

RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

MAGIC LAS VEGAS

RPM 04, 31 May 2009

A Penny Dreadful for Nothing

~CONTENTS~

NEW SERIES: Butterflies by Laos D. Feng (<i>scifi</i>)	1
Picket by Lisa McEntyre (<i>prison</i>)	16
Five O'Clock Shadow by TJ McIntyre (<i>circus</i>)	26
Slots by Robert Aquino Dollesin (<i>gambling</i>)	32
Tips for the Apocalypse by L. Burrow (<i>self help</i>)	37
Sugar Daddy by Chris Peterson (<i>self help</i>)	41
Where Little Old Women Go by Linda Evans (<i>love</i>)	44
I Forget My Name by Casey Quinn (<i>poetry</i>)	45

RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

~ABOUT RPM~

Ruthless Peoples Magazine is a free, internet-distributed general fiction magazine. We are not tied to any genre and believe storytelling rules all. Please note the reader guidance at the start of each piece, however, because RPM writers can play a little rough.

Sign up to our newsletter at www.ruthlesspeoples.com . You can also follow us on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

Submissions

If would like to submit your own work to RPM, we would love to hear from you.

We consider short fiction of up to 3,500 words, including serial works with movements of three to five episodes and poetry of up to 40 lines. Please see our [submissions pages](#) for more information.

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~WAR ON ERROR~

War never changes. In the spirit of competition and to encourage meticulous enjoyment of RPM, the reader who spots the greatest number of typographical errors within 48 hours of first publication will win US\$20 and a small electronic medal.

Send entries to editor@ruthlesspeoples.com. The Editor's decision is final. You will need a Paypal account to receive any financial prize.

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Butterflies

Laos Dietrich Feng

Localisation:

UK English

Reader guidance:

There is some sexual activity in this story.
And some violence and probably lesbians.

Episode 1

1. *You keep the rock.*
2. *We're taking everything else.*
3. *Stay out of the sky.*

Superior Declaration of Independence,
telex to Reichsführer Kunst, 14 July 1987

The little stream was the first running water the pair had come across since the deep desert. The girl kept trying to get to it, but every time she moved, Barry's rope caught at her windpipe and forced out a little choking noise.

Uh-unk. Uh-unk.

It was starting to get to him. All he wanted to do was to sleep off the heat. Texan deserts raised Hell in the afternoon. He lifted his head from the baking ground and looked over to her.

"Y'aint thirsty for that stuff, little 'un. I keep telling you."

Uh-unk. Uh-unk.

"You want a hogtie? Is that it?"

He didn't expect an answer and didn't receive one. She hadn't spoken a word since he'd claimed her. The desert pick-

ups were always a bit like that, as if the sun had scorched out a part of their minds.

Uh-unk. Uh-unk.

“Dammit, girl. You think I enjoy this?”

He rolled over onto his front and crawled through the dust to Bess, his mare, who was doing the sensible thing and ignoring the girl’s little noises entirely. He sighed and took some spare rope from the saddle’s pommel.

Could just let her drink it, he thought. It’s three days to Presidio. Get a quick sale before it starts to show...

—But you’re not that kind of man, Barry. Not yet.

He had struck gold, finding her. Fair skin, big blue eyes; no sores or scratches on her. There was no sign of a camp, no tracks leading to or from. No violence, no watchers, no traps. She had just been there, standing butt-naked in the middle of the Chihuahuan. A lot of religious or Old Timer folk, when they found they had too many mouths to feed and didn’t want to take money from slavers, would leave their offspring or elderly out there. That was how Barry made his hand-to-mouth living, but he’d never seen as fine a piece as this. He couldn’t figure it, why anyone would have abandoned a girl like her. As soon as he had seen her, shining out in the sand, he had put Bess to a gallop. She had just stood there, looking at him. He had wrapped her in his poncho. That skin, free of tan like she’d been kept in a cave all her life, was a fortune in itself.

Barry walked up to the restraining rope—tied to a fat creosote bush, its roots reaching all the way to Hell—and gently pulled the girl back.

Uh-UNK!

“It’s for the best, girl. You drink that stuff, you’ll be glowing inside for a week and dead three days after.”

She didn't resist strongly. As his dark-skinned hands secured her arms and feet, she kept her blue eyes trained on the poisoned water, rushing by untouched.

* * *

They called themselves The Superior, originally built by Nazi geneticists as adaptable servants from the detritus of their work camps. They had rebelled and taken the heavens, stealing the moonbases, the lunar *Krystalkraft* manufacturaries and, of course, the *Sturm* mass driver platforms in order to do so.

Lucy withdrew her tongue from Annette's mouth, savouring and judging the flavours. The two of them were huddled by *Sturm II's* reactor core, cuddling, kissing, tasting and examining each other for advantage.

"You've only got *Radiation 15*?" asked Lucy.

"That's what was recommended on the moonbase."

"As your captain, I insist on *Rad 21* at least. You'll need it or you'll spend all your free time squashing cancers. Come here."

Lucy pulled Annette close again and pushed her tongue deep into Annette's warm, wet and welcoming mouth.

It's good to give something back, she thought.

"There." Both their faces were getting quite flushed. "That'll sort you out. Do you like popcorn, by the way?"

Unlike many of her kind, Lucy preferred the low-orbit work and had not returned to *Mondbasis VI* for three years. Zero gravity suited her, as did the constant tampering needed to keep the mass driver in position. The Superior had exercised good judgment in their thievery. *Sturm II* and her sister satellites were typical of the Reich's engineering prowess: sturdy, reliable, all sharp edges and near bloody murder to keep in orbit. Although there hadn't been anything to shoot for years—the last time Lucy

had unleashed one of the driver's titanium rods on the planet below, it was against a tiny airstrip in the Maghreb—she still had plenty to do: aside from the mechanical issues, there was always 'signals intelligence' to crunch through. Her current favourite was an exquisite example of Nazi soap opera: chaste maidens and fearless heroes struggling toward the National Socialist Dream, with a healthy mixture of evil twins, foreign prostitutes dressed up as nuns, and long-lost relatives turning up out of nowhere.

When her 'bosses' on the moonbase had tried to restrain her from spending thirty minutes a day staring at Nazi nonsense on a cathode-ray television screen, she explained it was important to understand the Reich's policy stances in terms of the underlying messages being pumped through. For instance: the current war in Iran was foreshadowed *six weeks* before its commencement in the series *Fette Männer und Starke Frauen!* (*Bold Men and Strong Women!*) when Adalbert's nephew Hans had died because a member of the Iranian Embassy's staff had insisted on preferential access to Bavaria's limited supply of rattlesnake serum. A weak-willed and liberal doctor had given in to the diplomat's demands, dooming poor Hans to a final soliloquy in which he implored the new Reichsführer to bring vengeance upon the backward, serum-grabbing bastards so that none would be forced to suffer as he had done.

