but he settled with the feeling of satisfaction; it was a good sacrifice. He faded off to sleep. He dreamed.

The dingy blinds shuttering the small, square window tinged the morning light with gray. Dust motes hung sluggish in the cool air. His feet tangled, Webb awoke with a start and blinked at the alarm clock. Still early, he thought. He rubbed at his eyes with the inside of his elbow and tugged his feet from under the blanket, easing from the mattress with a sigh. He scuffed through the carpet to the bathroom, dressed, and stood at his kitchen counter for cereal. He felt a tremendous pressure in his head. Had he forgotten something? He felt like he'd been part of a miracle and then—

He remembered. God had visited him again while he had slept. God told him that while Webb was indeed His truest son, most worthy of His love and salvation, he was refusing to bear true Witness. God needed more from Webb. Until Webb corrected his error, He was aggrieved to report, He would not be attending any more sermons. Webb would worship alone.

"Oh," he whispered, as Revelation dawned. "Oh, oh. No."

Panic cut through Webb's veins. God's rebuke crushed over him, grinding down into his bones. He fell to his knees.

“Father, do not leave me alone again,” he whispered from beneath the pain, weeping twin rivers of mucus from his nose that mixed with his saliva and tears. He clasped his hands together as hard as he could, igniting fresh agony. “Spare me—I...cannot do this!”

Silence met his plea, and with it God’s request echoed in his mind: Webb needed to shepherd more lambs into the fold. The cereal forgotten, he watched the failing light bulb above him flicker, and an image flashed behind his eyelids.

Mrs Leevy. Mrs Leevy in her flowing, flowery dress. He saw a new painting underneath the searing and studied it in his mind’s eye. He would paint again tonight to seek guidance.

Then, a knock at the door.

“Webb? You home, dear?”

Webb startled. Mrs Leevy’s voice.

He wiped his face with a paper towel and stood, straightening his wrinkled shirt. His face felt hot, his eyes glassy. He walked to the door and pulled it open. Mrs Leevy stood in the morning sunshine, a heavy sweater draped over her spring dress. Her silhouette framed with golden light, she stood with her arms crossed, and her dark eyes soft.

“Did you hear all that shouting?” She craned her neck to peer inside Webb’s dim living room. “Sounded like it came from in here. Did you fall over? Are you alright?”

Webb planted one hand on the inside doorknob and the other flat against the wall, both just out of Mrs Leevy’s sight. He shook his head, looking at the orange flowers on the fabric of her dress. He used a lot of orange in his painting.

“Yeah, fine.” He nodded, forcing a brief smile onto his face. She watched his lips flatten in a self-conscious rictus and relaxed. Her own smile was easier, and stayed.

“Well, as long as you’re okay.” She smoothed her hair and waited, but Webb said nothing else. “I’ll bring you some cookies later?”

“That would be... nice.”

“Well, okay then. If you’re all right.”

They both nodded to each other and Webb closed the door. He locked it and peered through the peephole to make sure Mrs Leevy was leaving. Pain lanced behind his eyes as she departed.

A sign, he realised. This has got to be a sign.

Mrs Leevy was soon to be, like Webb, under God’s protection and guidance.

The timing of her visit, the blood orange of her dress, his earlier vision; Mrs Leevy was his first true test. He must bring her to God’s message, to her spiritual calling. Tonight he would paint for her, trusting his Faith to find a way to hers.

He went to his kitchen drawer and looked in.

He would need more knives.

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Let There Be Something Or Nothing

Tom Sykes

Localisation:

UK English

Reader guidance:

This travelogue set in Kuala Lumpur on the eve of the Millennium contains a distorted psychedelic reality. Vulnerable readers are urged to exercise discretion.

He is looking for the signs. All he needs to see are oddities or inconsistencies in the city he is so familiar with. Then he will know whether he is really the draughtsman of his own reality or a sketch in someone else's, some organising force or entity. Then he will have solved mankind's greatest mystery. The first day of the new millennium seems like a good time for it to happen. Let's test the predictions of a legion of oracles, druids and laudanum fops, see if they got anything right. And if some revelation is forthcoming then it might as well arrive on a blank slate, when there is a primal glow to every clock on every computer: 0:00, 01/01/00.

Will the signs be hidden behind the quotidian just to make things more interesting? Or will they be gaudily visible like the gold and green deities on pimped-up Delhi rickshaws? He has to be eagle-eyed.

Plotting some course must surely be inappropriate. Instead he trusts in his instinct which pulls him this way and that way like a rodeo bull. The destinations smack of bipolar disorder. He

finds himself in the compulsive bustle of Pekeliling Station, rubbernecking bus drivers, and then suddenly he's getting off the LRT at a sloping, windless suburb in Jalan Petaling where he meditates on the crazed array of insect sounds. Wherever he goes he is surrounded by the melioristic skyline of rocketships licking the stratosphere.

He moves in grey-suited anonymity, fedora forbidding positive ID. It hasn't escaped him that today there might be other forces at work for whom the signs could spell profit or advantage. There might also be parties whose interest it is to preserve the status quo, to stop him detecting the explosive truth. Near-delirious by the time he reaches Chinatown, he ponders the Homelands Food Court and grabbing some pig's intestines on the fly. But there's no time for that. He stands outside a luridly overpriced bar listening to the sotto offbeats and crosswind melodies of the gamelan. Nothing unusual there.

A door with a sign reading NO SEX NAVIGATION PLEASE opens and he gets a waft of computer game white noise—crowd groans, gun cracks, wench squeals. The silicon god boxes to whom spotty acolytes prostrate themselves.

He notes down the first possibility: the roof-hugging rollercoaster in Time Square is out of order, a first as far as he can remember. What can that mean? Doesn't matter. The correct thing to do right now is to listen and absorb.

A blind man wearing a Bin Laden T-shirt sits beneath the Petronas Twin Towers, playing a kendang drum which, by the arid state of his cap, hasn't earned him a single sen.

Near there a huge screen shows trailers for US action films all starring people who look distinctly like nightclub bouncers. High above in the sky the trails of aeroplanes almost form

a cross but on second glance they are more crooked like a pair of scissors.

He joins a crowd near Maharajelela station to look at a brilliant aura that has formed around the sun. He is disappointed to be told that this is an optical effect of ice crystals in tropospheric clouds.

He wonders if the animals might know something. He once heard a spaced-out Dutchman talk on a relaxation CD about how whales have evolved a more complex language than humans and a more complete understanding of reality. In the zoo he studies the backs of cobras as they sleep coiled up in their tanks. He gazes and gazes but the psychedelic patterns don't strike him as the elaborate work of a prime mover. He doesn't feel like he is being drawn through the doors of perception.

An obvious destination—maybe too obvious—is the National Mosque. Might the old creeds and their talk of fate, divine intervention, providence and submission still have some relevance? He strolls between the precise, star-shaped fountains until he reaches the entrance. He has missed the public visiting time.

It is conveniently close to the National Museum of History where he muses over the succession of maps made by explorers who came to region over the years. This was a kind of reality-making of course, and usually to strict ideological spec. The early cartographers consciously downsized India and Africa. Those globes on European desktops were always for closet megalomaniacs—touch and spin your very own Earth!

A giant inflatable grouper fish promoting a cellphone company bobs along the roof of the new media plaza outside Bukit Bintang. Smaller fish, buoyed by helium, are released from the backs of transit vans and crowd together before taking leave

of the ground forever, probably to be found days later deflated and wrapped round the blade of a helicopter. Some referential tuning fork is struck deep inside him. Fish multiplying. The signs might be going old-school.

In another mall, he doesn't care which one because there are so many, he takes a translucent elevator which goes so fast his ears pop. From it he can see the operations of perhaps the greatest world religion playing out on a big screen. Sculpted shamen work their magic and conduct time-honoured rituals inducing ecstasy in the onlookers. He shoots, he scores!

There are peculiar shops selling weapons like nunchucks, silver-plated blowpipes and replica handguns. Traders offer him superhero T-shirts, military-style binoculars, belts, cigarette cases, intricate pen knives, scale models of the Very Important Towers.

An Indian guy seizes him by the hand, makes as if he is about to perform reflexology but instead studies his palm. "You will live long and be healthy," he says. He pauses and then adds, "Don't worry about questions that might not have answers."

He keeps on through the afternoon. His route ends up a formless scribble on the map: next up is Jalan Tamingsari, then a swing back to KTM Station, then southwest to the Lake Gardens, a radical swerve towards the Merdeka Stadium, on to Jalan Davis, Jalan Raja Chulan and then a leap back into the core of the city, back to Chinatown and the Colonial District. But it's just another normal day all around KL, with a pinch more excitement than usual given the festivities looming. Inner critics question his choice of location. Why not Angkor or Borobodur; some place sparkling with mystical tradition? But the new signs, if they are to be relevant to the modern mindset, are more likely to appear in a modern milieu.

Night creeps up slowly in this eternal summer, so there is always a long intermission before darkness proper. He sees the omnipotent shine of the golden arches—there must be a record number in this city—and the guiding star of a sportswear advert projected against an office block. There's the colonel beaming at him and him only: Maybe I have the answers, kid! Pizzas and footballs and chopsticks: the hieroglyphics of seduction. A neon terrain of leisure lifestyle designed by the West, adapted by the East and known by almost everyone on Earth. A small part of him is jealous of those who can submit to all this with blissful ignorance, those for whom cosmology ends at the supermarket till.

At five minutes to twelve he returns to his Chinese hotel where twosomes can rent rooms on an hourly basis. His quest to understand the signs forced him to change his life some time ago, to cut off the ties most normal people retain. Thus all week his phone has been beeping a symphony. Pleas by text message and mobile phone.

Where have you been call me and let's go out for a few drinks you seemed like you needed it last time I saw you which was a long time ago hu-llo? hu-llo? don't make me beg I just need to know you're OK that's all I'm not prying into yur private business I'm sure you have your own reasons your daughter needs to see you and you've skipped the last five weeks this is an important age for her she needs a father figure especially since we got the divorce son? son? I can't get to Giant to do my shopping son I need your help you know I do og hello sir can you please call me back at the office concerning taxes owed for the previous three financial years much appreciated sir be reasonable friend I know you'll say something like we don't live

in an age of reason but just meet me for ten minutes and we can sort this all out

He half-listens, half-cares. The messages are distant, unreal. They are petty trivia the rest of those numbskulls care so much about but don't realise the futility of: careers, money, families, relationships. These things will not be the decoys that throw him off the scent of the signs.

He wipes the dust off the mirror and is shocked by his changed physiognomy. The key features—lips, nose, chin—have lost their association with one another and appear scavenged from different heads. The eyes have expanded and reddened like a firebrand preacher's. The skin is the same though, its creamy ambiguity an outward reflection of the cultural slippage and identity confusion that set him on this chase in the first place.

He needs to relax himself, eject the tension of the day. He strips down to his underpants now so worn that one of his testicles hangs out of a big hole in them. He doesn't care. He passes a pythonesque shit into the toilet and admires its girth and length for some time.

While the TV counts down he masturbates to a mind-parade of women's faces. One of them is the assistant in his local 7/11, others include Bollywood actresses and even distant relatives. He comes on precisely the stroke of midnight as the fireworks are launched and the crowd goes untamed. The camera pulls back to show helicopters dropping powder paint in the colours of the national flag. People in the local dress of each state release balloons which are blown into an arcing pattern by the vagaries of the breeze.

Presently he slips into bed. He mustn't dwell on the day's happenings at all and risk importing his own opinions into this project. He will murder to dissect the truth of the signs which

will only appear to him on their own terms. He must listen and absorb.

But he has no choice when it comes to his dreams. Wheels of life spinning. Sacred pillars throbbing with significance. Arks and saints and sinners. A garuda with wings of fire eating a wild-eyed snake. Monkey tricksters. Deities manifested in all the elements.

The signs continue to elude him into the new year and he enters a dark period of fretting over how they will appear. He needs to experience a major miracle, or a major disaster, something he could never conceive of himself. He has to be shown things of such complexity and wonder that he couldn't have imagined them himself, couldn't have been the godhead behind it all. But it's a matter of interpretation; there have been plenty of miracles and disasters and things of complexity and wonder but which were the Real McCoy? Which could be taken down as evidence?

He starts to take out his frustrations on the unsuspecting. He makes a beast of himself. Back in that Chinatown food court he steals the tin from a beggar on crutches and sprints cackling into the night. He tells another beggar elsewhere that he can't give him one ringgit because he only carries fifty notes.

He hangs around outside hotels to meet tourists who are about to go trekking into the interior. He misinforms them that the indigenous people they will encounter don't speak Malay or English. He gives them a few phrases in an entirely made-up language of his own devising. A couple of days later the newspapers report on tourists thought to have lost their minds in remote villages talking gibberish and getting angry that the locals can't understand them.

The schadenfreude of this keeps him mildly entertained and his mind off the profound questions, the signs. But he is soon thinking about them again...

Ten months later he is sat in a bar watching an audacious act of violence against a symbol of Western prosperity. Alcohol has always produced one or other of two feelings in him: pathetic empathy or icy neutrality. Tonight it is neutrality. He is surprised that the terrorists didn't aim for a more populous target but then he suspects that that might not have been the point. A practical military victory was probably deemed less useful than a terrifying image, a sign....

His head zips back to the drummer beneath Petronas. Had that been a prediction and therefore a clue that he was looking out for the right things?

The years go by, bringing with them more potential signs. His spirits improve to a level where he now thinks he didn't waste all that time searching. There is more terror closer to home along the border with Thailand and in nearby Bali. An old schoolfriend loses his life in the latter incident. Then a cataclysm that could have been from the apocalyptic phase of a holy book—the tsunami that mercilessly sinks islands, drowns whole tribes.

He is sure he would never have conjured so much suffering if he controlled the universe. The human subject might interpret the external world with its cognitive models but that is something quite different to creating the external world from scratch. So much responsibility there! So he plays with the scary notion that maybe there is a higher power and it is irrational and barbaric. But the alternative theory is scarier: that irrationality and barbarism is the result of random chance.

That night he has the most vivid dream of his life. He watches himself roam an endless volcanic landscape. He calls out but only echoes answer him. He looks to the sky which is devoid of a sun, a moon or stars. Only a murky light allows him to see the scabrous ground underfoot. It is a sad, desperate place and he is compelled to cry desperately. His tears fall to the ground and become puddles which expand until they become lakes which in turn form tributaries and rivers. At the edges of the water he begins to sculpt the sand into little hills. They grow into vast mountains and craggy gorges and swooning valleys. He looks up again and now a sun has appeared and he feels warmth and the new world is illuminated in a rich range of colours. He urinates and the sky follows his lead, lavishing life-giving liquid upon the landscape. Crops sprout at an amazing speed as do herbs and flowers and trees. Soon there is a kingdom of animals.

Feeling wholly satisfied he watches himself turn slowly translucent like a failing hologram, until he disappears altogether in a shroud of steam. The steam disperses upward into the atmosphere.

The next day he decides to take his destiny into his own hands. He quits all his responsibilities in this city—not a difficult process—and travels to Java where the bus takes him through rutted slums with birdcages hanging from their barbed wire balconies, where laundry is drooped over power cables and babies sleep in hammocks made from old flags. There is an all-pervading smell of smoke.

The countryside beyond cheers him up a little with its dramatic scenes of workers gathering sticks from manure-blackened fields sustained by groaning irrigation machines set in stone circles. He thinks about how different this is to home, how there is so much variety in the world.

As soon as he gets to Bali he notices a better quality of light which shows off the lushness of the vegetation, organized vaguely by rows of canes and streaming white flags to ward off pests. People in straw hats fish in the marshy lagoons carved out by low tide movements. The gentle, stained-glass sea seems to be the backdrop wherever he goes, it is always the same, always there. With little or no regulation the traffic flows across bridges, down country lanes, along beachfronts. The vehicles nudge one another for pole position, a scooter sliding between a bemo and an oncoming farm truck, an old Mercedes cutting off a motorcade carrying Hindu youths in head bands. But there are no accidents, no hard feelings. Everything goes on. Everything is as it looks. Everything is as it should be.

He arrives at a new, good, simple life. He will work at a beachfront bar, drink beer, smoke ganja, swim, soak up the sun and not think. He will unclutter his mind of meaning. He will accept the reality of appearances. He will not long for things that aren't there, signs that may or may not exist.

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A Serenade to the Sunset

L. Burrow

Localisation:

US English

Reader guidance:

Family pet not alive at outset. Caution urged if beloved reader is grieving. Also, drug use is referred to. There are five (possibly six) swear words from a character in distress and a sex act.

“What’s the matter? Kitty Yum Yum’s not hungry?” My son Kwinton asks, spoon feeding asparagus tips with ready-mix hollandaise sauce to the carcass of the family pet. The green stringy mass sticks to the animal’s teeth then falls to the laminate bamboo flooring of the dining room. The child does not realize that the relative inanimate nature of the cat signifies its demise. Nevertheless, Kwinton squats upon the mess and force feeds Kitty Yum Yum until polyurethane seeps from the cat’s rear end.

It is a feverishly hot August evening in Tucson, and the central air conditioning is trying to maintain the room temperature to an even fifty degrees. I keep the windows open in an effort to rid the house of the stench without the complete and total loss of comfort. I actually prefer to feel the soft swirl of the heated breeze as it interfuses with the frigid air; oh, how they mingle in the vestibule, the hot and cold engaged in a womb with vaulted ceilings, afterbirth spills forth and washes over me. It is intoxicating, especially with hard liquor.

My glass of watermelon schnapps is half full; the pool in the backyard is half empty. I am drunk and debating the pros and cons of performing a swan dive into the shallow end. But I don't want to die because Death is already here, alive and well. If I am gone, who will sit in my easy chair? I want to live, even though I haven't slept in several nights and have grown rather testy.

My wife leans over, and whispers into my ear, "Bruce Atomson, tell him the truth."

"Cheryl, there's no nice way to say shut up, so shut up," I holler, then throw the table end over end for dramatic effect. Canned salmon and escalloped potatoes fly through the air.

"Don't fight," Kwinton cries. "Kitty Yum Yum hates it when you fight."

"Mommy and Daddy wouldn't fight if Daddy would tell the truth," my wife spouts.

"Daddy? What's the 'truth'?"

"A horrible thing," I say.

"Daddy, I don't want to know."

"Don't worry, son," I say soothingly, smoothing the fallen Mohawk from his eyes. I can hear him clicking his tongue ring against his teeth. He has written, 'HONKEY,' across his forehead with what I hope is brownie mix. I nearly choke. My little genius tries so hard. I don't have the heart to tell him that the 'e' was unnecessary. "I would never tell you the truth."

"Don't tell me then because you know I don't like horrible things," He demands while stomping his feet and hugging the cat's ragged remains. "Come on, Kitty Yum. It's time for television!"

"Bruce," my wife screams, "I am going downstairs to do laundry."

"Is that what you call it?"

“Yeah, Bruce,” she sneers, storming off into the basement. “That is what I call it.”

“Do what you got to do then, woman. But don’t you dare touch my darks.”

This is not me. Normally, I would never raise my voice at my wife. After five failed marriages, a man knows enough to know that a young lady (she’s twenty three and a third) needs to be allowed certain liberties, even though said liberties are quickly bankrupting us despite my Air Force officer’s pension and her candle-making corporation. So we have been forced to scale back. The *mahi-mahi* with mango chutney is now chunk white albacore with portion control packets of duck sauce lifted from local Chinese take-out eateries; the veal and tenderloin have turned into pony and horsemeat; the tiramisu has been replaced with Twinkies. The excess had grown too excessive. No more decadent dinner parties; no soirees in the backyard; no Ecstasy-fueled orgies around the hot tub. Not every meal deserves a dessert.