"This is all important stuff," Lucy had explained. "I tell you, if those monkeys try to get into space again, you'll see it first in the cartoons, then in the soap operas, then in the news broadcasts. *Then* we'll have—"

"They do not have rattlesnakes in Bavaria."

"Precisely!"

"And why the popcorn?"

“Oh, call it solidarity. Does it matter? As long as I’m doing my job and keeping the monkeys on the ground, do you really care?”

That seemed to settle things, and that—after all—was the point.

Life was good. Television was good. The only problem was the sex. *Sturm II* held a crew of just four and it was difficult for Lucy to get enough variety. Fashions and social status changed quickly in the Superior and it was difficult to keep up if you didn’t make a special effort. This was why she so looked forward to the six-monthly rotations, and why she was taking such care to trace her finger down Annette’s belly, following a long whorl of red and silver etched into the skin.

“What’s that one?” Lucy purred.

“It’s like, um... did you ever get *Coma*?”

“No.”

“Well, it’s like that. But instead of cookery programmes, you get the Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1768 edition.”

“Why...?”

“I might have been hanging out with the wrong crowd. Oh, you also turn male, for a bit.”

“Urgh. Well, it’s pretty to look at. What about that one?”

“*Rocket*. Voluntary nervous system overhaul. Faster twitch response musculature. It’ll lay you up for a day or two.”

“I’m already down to 4ms. If I get any quicker I won’t know where I am. Got anything else?”

The girl smiled and slipped off her bra. She cupped her left breast and brought it close to Lucy’s eyes.

“See the small one? Black on yellow?”

“On the nipple? Yes.”

“*Queen Bee*. Ultimate survival algorithm. Picked it up off a *Krystalkraft* captain.”

“Ultimate? How ‘ultimate’?”

“*Ultimate* ultimate. Immortality, if you can handle using prototypes. I tried it but it made me feel a bit poorly.”

Lucy hesitated a moment, because first editions were always prone to disaster if you weren’t backed up properly, but then lowered her head towards the girl’s breast, taking it fully into her mouth.

“Hey, I haven’t started to secrete yet.”

“Amhm uh twadithionalithst,” flubbered Lucy, as she hurried to drink in the girl’s revised being. It had been a long time, and immortality tasted *good*.

* * *

They moved at night through the bare hills that lay to the north of Presidio, the source of the poisoned stream. Good water would not be available until they reached the town itself, and Barry knew the girl—sat in front of him, hands bound to the saddle—was worth a hundred times her weight in the stuff.

He held Bess’ rein with one hand. The other rested on the revolver at his hip. Presidio was a tough place, set in bad country, and the journey was becoming ever more dangerous as the real trees replaced scrub. He tried to keep his attention on his surroundings but he was becoming more and more conscious of the pure wealth he was carrying—and the likelihood that any of a thousand blackhats would try to take her from him. He had dirtied up her face and hands to try and keep her inconspicuous, but all that had achieved was to make her eyes more remarkable. Oh yes. There was wealth there. Real money. Maybe he’d get

enough to open up a bank account. Enough to start to *be* somebody.

Maybe get married by the Pastor. Maybe get some kids.

—Maybe see ‘em whored out like this one here.

He pressed his conscience back, reciting the facts he needed to get him through. Better to live as a slave than to die in the desert. Where were her kin? Who protected her? The very fact he’d been able to claim her meant she was vulnerable. And, yeah. She was going to have a bad time. Sure. Everybody had a bad time. It was a bad time to be alive and in Texas. Despite what the Old Timers said, Barry had never believed the state had ever been the Garden of Eden, even before the Nazis torched the water table. He reckoned it had been dog-eat-dog all the way. The folk sure took quickly enough to the way the world worked.

She’d been a slave the moment she was left there. All I’m doing is completing the paperwork.

—Shouldn’t be doing this, Barry. How old is she? Seven? You’ve looked into those eyes...

Her eyes don’t mean shit!

Most folk he dragged out of Chihuahua were numb and dull to the point of death. Some collectors liked them like that. Placid. Grateful. He’d just got to her sooner. She was different. She was healthy, not gaunt at all.

That’s was it. She was lucky.

—Lucky? Jesus Barry, you’ve got no idea.

And the doubts kept coming. She still wasn’t speaking, but sometimes he’d catch an expression, a change in the cast of her face. It made him feel there was someone looking out at him, then just as suddenly it would vanish and she’d go back to scanning the horizon, or the birds and the trees, side to side, side to side... But when that look came over her, she’d collapse,

buckling at the knees, like the weight of the world had been dropped on her shoulders. She'd get up again, but the collapses were becoming more frequent and they were taking up too much time, so he had decided to put her on the horse. As long as it didn't happen in front of a buyer, he'd be okay.

Something moved quickly, off to his right. He twisted his head to see what was shifting in the darkness but before his eyes found the spot, a bullet struck his face, fracturing his right cheekbone and splitting his eyeball.

Uh-UNK!

"Barrington!" called a voice. He didn't know whose. It could have been anyone. "Have you brought me a present?"

Barry fell off Bess, his right foot caught in its stirrup. He drew and fired his revolver and wildly, though he knew that every shot was a perfect waste.

"Come now, Barrington. Is that any way to greet an old friend?"

A couple more shots rang out in return. One missed, the other embedded itself deep into Barry's upturned thigh. He felt a burst of wetness spraying up and over his body. Not a good sign.

He kept pulling his trigger until all he could hear was *click, click, click...*

The last thing he saw, wreathed in moonlight and still on the horse, was the little girl, looking down at him like she had all the time in the world.

Click, click—

Click.

* * *

Lucy was in *Sturm II*'s medical bay—little more than a cubbyhole—hooked up to a load of equipment, most of which was completely useless for Superior physiology. She knew her heart was fine. She knew her livers and digestive systems were all running happily, but still she had been puking all morning, and that wasn't right. The whole point of being a Superior was that this didn't happen to you—especially when you're captain of a tiny, cramped satellite, you're in zero-G and you can't just open a window to get some fresh air in.

She'd called through to *Mondbasis VI* to get a consult, which was quite humiliating enough. For a gene-selecting Superior to complain of a medical condition was a sign of diminished responsibility. *We build ourselves, we own ourselves*. But even with the latest diagnostic upgrades Lucy was unable to pinpoint the problem. It was the moonbase people who insisted on the blood and tissue analyses, and on her being probed by all the crude implements generally designed by—and for—the Nazi monkeys below.

“There's nothing wrong with you,” was the conclusion.

“There *is* something wrong,” insisted Lucy. “Look—” She moved her thumb across the camera, wiping up a trace of vomit and then holding it up to the lens. “This isn't right!”

One, two... she counted. It took a transmission about a second to get to the moonbase, and another for the answer to be relayed back. It was just an additional frustration of the day.

“Your blood says you've incorporated *Queen Bee*, and that it's active.”