I pick up the paper plates from the floor. Flipping the table back over, I collapse the legs and place it in the corner of the living room next to the Christmas tree. I remember to plug in the lights. They blink off and on, off and on. I remove the disposable table cloth and take out the trash. The sun is setting over the sage brush. I whistle a bit then choke. It is beautiful; the promise of a new day. ‘Maintain, my friend,’ I think to myself.

After Kitty Yum Yum was hit by a car two weeks ago, my wife and I could not stand to tell Kwinton the truth about death. The cat lay out in the road for three days while we told Kwinton that Kitty Yum Yum was taking a long nap in the sun. When a neighbor called and threatened to turn us in to the community

commission, I went out with a shovel and a paper bag. I scraped Kitty Yum Yum's fur from the tar of the hot summer street. I nearly choked. I thought about telling Kwinton the truth, but when he met me at the door, I couldn't do it. He will be starting preschool in the fall, and my only child will have enough hardships to deal with. His personal style can be peculiar at times but always endearing. He wears his heart on his sleeve. Actually, I'm not sure whose heart it is. Having been afflicted with childhood morbid obesity (CMO), we try to keep his spirits high until a cure is found. Normally devout and God-fearing, I questioned the good Lord's divine plan for making my child big-boned and gelatinous. (Why, God? Why relegate the boy to a lifetime of cruel nicknames like lard ass or Gordo? Why not make him handsome with a chiseled physique, and well endowed to boot? Why must he suffer as I have suffered?) The truth neglected, Kwinton grabbed the bag, tore it open and gave Kitty Yum Yum a big hug.

Everything seemed to go well. Considering the cost of Kwinton's emotional distress and the price of outfitting another kitten with a tracking microchip, it was decided that Kitty Yum Yum could stay. Kwinton did not question the distended nature of the corpse. Nor did he notice that the rear legs of the animal had no doubt been nibbled off by coyotes. He didn't care that the stink caused Cheryl to wretch. Kwinton was blinded with the giddiness of friendship. I nearly choked.

"Time for a bath, young man," my wife purred, glad to see the boy happy but knowing that he desperately needed to be cleaned after squeezing the dead animal.

"Kitty Yum Yum, you came home for bath time!"

My wife argued that the cat was tired and needed a nap after his big adventure. Kwinton started to throw a fit, but I figured if

we were going to keep the corpse, it should have a bath as well. It took four rolls of paper towels to clean the tub, but seeing Kwinton and Kitty Yum Yum cuddled together took my breath away. Oh, the glee he must have felt having his best friend back.

After I put Kwinton and Kitty Yum Yum to bed, I went down into the basement and caught my wife screwing the washing machine. She put in a load, left the top open, dropped her panties then deftly mounted the agitator. I stood there aghast for ten minutes. During the spin cycle, she looked up and beckoned me to come closer. Leaning forward, she whispered in my ear, "Don't forget to use a fabric softener sheet." Hopping down and wiping herself with one of my dress socks, she ascended the stairs. By the time the laundry was done, she was in bed and asleep.

I put the wash in the dryer and drove down to the twenty-four hour home improvement store. I asked the project planner what I would need for a do-it-yourself taxidermy task. He suggested a five-gallon pail of polyurethane, two eight foot long two by fours, a box of finishing nails, a spool of twelve gauge copper wire, a hot glue gun, a sheet of half-inch thick CDX decking, a tube of caulk and a circular saw. Having only thirteen dollars and sixty-nine cents to my name, I put it all on my consumer credit card, and went home to prepare the pet.

Since then, I have been haunted by the ghost of Kitty Yum Yum. The evening after the preparation was complete, I awoke, or at least I thought I had, and there was Kitty Yum Yum sitting on the window sill. I wondered how he could have gotten out of Kwinton's room. I hadn't equipped him with the ability to walk. His joints were locked with rigor mortis and liquid nails. He did

have a hinge for a mouth and a motorized tail, but no mobility beyond that. Plus, this cat could talk.

“Bury me,” the cat stated. “I want a proper burial.”

“Now, Kitty Yum Yum, you know I can’t do that. Kwinton has grown rather attached to you and will not, absolutely will not, part with you. It is impossible.”

“Please. I am so cold, and I want to go to Kitty Cat heaven.”

“Now, Kitty Yum Yum, you know there is no such thing. In fact, I think you are being rather selfish. If he knew that you were dead, it is reasonable to conclude that he may question his own mortality. I can’t deal with that conversation. Also, it is quite apparent to me that you are done with the body, and now it is his.”

The apparition leapt from the window sill to the foot of the bed. The stitching in his ears was tattered and frayed. His tail twirled about with a whirl. His good eye was wet with tears; his bad eye hung loose from its socket. His fur was matted and a stream of clear fluid frothed from his lips. His voice changed from a soft, pleading squeak to a voice reminiscent of my father’s: a growl that demanded too much and stunk of cigarettes and whiskey.

“Listen here, you suburbanite piece of shit. Don’t talk to me like that fucking idiot child of yours. Go in there, get the body and bury it. Tell the moron that I ran away, or went on a cat vacation. If you don’t my soul will haunt you every night from here on out. Your days are numbered, rest assured. The end is near. They will come and take it all. And while you wander the wasteland in search of cheese doodles and cheap entertainment, I will follow. If you so much as nod off in the gutter, I will yowl. You will not be able to so much as shut your eyes without seeing me. Count on it, fucker. Count on it.”

“Now, now, Kitty Yum Yum, you don’t need to get fresh,” I laughed.

“Why don’t you go fuck yourself,” Kitty Yum Yum hissed, then removed his own head and threw it into my lap. I woke up screaming. Kwinton came to the door crying; his mascara was running. He and Kitty Yum Yum couldn’t sleep because of the blood-curdling screams.

“You can sleep in here, if you’re scared,” I whispered.

After Kwinton fell asleep, I carefully removed his arm from the neck of the carcass and carried Kitty Yum Yum downstairs. I set him on the counter and he watched me make a sandwich. Finishing my Spam on rye, I took the cat out to the garage and dipped him in the bucket of polyurethane. I set Kitty Yum Yum up on the work bench to dry. I thought about what he told me, about the coming of the end, and decided to take his advice. I went down in the basement to do a load of whites.

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The Arborist

John Biesecker

Localisation:

US English

Reader guidance:

The story contains swearing and sexuality.

“Why are we out here?” My words waft white in the frigid air as we walk through the trees. His response is his typical silent pause followed by brown spit into frozen weeds. Although I was born in the house behind these woods I feel no comfort of familiarity. Only cold.

“Pops, why did you bring me out here?” I continue. He hates it when I call him Pops.

“I planted a bunch of these when I was kid,” he says, as if stepping a couple of acorns and walnuts into the ground and walking away qualified as *planting*. “Couple o’ these trees got some kind of rot. I want to cut out what’s not right, keep it from spreading. We’ll get the low branches first.”

“Then why the ax and not a chainsaw?”

“Chainsaw’s busted. Besides, hard work is good for you. Makes a man out of you. “

Our crisp footfalls end before a small, twisted tree. The whorled trunk’s growth has been stunted; its straight and true

brethren tower over it. Most of the branches are dead and naked of bark, unevenly spread, reaching out at awkward angles.

“So why do I need the hard work, Pops?”

Again the silence and another brown projectile of tobacco residue. I pick a branch and swing the ax. It bites wood with a hollow thud.

“Just worried about ya.”

“Why?” As if I don’t know what’s on his mind. But let him say it!

“Well, you know. Since you moved to California, you’ve changed. You ain’t the same.”

I am the same. I’m just proud of it now.

“In what way?”

Another blow. I feel the pain of impact up my arms as chips fall to our feet.

“I don’t know about that whole music thing.” He has never thought of music as a proper hobby, much less a profession, but that isn’t what’s bothering him. I’m glad he’s uncomfortable; let him understand what it’s like to be uncomfortable in his own skin.

I pull back and strike again. The limb barely hangs on.

“Pam always thought you were doin’ drugs.” He continues.

Hell yes! Of course I do drugs. Probably no worse than his own six Pabst a night. And why does he care now? He was proud when the cops brought me home drunk at 14!

“And then there’s the Mohawk.”

Another hit. The limb falls to my feet. I pick it up, throw it aside, select the next target.

I had green hair even before I left. The old man’s still dancing around the point. He just can’t say it, the coward.

I should never have come back here. I never would have if Mom hadn't gotten sick.

The silence wedges cold between us before he mumbles:

"She said you're living with another man."

Ahhh, there it is, what truly bothers you. Took you long enough.

I attack another branch. It bites clean through. I rest on the ax handle.

"What's wrong with that Dad, if he makes me happy?"

"It ain't right."

Always such a great judge of right and wrong. Was it right to come home every night from the chocolate factory and ignore the wife and kid while he drank shit beer and puttered in the workshop? Did it ever make him happy?

"Aren't you happy that I'm happy?"

Again the silence. He scratches his beard while I deliberate further dismemberment of this pathetic, twisted little tree.

"Look. I just want you to have a normal life" he finally says. "I don't think it's healthy."

It's too late for that. *Now* I get his concern? That's not what bothers him. I know him. I take another hard swing. It provides no relief.

"You are my son. I don't want no son of mine growing up weird, is all."

"Don't want me growing up weird?" And there's the rub. *Afraid that it is some reflection of you? Maybe it is!* The anger that has been simmering all my life, suppressed but not forgotten, begins to sweat from my pores, driving the next cut deeply into soft wood.

"You know. Maybe more like your cousins, little more normal. Nothing wrong with that is there?"

His beloved nephews, truck driving football stars. Shining beacons of comparison all my life.

“Since when do you care?”

“Now what’s that supposed to mean? You are my son aren’t you? Can’t a Dad care about his son’s well being?”

I stop my swing and look at my father. Old beyond his years, hunched there, hands in his pockets. *Fucker! You start caring now? You never said shit my entire life!*

“You think there’s something wrong with me?”

Again silence as he looks at the tree, then at his shoes, says nothing.