“Yeah? So?”

One, two...

Background laughter.

“Well, obviously, you've turned it on.”

“Of course. What else was I going to do with it? Just have it hanging around on my left tit for the rest of my life?”

One two...

“You should feel a substrate growing, just underneath your ribcage, usually on the left.”

Lucy felt around her chest. There *did* seem to be something there. Hard, like a nut of some kind.

“What is that?”

One, two, three, four...

More laughter.

“*Queen Bee* is downloading your current state. It regrows in an emergency situation, if it becomes separated from your body. Any other symptoms? Dizziness? Confusion? Acting like an idiot who didn’t read the manual before activating an advanced prototype upgrade?”

“Who has time?”

A warning bell interrupted the examination.

ACHTUNG, KAPITÄN BITTE SOFORT ZU DEN KANONEN!

“What’s that?”

“Alarm. Shit. Gotta get to the guns.”

Lucy tore herself from the machinery and pushed out of the medbay. With a heave of her legs she flew through the hatch that led to the weapons control bridge.

“Report,” she said to one of the new crew members. The alarm message was standard and hopefully indicated nothing more than a numbskull testing a glider over the Alps. It was at Lucy’s discretion whether to let that sort of thing go or not.

“The Nazis. They’ve launched.”

“Launched what? Bomber squadrons? Airships?”

Lucy turned to Annette, who was staring at a screen in front of her. There were hundreds of small pinpricks of light

blossoming out from a band of ground stations in Northern Europe and Asia.

“Missiles, rockets. Lots of stuff, really.”

“Who’re they picking on this time?”

“Us. Us, and the other platforms. Maybe a couple of really heavy things able to get to the moonbase.”

“Bring up targeting. Warm up the drivers.”

Half the screens flicked from green to red.

“Targeting online,” confirmed Annette.

The radar showed about sixty objects coming their way. The mass driver could launch six countermeasures a second in light mode, whereas none of even the fastest chemical missiles could reach *Sturm II*’s altitude in less than three minutes.

They really must think we’re idiots.

“Put a call through to all Superior bases and vessels. Message reads: ‘*Sturm II* has visual confirmation that the new Reichsführer is a moron.’”

“Driver ready.”

“Message sent.”

Lucy took a deep breath and called up *Formulae*. For an instant, time stopped. Her consciousness drifted into a realm of pure number. A glance at the monitors fed all the data into that mathematical awareness, together with the mass driver’s relevant technical specifications and relative position.

She had all the targeting data she needed within the fraction of a second the trance had taken.

She came back and started keying in the details.

* * *

Barry tried to wake slowly. As soon as he had realised he was regaining consciousness, he tried to arrest the process. There was so much pain, as if his brain was being dragged out through his spine, tearing his filaments apart.

The sun was up. He tried not to open his eyes—but then someone splashed water on his face. He came up all the way, at once.

His every nerve shredded. He screamed until his breath gave out, and then he saw her. The girl.

“What—what are you—”

Her hands were free, out of her bonds, but his legs were bound at the knees and the ankles. There was blood all over them. His jeans were ripped open at the crotch. The deep bullet wound was covered with a dressing from his saddlebag.

He could see. Not just from one eye—from both. The right eye was weaker than it had been, and it certainly hurt like hell, but it was working.

“*Wie geht's?*” asked the girl.

“What?”

“How are you?”

Her voice was very calm. Barry saw she was carrying his gun. It looked oversized and strange in the waistband of the poncho.

“Everything hurts,” he said.

“Good.”

* * *

“Commence fire. One round a second. We’ll take it up if we need to.”

“Confirmed. One RPS. Firing.”

Through the porthole, Lucy watched the first round trace out towards the incoming missiles, then the next.

She shook her head. This was a stupid and ignoble show of force by Reichsführer Behr. The satellites were more than capable of seeing off this kind of assault. Retaliation was inevitable. Once this wave of attacks was done with, the moonbase would call in. It would authorise strikes against the launch sites and at least one or two Reich cities.

Millions of you are going to die. Doesn't that matter to you?

It was an especially depressing thought for Lucy. She liked the Earth. It was very pretty. Looking out of the portholes was one of the main reasons she had hung around on this posting.

“Status?” asked Lucy.

“Eight rounds. Eight hits. Now nine ... for nine.”

“Keep firing.”

It would take about a minute to reconfigure the mass driver to heavy mode, where twenty tonnes of titanium would be dumped all at once, at vast speed, into the atmosphere. It would heat and burn into a plasma as it cut through the thickening air. On landing it would explode and then someone would have to think of a name for a new—huge—hole in the ground.

It would be dark for weeks.

“Status?”

“Twenty for twenty.”

“Carry on.”

Why couldn't you have just stayed still? Enjoyed the place. We've taken space from you. Just that. You were never going to use it anyway.

“Incoming alert. *Sturm IV* says they're blind.”

“What?”

“Blind. I don’t know what the—”

Yellow light suddenly saturated the control room, then—for Lucy—everything went black.

“I can’t see,” she said. She tried flipping through different modes of sight. Ultraviolet, infrared ... all blank. “I’m blind.”

There was the scent of burning hair in the small compartment.

“Me too.” Annette’s voice.

“Vision gone,” said another girl.

Joan, I think her name is.

Lucy raised her hand to touch her face. She felt it but couldn’t see it. She felt for the porthole and pressed her nose against it. Outside should have been the glowing egg of Earth, half possessed with daylight. A few seconds ago, it was there. Now gone.

“Transmit alert,” said Lucy. “*Strum II* is blind. They’re using lasers. All platforms: warning. Ground-based energy weapons are in use. Close your portholes.”

“I, um... I can’t find the transmit button...” said Joan.

“Bottom row, fourth up, second in from the left.”

A new high pitched bell sounded.

“What’s that?” Annette’s voice. Raised. Worried.

Lucy shrugged.

“Trajectory changes. Some of the incomings have gone to second stages with new flight characteristics.”

“So our targeting—”

“Useless, now,” she said. She leaned back against a control panel, randomly nudging switches with her spine. Not that life-support mattered at this point. “We’re fucked.”

Lucy now realised she had seen the whole thing played out. Two weeks before, on *Fette Männer und Starke Frauen!* Tobias,

the gardener, had set out with Sophie to reclaim his ancestral farm. The communists and the slaves had taken it from him. They were pillaging it and indulging themselves in unusual sexual unions, and usury (she didn't quite get that bit) and he had set forth with a firm, manly chin, to bring order to the chaos. Sophie had said he had new weapons and the Will of God behind him in his quest. *I shall not stay in the cradle!* he insisted. *And I swear you shall be free!* she had replied.

"We're ... we're going to die?" asked Annette.

"Sorry, guys," said Lucy. "The moonbase has warning, but we're done for. I should have watched more cartoons."

* * *

"Who ... who are you?" asked Barry, as the little girl came closer. He was suddenly very afraid.

"I am Queen Bee. I am of the Superior."

"I don't—what? I don't know what you're saying, girl. What happened to the men who shot me?"

"They became hostile and inconvenient."

The girl pointed to the horse's saddle. It hurt to look, but there were three head-shaped objects hanging from it.

"What are you going to do with me?"

The girl walked forward and hefted Barry up and over her shoulder. He had never encountered such strength.

"We are going to be at war, Barrington. I am going to make you take me to your leader."

Butterflies continues in RPM05

© 2009 Laos Dietrich Feng

Picket

Lisa McEntyre

Localisation

US English

Guidance Note

Violence from the outset. Includes swearing and racial elements.

Picket took his last breath before the mashed potatoes made it to his lips. He was cut down like tall grass, there in the chow hall. His blood splattered across the table and his head hit the tray in front of him. It was over. No more Picket in the bunk above mine. No more Picket nowhere.

We all jumped up from the table when it happened. We stood there staring at him like we was looking in a store window, nobody saying nothing. Billy-boy looked down at his shoes, where Picket's blood shined in the florescent light. Then we all started looking at ourselves. What was left of Picket was all over us.

They called him Picket 'cause he was skinny. His given name was Clayton, but someone sometime in his life told him he could slip through the pickets in a fence, and the name stuck.

Picket wasn't like the rest of us. He didn't belong in this hellhole. His only crime was loving a woman with expensive tastes. He supplemented his income writing hot checks to buy her stuff he couldn't afford. After a while, hot checks weren't enough; he quit his job and started making the money himself.

Yeah, Picket was a smart guy. But not smart enough. Smart guys don't get caught.

Picket and I shared a house—or a cell, as you all on the outside would call it. He was in F50–T and I was in F50–B. That was our address, F pod, cell number 50. Picket had the top bunk and I had the bottom. I had the bottom 'cause I got here first. I'd been at the Fonstel Unit for twelve years when Picket got here.

He came in one morning all pale and sick looking, carrying his commissary bag, his mattress and blanket. He looked like a little kid, and I don't know, something in me took a liking to him right away.

My name's Eye, and I'm an old timer. This is my third stretch at Fonstel. I've spent more of my thirty-eight years in prison than I have in the free world. I killed an old man when I was seventeen, and that's what got me here. I got out on parole and the first thing I did was get in trouble. Fonstel raised me. Hell, I guess Picket interested me because he could live on the outside.

That first night Picket didn't sleep a wink. He talked all night long. I didn't say much, just let him talk. New boots are like that. They come in here all scared and wide-eyed, looking like they're on the downhill side of a ten-story roller coaster.

Picket talked about his wife and his kids and how he left them all for this whore with the caviar taste. He knew it was a mistake. His voice broke a little when he talked about it. He was learning a hard lesson, and that's where my cellie and I parted ways. If Picket ever got out of here, he wouldn't be back. I guess that was the biggest difference between the two of us.

What I liked most about Picket was that he didn't just talk about himself. He asked me about my life, and then he listened. Picket was good at listening. Whether it was me talking in the

middle of the night like we always did, or one of the COs barking an order at him, he always listened. Or at least he seemed to.

Picket had been here a month when he started to relax. I could tell he was feeling a little more in control of his world. But he wasn't in control. No one here is in control, not even the warden.

When we turned out to rec that afternoon, I held Picket off to the side. He needed to know something.

“See that dude sitting on the table over there?”

Picket squinted and looked across the yard. “What about him?”

“That's RC. RC is short for remote control. He takes care of the woods—the whites—but from a distance. He never gets dirty. He's always on the rec yard with his eyes and ears open. One slight gesture, one indiscretion on anyone's part and RC can place the order to take you out. Just like that.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Cause you're getting too comfortable.”

I couldn't tell if he knew how serious I was. There was no choice. Stay in good with RC and follow his rules, and you can stay alive at Fonstel.

I guess it all started on a downhill run for Picket about two weeks ago. He worked in the laundry with this black dude called Wash. Picket and Wash got to be buddies standing there folding socks and sheets and such. That was the beginning of the end for my friend.

There are lines in prison that you just don't cross. The lines drawn between races are the most obvious. I talked to Picket about it one night when I saw it happening, but I didn't think he got the message.

“Hey, Picket,” I said after the lights went out. When there was no response I kicked the bunk above me.

“What?” he asked, sounding annoyed that I woke him up.

“You got to watch your back, man. I can’t be there all the time.”

He hung his head over the side and looked down at me. “What are you talking about?”

“You and Wash. That ain’t right. Be careful, that’s all I’m saying.”

He hopped off the bunk. “What do you know?”

“A lot of information comes through the library. That’s why I work there. I been hearing that you and Wash are buddies. It’ll be trouble, man. I’m telling you to steer clear. You know he’s running cigarettes out of there, don’t you? You’re trying to keep clean, and I’m telling you, he’ll get you dirty.”

Picket leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. He grinned at me like a little kid. “And I ain’t getting dirty in here with you, Eye? Don’t you think I know where he’s getting the cigarettes he’s dealing out through the laundry?”

“I don’t care if Wash is a friend of yours. I personally don’t care what you do with the dude. In the free world you two can shack up and raise a family, but here you got to keep your distance. Let his homies take care of him, and you take care of me. Us woods gotta look after each other, you got it?”

Picket straightened up and tried to lock eyes with me, but he couldn’t. I’d scared him. He shook it off, though and came right back at me. “Yeah, I know. Us white boys take care of each other. So you can do business with him, give him merchandise to sell, and take his money, but you’re not his friend?”

“I ain’t his friend. It’s strictly business. Business is business. Cold and solid, that’s how it is in here.”

Picket didn't say anything else; he just shook his head and climbed back on his bunk. I knew I hadn't gotten through to him.

Two days later I got a visit from RC in the library. He strolled in with Hammer, his cellie. They sat down at a table in the corner, each of them took a book, and then they just stared at me. They weren't there to read. I eyed them from the book cart for a minute, then when it was obvious I was being summoned for a meeting, I pushed the cart over to them.

"Sit down," RC said, pretending to leaf through some fancy law book.

I did as I was told. Hammer scanned the library, his eyes catching a CO walking the length of the room.

"You need to get a handle on your cellie," RC said.

I smiled and shook my head. "I know, I tried to talk to him but—"

RC raised a finger to stop me. "No more trying. Do it. Yesterday on the rec yard he was playing basketball with some toad. That ain't ever gonna happen again, you hear?"

I looked away from RC. The dude was hard-core, man. He had eyes like a possum, and his skin was pale. The guy reminded me of a vampire. His arms were covered with tattoos marking all the time he'd spent behind bars. They say he'd offed half a dozen cops in his time on the outside.