“Well, Pops, whose... fucking... fault... is.. that?”

“Now don’t be blaming me for your problems.”

What the fuck? Did he forget? Because I didn’t. I can’t. I’ve tried to, pretended to, but never *have!* a man remembers being five. Remembers his father making him promise not to tell, to keep a secret, nothing wrong with what he just did with me, did *to me. Again.*

I had swallowed the truth, not for him or myself, but to spare my mother. But now she’s gone, the earth still brown and raw above her grave. So it doesn’t matter, does it?

And her last words to me: “I’m sorry”. Two tiny words that had destroyed what little I had left. All those years, and she had *known.*

I stare at the rotted trunk in front of me, barely able to see through the seething red that creeps into my vision. This tree is beyond salvation, beyond any possible efforts of the swinging blade.

I hate him for making me hate her!

Cut out what’s not right? Cut out the twisted? You created the twist!

His precious trees mock me with their strength, their solemn health, surrounding this decay before me. And he wants to save their perfection. Only loves perfection.

Anger overwhelms. I no longer care. I grip the ax tightly, trembling.

I look into his eyes, then step forward and unwind.

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My Friend, the Russian

Dominic Hamer

Localisation:

UK English

Reader guidance:

Story contains violence and criminal activity

“Checkmate in four moves, Gabrielle,” said Yuri Vasily, as he collected her Queen. It was a sunny day in Hyde Park. He sat back and wiped his thick Joe Stalin moustache with a monogrammed handkerchief. “I think you might have found your level. Why not walk away, leave it at that?”

Gabrielle eyed the pieces, projecting ahead. There were other games on the board, other moves; they hung in the air like wandering spirits, waiting to be reborn into something new. A form of defence could become a net to trap; a feint here unleashed an attack there... It had been bloody; a great many pawns lay dead at the wayside.

Two moves later, Gabrielle had won by catching Yuri’s own Queen out of position and strangling his King behind a defensive wall.

“How did you do that?” asked the Russian.

“I saw a ghost,” she said, looking him in the eye.

“It’s him, isn’t it? He’s making you do this tonight. That bastard policeman.”

“Language, Clare,” said Gabrielle, as she stroked sandwich filling back into place. Clare would need her lunch prepared for

school the next day, no matter their arguments. Tiny shards floated in the air: neither could breathe without hurting both themselves and the other. There was love of a kind between the woman and her not-quite foster daughter, but the nights when Gabrielle had to repay the Detective Inspector's kindness always brought out the sharp edges.

"Fine. But I'm not the one with my tits falling out. At least when Mum did it she needed to."

Clare walked off to the living room to play a loud game with shotguns and mutants. Gabrielle finished making up the sandwich and wrapped it in greaseproof paper.

On nights like this, the Words pressed hard against her lips, demanding to be said, but Gabrielle kept silent. What good would they do? Whose wounds would they heal?

Her apartment was expensive and well-appointed. Outside her living room window was Tower Bridge. A little to the left, passing in and out of view because of the fog on the river, Traitor's Gate.

Clare's psychological reports were clear. Defiant, intractable, too old for her years. Impossible and violent in school and care homes.

"She's bright and understimulated," Gabrielle had told 'Mindy', the social worker.

"You're twenty-eight and single," answered Mindy. "You're a lawyer with neither time, nor any childcare experience. Clare is twelve. It's a difficult age. There's no way you can meet her needs."

"She's much less trouble with me than with anyone else. I can't give up on her."

And when I look at her it's like I'm staring at a mirror.

“I’m sorry, Miss Harrier. That won’t be enough.”

And I may have killed her mother.

Gabrielle, whose own childhood records revealed her to be defiant, intractable, too old for her years, impossible and violent in school and care homes—had fought for a solution.

Detective Inspector Rank of the Metropolitan Police’s dirty tricks team had provided the answer. But the deal was causing too much trouble at home and Gabrielle needed leverage to adjust its terms. So, armed with a rumour, she had sought out the Russian.

“I can probably reduce the policeman’s influence. But it will be expensive. My own men take care of most of my needs. What do you offer me?”

“I heard something about a man Rank wants me to take down. Peter Anthropolous. If you used your own men against him, people would think it was true.”

For a moment it was as if the Russian was going to strike her—but then overruled the impulse and sat back.

“Whatever you heard is incorrect.”

“Of course.”

“But deliver him to me anyway.”

Gabrielle bundled the fat insurance claims handler, Petrous ‘Fat Greek Peter’ Anthropolous, into DI Rank’s unmarked Ford Focus. Anthropolous was insensible, drugged up with a mixture of alcohol and tranquilisers, and barely able to carry his own weight. Rank was angry. His pet gorilla, Detective Fields, lurked in the back seat, staring at Gabrielle’s breasts.

“I said a clean take-down, Gabrielle. That means loverboy gets taken ill shortly after entering the club, not after half an hour’s dancing and groping. It means cutting down the witnesses *before* you load him into my car.”

“He wasn’t drinking. I had to make him sweat.”

“Whatever. I’ve already had to pull the CCTV footage from the street cameras and I don’t like that kind of exposure.”

Fields taped up his victim’s mouth, put a bag over his head, then pushed him down behind the driver’s seat.

Rank started the Ford’s engine and looked off into the traffic. “Seatbelt, Gabrielle.”

Peter’s first crime had been to funnel over £13 million of his employers’ money to front companies he controlled by manipulating a legacy computer system that few understood. There was no way the insurance corporation could wait with that black hole on their balance sheets while the who-owns-what was argued out in court, so the company’s Special Re-Appropriations Team called in DI Rank.

As she had seduced him over the course of the preceding week, Gabrielle had come to understand Peter. A drifter, a dreamer, he had only lied to the computers at work to make himself real.

“I remember the 80s,” he had said on their first date. “All the money. The bigness of it all. Ever since I was a kid, I wanted a part of it.”

He was showing her around his townhouse. He collected signed photographs, signed guitars, signed objects d’art. Anything, it seemed to Gabrielle, to prove there were fingerprints upon the world. He took the signatures of others to show that he existed, that he was different from the ghosts of the city. The names themselves bore witness: as if they were love letters from the famous to himself.

Perhaps that was why forging cheques had come so naturally.

“Now you’re getting it,” said Gabrielle, raising a champagne glass.

“Yes,” he said, smiling amongst all the items he so adored. “I’m getting it.”

Things could have stopped at Rank’s intervention if Peter hadn’t fondled Yuri Vasily’s fourteen year old daughter in the courtyard of the Mafiosi’s Hampstead mansion.

Rank didn’t enter Peter’s house. He left the inventory and the boxing up to Gabrielle. A team of four from the insurance company’s Re-Appropriations Team—ex-military—did the lugging. It was an efficient process. Within two hours, everything Peter had owned came to be possessed by others. The money in his bank accounts was cleaned out just as it had been laundered in. A scan of a live thumb print did it all.

“We’re all done here, Miss,” said the last member of the team. They were in Peter’s bedroom. “Are you staying for anything?”

Gabrielle looked down on the fat, grossly hairy little man who was left dribbling on the hardwood floor, bound and naked.

“I was hoping he’d wake up.”

“No chance of that, Miss. Not for a while.”

Gabrielle nodded.

“I think I can promise Rank won’t treat you as his personal whore anymore.”

“That’s all I ask, Yuri.”

“Ach. Daughters are so much trouble, Gabrielle. You have no idea.”

Gabrielle had fulfilled all Rank’s instructions except one: she left Peter’s front door open.

When his body was found floating down the Thames a week later, there was no murder investigation: Rank came down hard on anyone looking into it. Witnesses in the club, the sudden request for CCTV footage, his car... too much could link back to him. Yuri's authority was restored: rumours that someone had interfered with his daughter in his own home were quashed, as if by some hidden hand.

Rank had Fields rough Gabrielle up a few nights after Peter's body was pulled from the river. She spat blood for an hour or two but it wasn't anything her dentist and Revlon couldn't fix.

Peace, of a kind, came to pass in the Tower Bridge apartment. Rank's jobs for her became more professional, less personal. Clare settled down to her homework, though she still fought at school when bored.

It was some time before she could meet her own eyes in a mirror and see what she had become: someone overlain with the dead ghosts of the future, and the once-living ghosts of the past. On top of that, the Words still pressed to be said.

Your mum died because bad people—the kind I deal with every day—wanted to hurt me by hurting her. It was my fault. I'm sorry. I promise I'll do anything to keep you safe.

But shifting the burden of truth would have been too easy. Gabrielle held her tongue, clenched her new teeth, went to work and waited for the next call from the dark side of the city.

The Newly Edited Man

Stewart Baker

Localisation:

US English

Reader guidance:

There is a little swearing and exploitation in this piece.

Sebastian typed in the last few words and clicked the button marked `SAVE PAGE` with a sense of accomplishment. Now his article was in Webipedia, he felt different: more important, more connected to the world. It made his Monday almost bearable.

“Sebastian Gough,” the article read, “is an American professor and the author of several non-fiction works on Arthurian legend.” It went on at length about the theories in his work and the critical response they had received. He had even put in some information about his childhood and personal life. All of it cited, too. Those fools at Webipedia had never said you couldn’t use personal communications as citations.

The alarm on his watch went off. It was time for his morning class: English 101, how incredibly dull. He got there five minutes late, ignored the students as he recited his lecture, and was back in his office as soon as it was over. Class today had been particularly vexing; one of the boys who always sat at the back of the class had been staring at his laptop screen and snickering loud enough for Sebastian to hear. Watching videos

on YouTube, no doubt. He'd made a point of embarrassing him in front of everybody.

Back at his desk, he checked his e-mail and was surprised to see a notification that somebody had changed his Wikipedia article. He clicked on the link and read it again.

About halfway through, some ignorant vandal had added the sentence "he is late for class and very boring dont take him if u can get sum1 else!" He clenched his teeth and went into the history page to see who had done it. There was no real name listed, only a nickname: *xXslurm1985Xx*. He went to the edit page to delete the slander—but then had a better idea.