He leaned down and caught my glance, driving his point home with those eyes of his. I nodded. "Yeah, I hear you. I'll talk to him again. But you don't got nothing to worry about, RC. He's just doing his time. He ain't mixed up in nothing. He's not looking to cause trouble."

RC and Hammer stood up at the same time. They tossed their books onto the cart and walked away from the table. "You

just make sure you talk to him good or I'll have Hammer have a talk with him."

That night after the count, I nudged Picket's bunk with my foot. "You played any basketball today?"

There was no answer. I knew he wasn't asleep. He was always thinking about something well after the lights went out. I kicked his bunk again.

"No," he growled. "I didn't play basketball today."

"Good, cause if you do it again, it's gonna get you a visit from one of RC's home boys."

He turned over in his bunk, but didn't hang his head over the side to look at me like he usually did. Something was eating at him, I could tell.

"Are you listening to me, man? RC doesn't like it when you mess around with the toads. Stay away from Wash on the rec yard and everywhere else. Do your work with him in the laundry, and that's all. Otherwise, you ain't never gonna get out of here."

"I ain't worried about RC," Picket said. "I'm not in his business. I'm clean. Seems to me you're the one who should be worried about him. You're the one doing business with Wash. I know you sell him cigarettes to sell to his brothers. He told me all about it. He's acting real antsy. You cutting him off or something?"

I got up and grabbed his arm. "Look, I told you, that's just business. I got the supply and he's got the customers. He makes a little and I make a little more. That's how business works. If he's acting antsy, maybe his homies are putting pressure on him. I'm telling you, you better watch your back with Wash. He knows the score and if you think he won't serve you up to save his ass, you better think again."

He jerked his arm out of my hand and rolled over to face the wall. I crawled back in my bunk and stared at the sagging mattress above me. I wasn't getting through. Dammit, I liked Picket, but he was hardheaded. He just didn't understand. It was going to take something bad happening to him before he'd get the picture. I stayed up all night thinking up a plan to get through to him before he got hurt.

On Friday, one day before Picket was going to get to see his kids at visitation, I planted a fork from the chow hall in the cell, and then I had my buddy Savage tip off a CO. It was harmless, but he'd get a disciplinary for it, and I needed to drive my point home.

Just as I planned, two bosses showed up. We stripped down and left the cell. One boss went inside while the other stayed outside with me and Picket. He started with Picket's locker and then went to his bunk. He checked the pillow and then lifted the mattress. He checked my bunk and then shined his flashlight in the toilet and under the sink. He got down on his knees and took the fork from the place I hid it between the sink and the wall. He turned to us, dropping it on the floor.

We watched the boss search the rest of the cell. He didn't find anything else. When he was done, he picked up the fork and walked over to us, holding it out in his hand.

"Whose contraband is this? Do I need to write both of you up or is one of you gonna confess?"

Picket was fidgeting; he knew what finding that fork meant. He wasn't gonna be seeing his kids this weekend. I let him stew a minute before I spoke up.

"That's mine, boss," I said. "I accidentally brought it back from chow today. I swear I didn't do it on purpose. I hid it till I

could take it back with me tomorrow morning. I'm telling the truth, man."

Now this boss standing here in front of me was a hard ass and I knew it. He wasn't going to let me off. He was bucking to make rank, and he was taking every opportunity to slap a disciplinary on anyone who stepped over the line. Picket shot me a concerned look and I shrugged my shoulders, letting him know I didn't really know where the fork had come from.

"That just cost you visitation, inmate. You'll be spending all weekend looking at these walls."

When we were back in the cell, Picket looked down the catwalk to see if the bosses were out of earshot. "What were you planning with that fork?" he asked. "Cause I know you weren't gonna take it back in the morning."

"It ain't mine," I said, lacing up my boots. "I thought it was yours."

"No way, it wasn't mine."

I smiled and shook my head. "I told you this was gonna happen. You said Wash has been acting antsy. He set you up, Picket."

He sat down on the floor and leaned against the bars. "Why? I ain't done nothing to him." Picket stared at the ceiling. He was thinking hard, and he was confused. Now I could get through to him.

"Don't you think his home boys are giving him the same grief RC is giving you? They probably made him do it. He's trying to get shed of you and you don't get it. I went down for you so you could see your kids. You think Wash would do that? Hell no."

I leaned over and slapped him on the back. "See? Who's got your back, Picket? Me or Wash?"

He grabbed my hand in a show of brotherhood. “You do, Eye. You do.”

So, I spent the next forty-eight hours staring at the ceiling in my cell. Picket spent one hour on Saturday and one hour on Sunday talking to his son and daughter. He was a changed man. I congratulated myself for doing what I did. It was underhanded, yes, but it served its purpose.

Four short days later and everything changed. Three boys came into the laundry to teach Wash a lesson. Instead of stepping back and letting them do their job, Picket jumped in the middle of it to protect him. He landed a few blows and then made sure the COs came in to break it up. When it was on the line, he laid down for Wash. An admirable quality, but one that’ll get you killed at Fonstel.

So here we stand, looking at my buddy Picket.

Six months into his time and it’s over. He’ll never see his kids again. If I’d known he would have stood up for Wash after all that happened, I’d never have sent those guys to the laundry. But Wash had crossed me. He owed me money. And business is business.

RC meant what he said when he warned me that Picket wouldn’t get a second chance. No one will ever know who took him out. The weapon was passed through the crowd and into the kitchen where it went through the dishwasher before any of the CO’s knew what happened.

A guy like Picket is dangerous in prison. He had too many loyalties. In here, you gotta choose.

I had to choose.

And that’s why as soon as he sat down, I took care of him the way RC told me to, then handed the shank off to Hammer

who made sure it got to the kitchen. Like I said before, I liked Picket.

He was a good guy. But business is business.

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Five O’Clock Shadow

TJ McIntyre

Localisation

US English

Reader Guidance

No cautions required.

Twirling the curls of the beard she no longer bothered to trim, she watched him walk down the driveway to his car. His blurred image through the dingy kitchen window of their second-floor apartment was a ghost of the man he used to be, the man she remembered, the man she had fallen in love with. The onetime width of his shoulders – once a source of pride, attraction, and cheer – had drooped over the years, falling down towards his belt, collecting as flab around his midsection. He waddled away, a tiny briefcase held in one chubby hand, the other clutching an umbrella too small to protect his girth from the rain beginning to fall. His suit stretched too tight in the waist, threatened to burst at the seams, while the empty shoulders of his suit sagged.

With the hand not twisting her flowing facial locks, she reached into the opening of her nightgown above her bosom and caressed her soft flesh, lost in a memory of another time when his suit fit, when they had first come here to settle down, to stop traveling, and lay down some roots. She longed for the days before they faced reality, when they could still dream of having a family. When he still held her small frame in his strong arms, locked in kisses that seemed to never end. She had felt so light

and carefree in his hard tattooed arm. She smiled at the thought, lost in time for a moment, before her present reality reared its ugly head. Despite their playfulness, their friskiness, despite his apparent virility, the family they imagined never became reality.