He entered the words:

Dr. Gough has a reputation as a top-notch educator and is nominated regularly for 'funniest professor' at his university.

He threw in a bogus citation to a student review form and clicked the save button. That would teach the bastards.

A knock on his door made him jump. He closed the browser window and brought up some e-mails, opened a book on his desk and got out a pen.

"Come in."

The door was pushed open by a girl in a flip-flops and pajamas. He readied himself for yet another stupid question.

"Yes, can I help you?" Not that he really wanted to.

"Uh... Yeah. I didn't really get what you were talking about today with that Withering Heights stuff."

"*Wuthering* Heights," he said. "I can't say I'm surprised you didn't understand it. Sometimes I wonder how you people get past high school."

To his surprise, the student laughed and agreed with him. He was so nonplussed that he forgot his irritation and explained

what he had been talking about in class. She laughed at all his jokes, and thanked him for sharing his knowledge before she left.

Well, that was weird, he thought, then shrugged and went back to the Webipedia article. The words “funniest” and “knowledgeable” jumped off the page at him. It had to be a coincidence, but he’d never had a student act like that before. He decided to test it.

Under the “Awards and Recognition” section, he added:

Dr. Gough was recently awarded \$50,000 by the Modern Language Association for his dedication to preserving English literature.

He drew up another citation and saved the page, then logged in to his bank account and sure enough, his balance had changed.

He grinned. He wasn’t going to stick around in this dump any longer than he had to. He packed up his essentials—there wasn’t much—and locked the door behind him on the way out. He could go to a big-name university and become a major player in the world of academia. Harvard, Yale... the sky was the limit. *Hell, why not Oxford?*

Yes, Oxford! No longer would he have to deal with ignorance, with students who thought spelled Jane Austen’s name like she was a city in Texas. At Oxford he would be surrounded by genius. He would captain the rowing team—never mind that he didn’t know anything about it yet—and glory in the promise of youth. The only promise you’d get from the youth here was one to work at Burger Queen for the rest of their lives.

Still, he reflected as he walked to his car, his time here hadn’t been a total waste. If it wasn’t for the low admissions standards, he probably wouldn’t have become nearly as familiar with Webipedia. Every word out of his students’ mouths that wasn’t ‘Google’ or ‘YouTube’ was about the damn site. Some

had even tried to use it as a source for their work. He had relished failing them for it.

For all that he had loathed the site, he realized he would be a fool not to use it for publicity. He had decided to put his information in there and had spent a few days writing up the most comprehensive—and inflated—curriculum vitae he could come up with. At the time, his esteem had been as small as his system. *Anywhere, he'd thought, was better than here.*

He reached his car, an old Accord which had seen better days. The handle stuck as it always did and he had to struggle with it for a minute. Then he turned around, dug his Blackberry out of his briefcase, and connected to Webipedia.

I have a Lamborghini, he typed.

There was a slight 'pop' sound behind him, and he looked over his shoulder.

There she was, sporty red and gleaming new.

About damn time, he thought, slipping in to the bucket seat. The brown leather was wonderfully soothing, especially compared to the natty beige velour of his Accord. The color suited him a lot better too. He gunned it out of campus, enjoying the looks on people's faces as they noticed who was driving the sporty car.

Take a good long look, he gloated. *You won't see me in this backwoods institution again.*

He pulled out onto the highway, a route he usually avoided because his Accord could barely break forty. Tonight, though, he was in the mood to roll down the windows and feel the air blow past him as he pushed his new acquisition to the limit. He dodged and weaved, never lifting his foot from the pedal unless he absolutely had to. He laughed at the angry honks and raised

fingers. Even the inevitable patrol car which pulled him over didn't dampen his mood.

"Hello Officer," he said as he passed his license and registration over. He couldn't wipe the grin off his face. "There's not going to be a problem, is there?"

The cop didn't seem to view the situation in the same light. "Do you have any idea how fast you were going?"

"About a hundred, I'd guess."

"A hundred five, actually."

"That fast? Sorry, it's hard to tell when the needle goes past a hundred." His grin got bigger.

"I've half a mind to compound your car and see if you still think it's as funny."

Sebastian looked properly contrite and went through the motions, and the cop let him off with a 6-point reduction and a 500 dollar fine because he didn't have a previous record. Like he cared. Still, he took it a little easier the rest of the way home.

His newfound caution probably saved his life. He was about two miles from his exit when the car started vibrating from side to side as if a tire had burst. He fought with the wheel and managed to get onto the shoulder of the highway somehow. The engine started to emit loud popping noises, and he thought for one crazy second that it was going to explode.

When his heart stopped pounding, he realized that he was sitting behind the wheel of his Accord. What the hell had happened? He drove the rest of the way home and logged into Webipedia. No Lamborghini anywhere. He found the culprit in the history tab: "Vandalism: reverting to previous edit."

So: there was a limit, but maybe he could get around it. He clicked into his user profile and typed in:

My name is Sebastian Gough and I have three pet platypuses in a huge terrarium.

He had always been fascinated by platypuses.

There was a sudden change in the room's acoustics, and he turned around. Behind him was a tank which took up fully half the room, floor-to-ceiling. The lower half was filled with dirt, with a track of muddy water running through its centre. Two of the platypuses were swimming in the water, while the other was sniffing around some of the greenery lining the banks. He watched them for hours, fascinated.

In the morning, he realized he had no idea what they ate and edited them away again. In any case, they'd served their purpose. Now that he knew that edits to his user page had the same effect, he was unstoppable. He typed a few more words into it, picked up the phone, and dialed the Dean of English at Oxford.

The students at Oxford loved him, of course. The faculty too. He'd already made full professor but had to remove the words "driven and ambitious" from his profile when the Dean offered to retire so he could take over. Sebastian didn't want to be Dean—it was too much work by half. Besides, he had better things to do with his time.

On the flight over he had been playing around with his user page when inspiration struck. Why not become a writer? Why satisfy himself with teaching others' works when he could immortalize himself with his own? He'd immediately filled out his writing abilities. The novel he was writing now would be the most important ever written.

Between that and all the models he dated, he barely had time to prepare his classes. Webipedia saved the day there, too. "My

class materials are ready, and they are excellent.” were the magic words.

He was getting a little worried that the length of his user page would draw attention: all those little edits added up. He’d thought about periodically cleaning it, but he remembered the Lamborghini, the platypuses. What if he wiped out some vital event that had brought him to where he was? Who knew what the repercussions might be?

No, he thought. *Best to leave it.*

Besides, he was late for class. He sauntered in about five minutes late to find his students eagerly awaiting him. No surly football players or bimbos in pajamas here, that was for sure. He couldn’t have been happier with his students. They were alert, took good notes, and—most importantly—agreed with every word he said.

He tossed the expertly prepared lesson plan to one side and sat on the table next to the lectern. He felt like ad-libbing today.

“I know our syllabus says we’re leaving Mallory behind to discuss the myth of Arthur in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, but I want to spend just one more class talking about the meta-textual meanings in Morte’s treatment of Lancelot and Guinevere.”

A round of applause filled the air, and Sebastian basked. It was so nice to finally be appreciated, even if his students would obviously never understand him.

“Now,” he said, but was cut off by a leggy blond in the first row.

“Oh, Doctor Gough! I can’t take it any more! You have to let me come home with you tonight.”

He coughed, caught off guard. Being irresistible to women took some getting used to. He slipped her his card and winked before resuming the lecture.

“Now, as we all know, Mallory—”

“Oh, Doctor Gough!”

This time it was a petite Asian girl halfway up the auditorium seating. She was looking at him from behind her laptop. *A threesome tonight, then?* It was getting downright embarrassing. He’d have to tone down the page a bit after class.

“Oh Doctor Gough! It can’t be true! Please don’t let it be true!”

“Well, okay,” he said. “Since you insi—Wait. Can’t be true? What are you talking about?” His stomach suddenly dropped into his toes.

“You—you—you’re really a *eunuch*?” the student let out a wail and collapsed against her open laptop.

He was a what? Sebastian sprinted up to the girl’s seat.

Please, he thought, don’t let her be... Oh shit!

She was looking at Wikipedia. He scanned the page and there it was, plain as day.

Sebastian had both testicles removed at an early age due to an accident with an industrial paint-stripper.

“That’s ridiculous,” he scoffed. “I’ve never even used an industrial paint-stripper.” But on the last few words, there was a subtle change to his voice, and he knew with horror that something had changed. His body felt somehow different, as well, and... and...

They heard his scream all the way in the Bodleian.

He ran full-tilt to his office and slammed down in front of the computer. Who would do such a horrible thing? He checked

the history tab to find the answer: *xXslurm1985Xx* again. Sebastian was furious. One quick edit later, his body had returned to normal. He breathed a sigh of relief as he fondled his newly returned manhood.

“Thank God for that,” he said, then shoved his fist into his mouth and moaned in terror. They’d edited it back in! He deleted it again, but this time it was back as soon as he hit the SAVE button.

Sebastian spent the next five hours hitting REVERT TO MOST RECENT EDIT.

The changes flashed over his body. He couldn’t even remember why he was crying, or why he had to have the last edit. All he knew was that he had to.

* * *

“This will be your office, Dr. Andrews. I’m sorry if it’s a bit dusty, it’s been empty for...”

The Dean of the English department trailed off, brow furrowed.

The room was anything but empty. In fact, it looked like it had been occupied as recently as five minutes before.

The computer was on, there was a half-eaten sandwich on the desk, and a smoking cigarette butt lay in an ash tray. He made a joke about not knowing his own building and guided the new professor into another empty office.

He came back later to try and figure out what had happened. He knew this room had been empty... He flipped through some of the mail on the desk. *Dr. Sebastian Gough? Never heard of him. Certainly never employed him!*

He took a look at the computer screen, hoping it would shed some light on the mystery, and read:

This user account has been deleted from Webipedia for repeated violation of the Webipedia Terms of Use Agreement.

It was signed by someone named *xXSlurm86Xx (Admin)*.