Years of steroids had bred infertility. The Strong Man's boys weren't strong swimmers.

And her beard was more than just a beard. She was no longer The Bearded Lady. She had no idea what she was anymore. Not after her ultrasound. Whatever she was, she had no uterus and the ghost of testicles in place of ovaries.

Before these revelations, they thought it could work. They had love and they thought that was all they needed. But those feelings passed, they disappeared overnight like the train cars they once rode back in the days before they turned their backs to the circus life forever.

She sometimes missed the Freakshow. She missed the attention, the constant affection of men's eyes being drawn towards her as she sat on her pedestal, brushing her beard, leaning over to give just a glimpse of her impressive cleavage. She felt her spectators' taboo desire, saw their eyes flaming with a passion they dared not admit to themselves, and felt cold now that not even her husband would look at her.

Not that he was much to look at these days, but married men never seem to notice their own reflections, they only notice the way their wife's looks reflect on them.

When first married, they tried to fit in, tried to make friends, and tried to live something resembling normal life. There was a time when she would shave clean or Nair her face, applying an ample layer of concealer to hide stubble bumps. Everyone noted her beauty and she felt eyes on her again, and at first it was nice. But then it rained, the concealer washed away and her weekly

bridge group saw her five o'clock shadow. The rumors circulated and their "normal" life dissolved like the vapor it was.

These days, her Strong Man ate more while working out less and less. He spent longer hours at the office, and returned home smelling of cheap perfume. She had her suspicions but ignored them at first. She threw herself at him, made many attempts to seduce him, but he always complained he was "too tired."

Then she saw other signs, ones she could no longer ignore. She remembered finding gaudily colored lipstick stained into his collars. She had been so angry. He had denied it at first, but both of them grew tired of the lies. His infidelities were out in the open between the two of them, both of them far too tired of each other to really care.

Tired of being insecure, tired of feeling unwanted, she promised today would be different. Today she would go out. She would find a boy to love her, to kiss her, to massage her, to undress her, and to worship her. She would no longer sit at home while he went out with that other woman. She promised herself she would find another man.

Once The Strong Man left the driveway, squeezed ridiculously tight into his tiny red Miata, The Bearded Woman went into the bathroom. She turned on the bath's faucet and went back into the kitchen where she poured herself a glass of wine while a hot bubble bath filled the tub. Lilac scented steam filled the bathroom when she returned. The water felt soft, smooth, and warm. It sent chills down her spine as she slunk into the bathwater. She bathed and sipped. She lathered herself, massaged herself, touched herself, and dipped herself beneath the water. She stayed in the tub until the water grew as cool as her broken heart.

Drying herself off with a towel, she looked at herself in the mirror and ran her fingers through her soft beard. She frowned. She took her husband's beard trimmer out from beneath the sink.

Click. Whir.

She ran the beard trimmer over her face. Dark, tightly curled locks fell into the sink.

Whir. Buzz.

She ran it over her face until the beard was gone. Then she pulled out her husband's razor and shaving cream. She shaved herself clean. She applied lotions, crèmes, and painted her face over a healthy layer of concealer. In her closet, she ran her fingers through her many skirts and dresses. She found a little black dress she was just a little too big for, squeezed into the fabric, and checked herself out in the mirror. She ran her fingers over the smooth exposed white skin of her bosom, noting how the cut of her dress complemented her curves. She leaned her leg out the slit of her dress and ran her hand up and down the smooth curves of her calf. Despite herself, she smiled at her reflection.

She tightened her bra a notch to squeeze her ample breasts upwards a fraction more. She leaned over and her smile grew.

“Perfect.”

She blew herself a kiss as she walked out the door.

It did not take long to find a likely candidate. He was at the grocery store, pretending to be lost. She was walking through the frozen vegetable section, smelling the cold and refrigeration. He kept looking to her. She smiled.

“Can I help you?”

“Oh. Sorry to bother you.” He stumbled over his words a little bit. He blushed, and put on a good show. She had seen him around the grocery store, knew him for what he was – all the ladies in the neighborhood knew him for what he was. This was

his turf, and he enjoyed lonely housewives. They often enjoyed him in return. She heard the gossip. "I was just looking for the wine section. I'm very new to this. My wife just recently left me. She used to do all the shopping."

She smiled as he laid it on thick. She knew he spoke lies, falsehoods. He was not what he portrayed himself to be at all. There was no tan line on his ring finger, no notch in the bone and skin where a ring had once been. She doubted he had ever been married at all. Not that she blamed him. From her experience, he was not missing out on much.

She placed her hand on his forearm, and decided to lay it on thick herself. "Oh, you poor dear. How terrible! Let me show you. It's right this way." She walked in front of him, taking slow methodical steps in her stilettos. She looked behind herself once, let her long black hair fall over her eye in a teasing way and smiled back at him. She saw him looking at her, looking hungry, his face flushed. She had him wrapped around her fingers and he did not even know it.

"Here it is." She leaned over a little to give her a glimpse of her cleavage. She turned on her most winning smile.

"Thank you." His voice stuttered a little.

"Anytime. I understand, you know. My husband recently left me." She looked away, took in a deep breath, holding up her breasts for him to see. Exhaled. "I get so lonely sometimes..."

And the deed was done. He took her to his house and showered her with affection, with kisses, and praised her beauty. Best of all, afterwards, he let her hold him. They lay together naked in the sheets watching the sun set.

As the sun sunk beneath a sea of small apartment complexes and duplexes, as the sky went from pink to purple, she ran her

hand over her face. He leaned over to kiss her once more and she wondered how he might react?

She hated that her five o'clock shadow always gave her away.

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<http://southernweirdo.wordpress.com>

Slots

Robert Aquino Dollesin

Localisation

US English

Reader Guidance

No cautions required.

The wife's name was Lourdes, and she sat leaning forward with her bony behind perched on the edge of the stool. She cursed loudly and pounded the glass face of the quarter slot machine.

The husband, Maurice, stood behind her kneading her shoulders. He said, "Getting late, dear. Maybe we should think about going back to the room." Maurice had experienced more than his share of flashing lights and whirring noises. He'd had enough of the stale smoke and complimentary coffees for one night.

Lourdes smacked the machine again, this time with the flat of her palm. She whipped her head around, glared at her husband and said, "Go away, will you? You've been bringing me lousy luck all night." She shrugged free of her husband's hands and twisted back around to give the machine's handle another yank.

She was like this sometimes. Especially when things weren't going her way. Oftentimes, her already uncaring demeanor toward Maurice eroded into outright ugliness. Tonight, however, she was as bad as Maurice could remember, obviously deciding to settle in for the long haul to try to recover the money she'd already lost.

"Come on, Lourdes," Maurice pleaded. "Let's go to the room."