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Anyways I Borrowed Your Body

Keyan Bowes

Localisation:

US English

Reader guidance:

Your loving editor would not call this cross-dressing, but others might.

Hey Sis,

First off I want to say it's all Meggie's fault. I mean she was your house-sitter not me. She's really mad. She's making me write this or she won't fetch my car back.

Anyways I borrowed your body. Well I knew you wouldn't want it until you got back. Meggie let me. Yeah I know you're going to say she never could say No to me.

You left it wearing a nightie. I needed clothes so I looked in your closet. There was this cool shiny teal-blue sort of thing, felt really nice when I put it on. Silky. Slinky, too. And the underwear—whoo nice! My girlfriend would be jealous, she loves that stuff. Guess your job really does pay bucks.

I always wondered about those spiky heel shoes. Mannolo blahsomething? Anyways I had to walk all careful. And I found your Purple Passionfruit eyeshadow and some lipstick. Magenta Frosted Dream. Goddam I looked sexy.

After all that trouble I had to go out somewhere. I went to Rory's Bar and had a drink or three. The guys hung around a bit. You sure get lots of attention when you're a girl. Some bought me drinks. I swear I forgot about the body-weight/alcohol thing.

It was all going fine. I was going to call Meggie to drive me back.

Then your boss came in. He looked surprised to see you there. I laughed maybe giggled it sounded like a giggle actually. He asked where James was. I'm alone, I said. Yeah? he said. He bought me a drink and sat down next to me at the bar. I could smell his cologne. He looked hot. Real sexy. So why did he look hot, huh? I'm not gay. You're a married woman. Why did he look hot? It got me upset. I didn't like the way he talked to you.

I took a swing at him. That surprised him. When he was falling, he grabbed at me and I fell on top of him. And a bar stool fell on both of us. Hey, he said and pushed me off. I got in one more punch before someone grabbed me and pulled me away.

Okay it makes less sense now than it did then.

I decided to leave. I walked funny because one shoe lost a heel but I made it out to the car. My cellphone was somewhere in the bar. Someone called the police and they came and made me walk in a straight line. Well you try that when you have one shoe up and one shoe down. They put me with a disgusting bunch of drunken barfing broads and that set me off so I upchucked. That stank so anyways I set your body on the concrete floor and got out of there into my own body.

Anyways your body is fine only it somehow got a black eye and the ankle twisted. And the left leg's maybe broken.

That's all, Bro

Hambone Sizzlewitt

Mel Bosworth

Localisation:

US English

Reader guidance:

Set senses to 'sweet'

Early Morning:

Hambone Sizzlewitt pushes the boulder up the hill. He wears flat-foot boots. He has big ears. The sun is low.

Push Push, Hambone! he says to himself.

He puts his back to the boulder and rests.

Noon:

Hambone Sizzlewitt pushes the boulder up the hill. He wears a jacket with five pockets. Three are filled with beer bottles, two with cookies. He has blue eyes. The sun is high.

Push Push, Hambone! he grunts to himself.

He puts his back to the boulder and cries.

Late Afternoon:

Hambone Sizzlewitt pushes the boulder onto the summit. He wears polyester pants. They are bell-bottomed. He has shaggy hair. The sun is low.

Good Good, Hambone! he smiles to himself.

He puts his back to the boulder and drinks one beer.

Twilight:

Hambone Sizzlewitt sits atop the boulder on the summit. He thinks it will bring him closer to her. He drinks a second beer and then pulls out a cookie. The cookie is oatmeal with red candies pressed into it. The sunset is pink cotton.

Hambone is quiet.

Doves perch on his flat-foot boots. Six birds, three on each boot. He crumbles the cookie into their upturned beaks.

Tweet Tweet, says Hambone.

He sets aside the final beer and cookie.

Night-time:

Hambone Sizzlewitt sleeps atop the boulder on the summit. The doves nest in the bells of his polyester pants. The sky is dark, but to the west shines Venus and to the north, the Moon.

Hambone snores.

She eats the cookie and drinks the beer. She kisses the lids that cover his blue eyes. Then, with pale fingers, she brushes back his shaggy hair and whispers into his big ears.

Hambone dreams.

Snick

Donald Conrad

Localisation:

US English

Reader guidance:

Ulp. Horrible things happen. Your loving editor cannot bear to look.

In the darkness I stand, quiet, listening. This house has always been so very needy.

There it is again.

Sssnick.

There seems to be some sort of timing to it, a few seconds maybe. I try to time my nervous shallow breathing so I am ready to listen when the sound happens again.

Sssnick.

I cannot place it to save my life. My mouth is dry. I came for water; I really want a glass of water. I take a step and bring my feet together. The sound is coming soon. I breathe and hold, listening.

Sssnick.

Still, I don't know the sound. The same clue again and again.

Water, yes, water.

Step, and step again, then feet together. The sound is coming. Breathe, like a target shooter, and hold...

Sssssnick.

Hmmm, that one seemed longer; it was longer. Here I ponder, the sound seemed longer. Open the cabinet for a glass. Feel for it, choosing. Glass in hand. Slowly and carefully I close the cabinet. I face the impending sound, exhale and hold.

Ssssnick, snick.

That was a double; that was the first double. It sounded like something moving.

Moving?

I have been quiet, stealthy.

Mice do not sound like that; an intruder would be less bold.

I should turn on the lights. Scare away the bogeyman; warn away ghosts. But I want water. I step to the fridge, one silent step at a time. Sales pitch: I know this house like the back of my hand. There is nothing to be afraid of.

Sssnick.

Was that one closer? It is really dark in the kitchen tonight. One more step. Cool, clear, water. The freezer door has two paddles in it. One paddle is for ice, and one for water.

Water.

I push the glass against the right paddle and that puts the glass in alignment with the flow of cool, clear, filtered water. The water streaming into the glass is the first sound I allow.

Ssnick, snick, snick.

The glass is probably only half full and I stop the flow by pulling back with the glass. Half full, half empty. I listen. The silence is stifling. I lift the glass to my lips slowly and warily. I allow a small amount of water to pass my lips. Greedy now, I throw it back with abandon. I push the glass into the right paddle again. The water gushes—a sudden copious flow that changes pitch as the glass fills.

Ssnick, snicka, snick.

That was closer. That was right in front of me. I step back a single step. I reach for the light switch. I pause—for nothing.

Wait. Breathe and hold.

Ssnick.

I flip the light switch.

Snnick.

Split second, lights on, and it occurs again. Closer I see.

Snick, snick, snick.

The floor tiles are moving. One is missing. And they keep filling the void, moving the space closer to me, like a big tile puzzle.

Snick, snick.

The tile under my left foot moves, and then back again.

Snick, snick.

I'm suddenly off balance and lurch forward to regain equilibrium. I step where there is no tile. A tile moves to the same spot. I step again with the same foot, but this time it is a phantom foot.

I feel it land on a tile but when I look down for purchase there is no foot at the end of my leg. But I can feel it. It is there.

Snicka, snick, snick.

I look from my left foot to my right. Two stumps now. Some tiles are smeared in crimson streaks. I drop the water glass and...

Snick.

...the water glass is gone.

I am standing, with some trepidation, on two trimmed stumps. I look from one to the other and...

Snicka, snick.

...I look up to the fridge, and then to the cabinet.

Away, I see the French doors that lead outside. The doors blur a bit, and then a bit more.

Snick, snick.

I just wanted some water.

But the house wants me.

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Man Bites Man

Aaron Polson

Localisation:

US English

Reader guidance:

Contains violence. Beware.

Action Six News Team—*Four Men: One Team!*—were getting cramped and antsy in the back of the uplink van. There were only seconds to go and tonight had to be big.

“Why’s it got to be so damn dark in here?” said Terry as he snapped the Steadicam into place. “It screws up my light balance.”

“Terry, you’re a pansy,” said Mick. There was a chink as he chambered a round. “Why don’t you just do what you usually do and screw everything up—”

Benny, the field producer, broke in.

“Guys—we need to move in, three, two, one...go!”

The back doors of the van spilled open, and the four men piled out onto the blacktop. Terry cursed under his breath and scrambled to adjust focus and light filters. Mick straightened his tie, brushed back a little hair behind his ears, and shuffled toward the front door of a modest bungalow.

“Benny: time?”

“Uplink slot in, forty-two...forty-one...”

Mick glanced over his shoulder. "Nate, details?"

Nate, an intern at Action Six, scabbled over the paperwork on his clipboard. Mick knew the kid's look. Nervous type, a planner. Thought accidents didn't happen. Would he be ready for prime time?

"Door unlocked," said Nate. "Mr. Gruber is at the dinner table. Mrs. Gruber is in the bathroom. We've got him. We should go now."

"No," said Mick, holding up an arresting finger. "Wait for it."

Benny touched at his earpiece. "She just flushed, Mick!"

"Go!"

Mick he kicked the door open, pushed inside and strode through the foyer to the Grubers' small dining room. Mr. Gruber, middle-aged and balding, stopped with fork in hand, a bit of pork chop speared on the end; a globule of gravy hung from it, eager to fall. Mick leveled his automatic and popped him in the face.

The man's body snapped back, his head snapped back further, then nearly all of him lurched forward to crash on the table. Silverware clattered and span up in a fountain of forks and spoons.

A squeal sounded from the hallway.

"Ready, here she comes." Mick slipped the gun in his pocket and took the microphone from Benny.

Mrs. Gruber appeared in the hallway arch. When she saw her husband's body and the news team, she clamped a hand clamped across her mouth. A small noise squeezed between her fingers.

"Uplink live," said Benny. Mick spun around to face Terry with the camera.

“Mick Armstrong here with Action Six News. We are at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Harold Gruber, the site of a grisly murder earlier this evening. Mrs. Gruber, can you tell us—”

Benny waved his hand frantically. “Mick! Cut!”

“What the Hell?”

“We’ve lost the show. Action One News just set fire to a school choir practice. Dress rehearsal. Doors are locked and they had minicams up ahead of time. Quality’s all to hell but the cassocks, man... Those kids are going up like matchbooks.”