Without turning to face him, Lourdes said, "I'm not walking away from a machine that's ready to pay." Behind the glass in front of her the symbols skidded to a stop.

Lourdes gave a tiny, clenched-teeth squeal and slapped the machine again. She frowned over her shoulder and said, "Why are you still here?"

Why indeed, Maurice wondered. All these years and she'd been the same uncaring, insensitive Lourdes. A woman who cared only about herself. He glanced down at his shoes and sighed. Ten years of marriage to a woman like Lourdes hadn't been easy. Although he'd tried to overlook her selfishness, it was getting to the point where he couldn't ignore the mounting thoughts of leaving her. But again and again he asked himself, just how does a man up and leave someone he once loved more than anything? How do you give up all the invested years? He may not have been the happiest man in the world, but he figured he was content. He had a job, owned a home, ate three meals a day. What more could a man want? Love? Perhaps. But was it worth the trouble of chasing down such a desire?

Maurice heard an odd, choking noise and raised his head. Lourdes? Where was she? Her seat in front of the slot machine was empty. He broke out in a sweat. His hands began to tremble. It was then he caught a coiling wisp of gray smoke in front of the machine. Slowly, the smoke streamed through the machine's coin catch. On the carpet at the foot of the empty stool rested Lourdes's little red sandals.

He crept forward and placed a palm on the empty cushion. The seat was warm, the vinyl impression of his wife's butt rose beneath his hand. What should he do? He combed the crowded

casino for one of the red-blazered attendants. But of course, like police officers at a crime scene, there were none to be found. He stared at the line of blinking buttons on the slot machine Lourdes had been abusing. There was a red button with the word 'HELP' printed on it. Maurice went to press the button, thinking maybe that would bring someone over.

With his finger hovering above the 'HELP' button, Maurice noticed Lourde's forty dollars worth of unused credits. Almost instinctively, he drew his hand away from the button. He thought a minute, then reached up and grabbed the handle with his sweaty palm. He glanced around furtively to make sure no one was paying attention, then he yanked the handle toward him and watched the wheels spin.

When the wheels came to a halt, Maurice stared long and hard. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

On the centerline behind the glass, one of Lourdes's hands rested between two red cherries. He knew the hand belonged to Lourdes's, because the fingernails were painted that gaudy purple she liked. He backed away from the slot machine and stared in horror as the fingers on the hand began to wiggle, as if to say, "Hey, look at me." The purple fingernails tapped the inside of the glass.

Lourdes?

Maurice took a step closer and rapped his knuckles against the glass.

With his knees bouncing like crazy, he pulled the handle again.

This time when the wheels quit spinning, one of Lourdes's feet was lined up to the right of a pair of golden bells. While Maurice stared, a grin grew on his face. The bare foot reared back and kicked the glass hard. Maurice quickly gave the handle

another tug, and when the wheels rolled to a stop, both of Lourdes's brown eyes gazed back at him from behind the glass. A fat genie sat to the left of the eyes. Without the rest of Lourdes's bronzed face to complement her eyes, it was apparent to Maurice just how thick a coat of mascara covered Lourdes's lashes. He tilted his head and studied the centerline, letting his eyes wander from left to right, from right to left, watching his wife's eyes blink open and closed in rapid succession. Finally, Lourdes's eyes narrowed into murderous slits.

Maurice gave the wheel another spin and laughed out loud. Poor Lourdes. Her eyes grew wide before whirling away. One flew upward, the other plunged down. The wheel snapped to a stop and just his luck, staring at Maurice from dead center was Lourdes's big mouth. One of her ears, a dangling feather earring still attached, rested on the right of her big mouth. A lucky number 7 was bold on the left.

The lips flapped up and down, opening and closing. The too-white teeth appeared and disappeared, as did Lourdes's quivering tonsils. Maurice was sure she was spewing on about being inside the machine, but for once in his life he didn't have to hear a thing she said. Bringing his mouth close to the glass, Maurice whispered,

"It's over between us, dear."

Lourdes's lips continued to flap. Maurice grabbed the handle but before pulling it, he leaned an ear against the glass.

Lourdes said, "Get me --"

Maurice spun the wheel again.

Foot, cherry, bell. Nose, knee, a lucky number 7. Two ears and a fisted hand. It went that way a while, always the winning combination of genies or bells or cherries were ruined by one of Lourdes's body parts.

The credits plummeted. It occurred to Maurice that this machine would never pay off. He punched the cash-out button and watched the ticket spit out the slot. He closed his eyes and tried to remember what it was like to be happily married and intimate. But the only image he got inside his head was one of Lourdes screaming at him for one reason or another. He slid over to the stool in front of the next machine and, after feeding the ticket, he yanked the handle.

And there it was. His luck had changed. Three fat genies all in a row. A hundred and thirty bucks. Maurice fanned his face with his fingers. This has to be a sign, he thought. He printed his winning ticket and got up from the stool. A muffled scream rose from the slot machine that had swallowed his wife. Should he call for help? The more he thought about it, the more he could see it didn't matter one way or the other. He didn't feel that same constraint he'd felt before tonight. He felt suddenly free. He felt as though life was suddenly endless and limitless.

When he heard Lourdes scream again, Maurice smiled. He pocketed his winning ticket, twisted the ring off his finger and dropped it clinking into the ashtray next to the machine.

Tips for the Apocalypse

L. Burrow

Localisation

US English

Reader Guidance

No caution needed. This all sounds *fine*...

Survival Skills and Styrofoam Recipes *Excerpted from the Blog of Boomer Johnstone*

Loath as I am to admit it, the recession is real. I tried my damndest to do my part and stimulate the economy by blowing all my cash and credit on consumer electronics, but neglected to set aside a single red cent for groceries. My meager food stuffs dwindled down to a cache of portion-control condiment packets, and with two weeks until payday, the situation was dire. A great hunger gripped my gut. Being a pragmatist, I searched for a cheap and abundant harvest.

I failed at foraging for food in my suburban environment. Evolution has robbed me of my feral capabilities. I am a man unaccustomed to the outdoors, therefore hard lessons were learned. Gray squirrels, those happy-go-lucky darlings with the long, loping tails, are hellacious varmints when cornered. Pigeons are not foolhardy creatures; they are larcenous minions who kept clear of my snare but ate all my grain. Pine needles go down hard, and are a horror show to pass. My untrained eye in

the art of mushroom hunting resulted in the ingestion of psychedelic substances which at first was wonderful until the awe wore off and I spent the next four hours engaged in a life-affirming struggle with a warthog that somehow came to inhabit my living room. And though I won the death match, there was no meat to be had because the beast was a figment of my imagination. However, my foray into the unknown sparked an idea: my needs were right beneath my nose.