“Clever bastards!” cursed Mick, his blazing dentistry hidden behind angry lips. He was not going to be defeated by incendiary news reporting. He had to think.

Mrs. Gruber slumped against the wall, sobbing. “I—I missed it, didn’t I? I missed my fifteen minutes...” She waved a furious hand at her husband’s ruined head. “*He* got his big moment!”

Mick looked at her, his heart full of sorrow. He had to comfort her, somehow.

“Don’t worry, Mrs Gruber. You’ll get another shot. Benny, get the station manager on the horn.”

“What you gonna do, Mick?”

He fixed on his eyes on the hole in Mr Gruber’s face. In one fast, professional movement, he whipped off his belt and reached into his pants.

“Whatever it takes to stay on top.”

Held Up

Benjamin Jacobson

Localisation:

US English

Reader guidance:

Story contains criminal activity.

How does one write a hold-up note? This was the question Trent pondered as he stood in line at his local AmeriBank branch. He'd never been much of a writer and when he'd planned this heist he had neglected to think that far ahead. He stood, a blank deposit slip in hand, and waited for his Muse to strike.

She had last struck when he was on strike, back at the factory: "Better pay for better workers!" He had written that sign. It had been effective. He could have just written, "Strike!" like so many of his buddies had, but he came up with a slogan instead. Where was that inspiration now?

The line moved quicker than his brain and he found himself at the front with the blank slip. He moved toward the open window and chickened out. He shrugged and gestured with the slip and pen. The teller, a man with a pie face and a watermelon body, smiled back and then looked on to the next customer. Trent had to duck between two blue jump-suited technicians as they raised something large and heavy to the roof. He returned to the side counter where he had picked up the slip.

He leaned over his work as he wrote, trying to pour himself onto the paper. He wouldn't get in line until he had a note, he

decided. He wrote out these words: “Better pay or I’ll batter your workers!”

Not bad. It had menace. It built on past success. He underlined “batter” for emphasis but then questioned the spelling. “Batter” like pancakes, or like baseball?

He crumpled the paper and dropped it in the tiny counter-top garbage can.

He looked around to make sure he wasn’t being watched. His eyes caught the workmen again. They stood on reinforced ladders installing a giant weight in the ceiling directly above the teller window. The weight was cartoonish and someone had stenciled a giant “10 TONS” on the side. A single cable ran through a sculpted O-ring to hold up the massive load. Trent wondered if they were hiring. The work looked semi-technical, his specialty. Would they try to stop him as he ran out with the money? Probably not. Not for what they make.

Trent rubbed the gun in his pocket, hoping to feel the confidence it usually brought him. Yep, it was there. If he got away with this, the note would be his only chance to let people know why. His severance package had let him pay his mortgage for four months before this bank took his home away. His fault, he knew: he hadn’t really understood the terms, or that he couldn’t afford them. He didn’t blame the bank then, but when the bank failed and the bailout saved it, that bothered him. Trent had always paid his taxes. That was *his* money the bank had now, as well as his house and his job. He just needed it all back.

He wasn’t stealing it; he was reclaiming it. His attempt to sum up his thought sprawled across four deposit slips before he realized how stupid it would be to hand the teller a book. What would he do while it was being read? He pictured himself standing awkwardly at the counter, worried the teller might bring

out a red pen and start correcting the grammar. He crumpled and dropped again and took out another piece.

He looked down the counter at another man filling out a deposit slip. He stretched his arm around the paper to shield it from onlookers. It felt like fourth grade: trying to compose under time pressure, hoping to create something awesome that would impress the teacher and the class—and then being upstaged by Suzy Turner who always got As and used wonderful adjectives. Trent could use Suzy now, but he hadn't seen her since she'd left town for college.

Trent glanced up at the teller. He caught sight of the man's pie-face between blue jumpsuits and ladders. Trent had gone to school with him, he realized. A friend of Suzy's maybe? A couple years behind him, no doubt. Trent thought his name might be John.

He imagined pulling the gun on John, threatening him, even shooting him if he had to. AmeriBank was evil, but this guy was just another kid who went through Coach Selznick's locker room. Just a guy who was lucky enough to have a job and house.

Trent couldn't do it, not to someone he knew—or ought to have known. But he still needed the money. He wrote on the deposit slip:

“I need a loan.”

Odd perhaps, but after all this he couldn't just walk out. Maybe John would grant him one, just to get him through.

As Trent waited again in the line, he watched John converse with the workmen, who seemed to have completed their task. They talked about security measures and the workman pointed to a large button on the counter and the cable and pulley system connecting it to the weight. Trent still had flop sweat dripping down his brow and he tried in vain to wipe it on his jacket.

As his turn came, he walked forward and reached into the pocket he had stuck the slip into. When he pulled it out his sleeve caught on something small and heavy.

The gun tumbled to the ground.

John looked at Trent, sweaty, note-holding Trent who had just dropped a gun at the bank, and hit the shiny, new button in front of him. A siren sounded and the whirl of cables sung out. The weight slammed down, and Trent finally realised that people were either plain evil, or too stupid to deserve pity.

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Trollette

Han Hwang

Localisation:

US English

Reader guidance:

This story contains body fluids and other anatomical items which may upset readers of insufficient phlegm.

Another day, pre-tomorrow, could wash away the sorrow for the lonely troll who had unused love burning in his soul. And when the sun rises over the bridge, the day begins for this homely midge, who ventures out to find love on the grassy green knoll.

The grassy green knoll was where the troll waited. Waited and waited for trollette who had belated this meeting that was slated to happen. And hopeful the troll waited because soon enough they would have dated long enough not to be jaded about sharing spit and bodily fluids—an act never underrated.

Then trollette appeared from afar, in a Sunday dress with sultry breasts looking like two car headlights, beaming radiance and bringing life back to dead nights. So the troll licked his lips to the rhythm of how trollette swayed her hips back and forth, forth and back steady, contort, retract, ready to pounce, attack with the softness of a cat landing on four paws. Her seductive motion captured the troll's eyes—his gaze so sustainable on this unattainable prize. Frustration now setting in, how he resented her plastic grin—that façade for the deception within. The troll

knew too well how she could pretend, how pretentiously akin to coquetry, retention of the troll's attention (not to mention the pretension)—the grip over him so solid, her heart frigid, black and stolid.

She winked a long exaggerated blink to the troll, who had sat on the edge of the bench and thoughts he began to think started to wrench his inside vitals. Then the troll watched trollette pass by, no words spoken yet, not even a lie to casually kill the time between awkwardness and sublime—nothing but a dejected feeling left in the troll who although used to dealing with pain and suffering, still was left wondering why every time trollette came wandering across his bridge, she just smiled simply and vanished into the horizon—she barely managed to escape this time! Only if the troll had the right line or any line for that matter, the whole experience would've been far less sadder but could this troll be so bold to speak to the dainty trollette? Maybe next time his dreams wouldn't be flushed down the toilet.

Every time, it was the same old ending for the troll, who so used to the mending of wounds so deep, whenever trollette tore through his seams and put his dreams right back to sleep. Trollette would be back one of these days, and when next she comes, maybe the troll wouldn't just twiddle his thumbs, but say something—anything! How many sing the words of love like a muse, but the mute go home all alone, no song to choose.

Defeated once again, the troll descended back to the bridge under. Yet his sanctuary accepted the blunder of the day, never judged him, never pushed him away, extended welcoming arms to this troll, to this disfigured gnome it screamed, "Welcome home!"

Trolling for Trouble

Jan Christensen

Localisation:

US English

Reader guidance:

UK & Commonwealth readers may wish to be made aware that in the USA, garden gnomes are called “trolls”.

Eight a.m. Completely dressed, every hair in place, sixty-six year old Millie Jefferson opened her front door and stepped out to fetch the newspaper. Today she found it in the bushes to her left. No matter how many times she got after young Henry about the way he threw it, the paper always landed anywhere but on her front porch. She stooped to pick it up; then, as she straightened, saw that her little troll had disappeared from her small front flower garden.

“Not again,” she said aloud. This was the fourth troll to be stolen in the last three months.

She sighed and went inside, closing the door harder than she usually did. The idea of calling the police crossed her mind, but like the other three times, she dismissed it as too silly.

She poured a cup of coffee and sat at the kitchen table and began to read the newspaper, but she couldn't concentrate. Who was stealing her trolls? And why? She didn't think she had any enemies in the neighborhood. She was friendly to everyone, even the occasionally bratty child.

Certainly no one was stealing them for their monetary value. So, it was a prank. Or someone, for some reason she didn't know, was mad at her.

But what a petty thing to do to get even.

She shrugged and finished reading the newspaper. Then she put on a light sweater and began her morning walk.

She knew she didn't really fit into the neighborhood. Too old. But she had bought the house after Hank passed on because she loved the floor plan and the yard.

Thelma Bingham stood in her yard, spraying water on her shrubs. Millie gave her a cheery hello, and Thelma turned off the water to come talk. Thelma was the friendliest neighbor Millie had. She was in her early forties, divorced with two teenagers.

"What's new?" Thelma asked, as she always did. She loved a good gossip.

"Someone took my newest troll."

Thelma looked shocked. "No! My goodness, how many does that make?"

"Four."

"Someone now has a regular little family of those things." Thelma brushed away a lock of hair from her eyes.

Mollie realized Thelma was right.

"They do, don't they?" Millie laughed. "Well, better get my walk done."

The first troll she had bought, male, pushed a wheelbarrow full of flowers. Another fellow rode a bike, a girl sat on a swing, and the last little guy had held a mug of coffee.

As she continued down the street, she noticed Mr. Henderson working in his side garden. A beautiful spot, she thought he'd ruined it. He had a fountain, a decorative bench, a small tool shed, a trellis for his roses, and a wheelbarrow full

of potted plants. She said hello, but he didn't answer. She'd made him angry when she'd first moved in by telling his wife she thought the garden was too full of "stuff." He'd overheard her and ignored her ever since.

Henry the paperboy rode by on his bike so fast that the air stirred around her.

She passed the Smith's house where their teenage daughter swung higher and higher on the wood-and-rope swing in the front yard. Tiffany had driven straight into Millie's mailbox the day after she got her driver's license. Millie had given her a long lecture, and later wondered if Tiffany had done it deliberately. Such a strange child—quite belligerent.

Millie rounded the corner and was startled to see Mr. Rogers standing on his front porch, coffee mug in hand. He wore his usual black jeans and black t-shirt. How she hated that Goth style. No one in the neighborhood saw much of Mr. Rogers. There was speculation about what he did for a living. He drove a silver Porsche, and it was rumored that his house, an old Victorian pile, was full of fine art.

"Hello, Millie," he greeted her with a smile.

She hated being called by her first name by someone she hardly knew.

"Mr. Rogers," she said stiffly.

"How are you today?"

"Fine, thank you." Her feet seemed glued to the sidewalk even though she wanted to leave.

"It's a beautiful day for a walk."

"Yes." She still couldn't move. She watched Mr. Rogers lift the mug to his lips and take a sip.

"You know," Mr. Rogers said, "this really is a nice neighborhood. Everyone tries to get along. But I've been hearing

a few complaints about an older woman who gripes a bit too much about other people. A woman who seems to have a compulsion to buy trolls.”

Millie gasped. Suddenly she realized she'd never really liked trolls. Thought they were silly. Why had she been buying them? She squinted at Mr. Rogers and shivered. She tried to leave, to move, and still couldn't. He was the reason she'd been buying trolls. He had been giving her a warning.

“Perhaps you are seeing a connection between the trolls and your neighbors now.” He took another sip of coffee, staring at her over the rim.

“Yes,” Millie said, her voice hardly above a whisper. She remembered Tiffany on her swing, Henry biking, and Mr. Henderson in his garden, each matching a troll she'd felt compelled to buy.

Mr. Rogers's smile chilled her.

“You may go. It's a wonderful day in the neighborhood, isn't it? Let's keep it that way.” He turned around and went inside his house.

Now Millie could move, and she walked home.

The compulsion to buy trolls left her immediately. She became much too busy for such nonsense since she was always baking cookies and cakes for the neighbors and helping them by babysitting or running errands when they were sick.

Whenever she saw Mr. Rogers, he smiled gently at her. But somehow, that smile still chilled her, and after greeting him, she hurried away to start baking.

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The Kid on the Bike

Sanford Allen

Localisation:

US English

Reader guidance:

Taking rides from strangers = bad

I watered my lawn and watched the kid on the bicycle pedal down the street toward me. His arms looked like pale twigs sticking out from his black t-shirt. The tassels on his white bike's handlebars streamed in the wind.

As he passed under my neighbor's oak tree, a bird dropped and smacked the street.

He stopped in front of me and looked up, squinting.

“Yo, mister, your time's up.”

He showed me his watch. It had no hands or numbers, but I knew what he meant.

I dropped the still-running hose and climbed on behind him.

A young woman I hadn't noticed before was perched on the handlebars. She looked over her shoulder at me, smiled and brushed a strand of hair from her face.

Poor girl, her neck was sawn half through.

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The Bridge at Bayou Pierre

Lisa McEntyre

Localisation:

US English

Reader guidance:

Contains children

Dalton McGrew sat Indian style in the tall grass. A wash of gray-blue light lingered on the horizon. It was nearly time, but not quite. He had to wait until God brought darkness to Bayou Pierre. Those were the rules, and so he waited. A chill ran down his spine. Night things began talking to each other over the water.

He wasn't as scared as he'd been the first night, but he was still shaking. Where were his shoes? He touched his feet and they were ice cold. He couldn't imagine why he came out here without his shoes.

The Moon lit the top of the poplar trees, making them sparkle like the water. He could just see the rails in the pale moonlight. The long railway bridge over Bayou Pierre headed straight out over the water, and then made a long, shallow curve to the right before disappearing into the woods on the other side of the valley. When he could see that small place where the bridge was swallowed by the night, he'd know it was time.

There. That was it. The evening light had abandoned the special spot on the bridge; he got to his feet.

That first night, he'd stood where he was standing now. He had waited, but Terence Barnes and Jimmy Rayburn never showed up, or maybe they had been hiding somewhere, watching him. They'd called him a scaredy-cat because he didn't like going to the outhouse by himself. They'd dared him to come out to Bayou Pierre and walk the rails at night. As he had stood there listening to the bullfrogs and other creatures gurgling in the water below, he'd started thinking that he wasn't going to let them call him scaredy-cat again. So that first night, his legs shaking, he'd walked through the grass to the foot of the bridge, and—trying to keep his heart still—stepped up and onto the rail.

And so, again: braver but still scared, Dalton hooked his thumbs under the straps of his overalls and high-stepped through the grass towards the bridge.

But where were his shoes?

Dalton shook his head. It didn't matter. He had things to do. He raised a bare foot and stepped onto the bridge.

One... two....three... Three wide steps. That was easy, he thought. It got easier every time he did it. He looked down at the black water below him. He hadn't done that before. It was a long way down, but he wasn't afraid. A smile slid across his face, and he paced on.

Twelve...thirteen... He was only going to the first poplar tree. No sense going any further. He'd prove his bravery by then, besides, he hadn't gotten nearly that far on the first night. How far had he gone? He'd made this walk so many times now, he couldn't remember.

Thirty... thirty-one... Dalton raised his arms. He pretended to be that guy in the circus that walked on the wire. The only

difference was Dalton didn't have a net. He figured that made him at least ten times as brave as the guy in the circus. The net was easy. Take a fall from the railway bridge over Bayou Pierre and the black water would swallow you whole.

Forty-two... forty-three...

Dalton turned and walked backwards. His heart didn't even start beating fast. This was so easy. Wind rustled the poplar leaves; it chilled Dalton's skin. He turned back around. He was over half-way there.

Dalton waved to the shore on the right, and then the left. He wasn't sure where Jimmy and Terence were hiding, but he felt they were there. He wasn't a scaredy-cat. *They* were the ones who were scared. If they weren't, then why weren't they up here with him?

Dalton reached the first poplar rising, arrow-straight upwards. He looked over his shoulder and smiled. He'd done it again. He walked the bridge over Bayou Pierre and hadn't stopped, hadn't let the fear get to him. Not for one minute, not for one second.

Dalton gave one last wave to the shore behind him, then disappeared into the darkness between the trees.

Jimmy nudged Terrence with his elbow. The night was hot and humid, but that wasn't what was making the two boys sweat.

"Did you see him?"

"Yeah," Jimmy whispered, trying to stay low in the grass. "Did you?"

"Yeah."

"Do you think he told?"

Terrence shook his head. "Naah. He didn't tell anyone."

Jimmy pulled a reed from the ground and tried to make it whistle like his father had shown him.

“You never should’ve called him that name, Terrence.”

“You dared him just like I did.”

Terrence looked down and the worn, red sneakers in his hands.

Jimmy looked at the shoes. “What you gonna do with those?”

“Throw ‘em back in the water.”

Jimmy’s voice quivered, “They’ll float up.”

“*He* didn’t,” Terrence said. He stood and tossed the shoes as far as he could. In the distance, he heard them hit the water.

“I’m not coming out here anymore, Terrence. I’m gonna tell someone. You’re not making me come out here one more time.”

“And who you gonna tell? That you saw Dalton McGrew—been dead a year—walking on the bridge over Bayou Pierre?”

Jimmy stood and marched away from his friend. “You’re mean. You pushed him off that bridge, sure as if you were up there with him.”

Terrence ran to catch up to Jimmy. “You’ll be back with me. We’ll watch again. And I’m not mean. I gave him back his shoes.”

How Late Am I?

Irene Cunningham

If I sat on my exercise bike, my view
would be of bold, confident women
soft and rounded but not, bearing
great bellies and arses.

They would walk with long strides
and get where they're going in a flash;
like I used to...when I were a lass
a woman, a young mother.

My destination would be a future
that was wrapped around my past
the figure I was then would sail this ship
in style, with panache ...

float a fabulous wardrobe of smart
sharp trousers, and suits and dresses
outlining a sharper chin
and legs riding up and up .

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No Worries

Matthew Westphal

An indistinct sound disturbed my mastery over the house.
I continued eating.
It was likely a mouse.
Suddenly, I heard squeaking!
Ha! I know every inch of this place.
Following the sound to the ballroom,
I grabbed my hatchet, just in case.
The squeaking soon grew louder
until it resembled shrieking.
Its torment ceased.
I found her!

My husband would have been proud,
for I didn't let a mouse in the manor.
"I'm a fine lady," I said aloud.

In my vanity mirror I could see,
the squeaking and the screaming
was from me.

What a relief.

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RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

~AFTERWORD~

Let me finish up on a personal note. A big thank you to all our writers who have taken a remarkable chance by joining us for this first edition. I very much look forward to working with all of you in future.

Another big thank you to those who submitted material which I could not accept for publication. Keep submitting: new blood is essential, so give freely and make us big and strong!

A rather colossal thank you to the entity advertised on the previous page: www.scribophile.com. RPM owes its genesis to this eclectic writing community. It is a fine place to hang out and have some fun with words and people who love them.

The largest of all possible thank yous conceivable within a human mind must go to RPM's Poetry Editor and Webmaster, Stewart Baker. Without his effort, inspiration and constant care, RPM as you see it today would not exist.

One more vote of thanks remains: to you, our unknown reader. We have not met; we will in all likelihood never meet. There is no way for myself or any of RPM's writers to know truly what goes on in your mind, the troubles and joys and distractions you face.

But thank you, from all of us, for taking the time to consider our words. We hope that at least some of them find favour.

I would also add that you are looking *especially* sexy today.

Toodle pip,

Dominic Hamer
The Editor

PS. Errata to editor@ruthlesspeoples.com

PPS.RPM02 is out on 14 April!