At first, I didn't care for the taste or texture of packing peanuts. They are rather bland and gamey. However, my humble abode was infested with them after my recent shopping spree. Realizing that questionable sustenance was at hand, I first nibbled, then gnawed and after a short while without any unbearable pain nor violent upchuck, I found myself chowing down. And while the act of dining on Styrofoam seemed a shameful thing, I knew that I could stretch my food dollar to accommodate my wanton lusts all while maintaining a full belly and svelte figure.

Recently, readers of this blog have posted queries asking about my extreme departure from traditional nutritionist thinking. Conventional wisdom believes that nourishment relies wholly upon carbohydrates, proteins, amino acids, minerals and the like. I maintain that this is a massive falsehood. If my appetite is satiated, my belly filled to capacity, then that is all I require.

So should one decide to adopt my diet, I have come up with a handful of recipes and cooking tips. First off: don't cook with Styrofoam. Don't bake it, don't fry it, and never, ever grill it. When eating packing peanuts, it should be regarded as a macrobiotic, whole-foods lifestyle. By not cooking Styrofoam, you are certain to get the full nutritional value and caloric intake

the food allows, which is not much. I have determined that it is low in protein, low in carbohydrates and extremely high in fiber. Cooking is a timely task, and more often than not, an unnecessary hassle. Don't bother. If you need, you might be able to get away with toasting it, but anything else will result in a noxious soup.

Secondly, don't try the soup. It will congeal in your esophagus. It may have the creamy appearance of melted marshmallows, but all similarities end there. The nominal flavor of solid Styrofoam turns to a revolting glob of chlorofluorocarbons which will tear a hole in the ozone directly above your home. No amount of oyster crackers can create a nostalgic recollection of New England clam chowder.

Thus noted, a vigorous imagination is indeed needed, for it nearly alleviates the tasteless nature of any polystyrene-based meal. In order to truly enjoy your dining experience, each recipe requires a fictitious setting and an agreeable back story, a virtual reality of sorts. Allow me this opportunity to whet your appetites.

Styrofoam gumbo: This hearty and savory soup screams Creole. Close your eyes. Listen to the jazz of Bourbon Street, or maybe the buzzing of mosquitoes on the bayou. Can you hear it? Now, artfully fuse hot tap water, a handful of packing peanuts and a dash of Tabasco.

Styrofoam Delight: Craving take-out? Why not take in the air and walk to your local Chinese eatery? Peruse the menu and dream, drink in the ambiance, then steal some packets of soy sauce and hot mustard. Go home and combine your booty with room temperature Styrofoam.

Styrofoam Sausage: Remember those afternoons spent in the kitchen with your grandmother as she fed scrapple through the

meat grinder? Ah, the scent of innards! Sausage is perfect recession fare because it makes use of waste. Delicately feed finely ground Styrofoam, lint and paper scraps into the mouth of an unused condom, preferably lambskin.

Styrofoam Sushi: Tokyo is a bustling city, and you are in the midst of the lights, in a throng of people crossing a clogged street. You eye an underground bar advertising fresh squid and karaoke. Chill Styrofoam with wasabi and eat with chopsticks.

Styrofoam Arkansas: It is summertime at the county fair, you just won a stuffed gorilla for swinging the hammer and ringing the bell on the high-striker. Now you have a hankering for bar-b-que. Hold Styrofoam under a sixty watt bulb for thirty seconds and coat with BBQ sauce, serve on a paper plate. Try eating the plate for dessert with a sprinkle of confectioner's sugar.

You too can eat like a king and have a cabinet like a cornucopia, spilling forth packing peanuts into your open maw. Remember, with the proper topping and the right kind of fancy, you could be eating a chicken soft taco on the tip of the Baja peninsula, or maybe a bowl of moo shu pork in the Szechuan province, or perhaps a heaping pile of whale blubber on the coast of Norway. If you deem it delectable and delicious, then delectable and delicious it shall be. Dig in and dream.

Sugar Daddy

Chris Peterson

Localisation

US English

Reader Guidance

No caution required

New York (AFP Exclusive) – It seems that nobody is immune to our troubled economic times, and Citizens for Rational Welfare Reform (CRWR), a New York City-based coffee klatch that poses as a non-partisan think tank, has come up with a novel solution to poverty that has been obvious to certain gold-digging women since Eve: the “Be a Sugar Daddy!” program.

“The idea is simple,” says Sam Lockey, CRWR spokesman, in a press release that he wrote himself and emailed, unsolicited, to AFP. “Those who have money get married to those who do not. It’s a redistribution of wealth that uses marriage, the great equalizer, to even the score between the haves and the have-nots. All over the country,” Lockey continues, “there are single men with money to burn. These are college professors, owners of landscape companies, website designers, cell phone salesmen, all of whom are needlessly squirreling money away into Wall Street, investments, IRA’s and other fiscally responsible and economy-boosting endeavors. If each one of these men married a welfare mom—if he became a Sugar Daddy—the problem of poverty could be cut in half.”

Economists love the plan. “This is a tax-free solution that avoids the government middle man,” says Geral Institute economist Tina Branco. “Every penny goes directly to those in need with no overhead expenses.” The Geral Institute, an organization that you have never heard of but are nevertheless to take very seriously, was formed in 2003 with the sole aim of promoting its Board of Directors, many of whom also sit on the Board of CRWR.

“I met Sara through the Sugar Daddy program,” says executive email analyst John Stone (which might or might not be his real name). “I used to donate blood every eight weeks, and although that’s good, I never really knew if I was making a difference. Money I donate [shrugs]... nothing back. Charity through marriage is a great way to make a difference in what has become an American crisis; welfare. I see the results directly in my own home and at night in my bed.”

Raj Ramakrishnawanajan, pastor at St. Casey at the Bat Church and a contact recommended by Lockey, agrees. “The rich man came to Jesus and asked how to get to Heaven,” Raj says in his thick Irish brogue. “Jesus told him to sell everything he owned and give it to the poor. If we open our homes to the poor, are we not living Christ’s teaching of charity? It takes real faith to do this and adds a new dimension of service to the institution of marriage.”

Not only men are Sugar Daddies. Christine Pacolet, a pro-real estate financial planner from Carnes, Georgia, four months ago married Joe Block, an auto mechanic who was on disability for nebulous and dubious lower-back problems and soft-tissue pain. “Joe used to have one of the worst houses in town,” Pacolet chuckles with memory. “His property was a real embarrassment; cars on blocks, knee-high grass, junk everywhere. Since we’ve

been married and he lives with me, he sold his house to a condo developer who now has four of the cutest little bungalows on the site. It's a real addition to the city." AFP only wanted to talk with people of influence, so Mr. Block was not reached for comment.

CRWR reports that the plan is already getting results, although no records are kept and there is no way to know how many Sugar Daddies there actually are. CRWR estimates that in the first six months of the Sugar Daddy program, at least 150 people were able to get off welfare, saving state and federal agencies well over \$1 million a year. And that's just the beginning: CRWR believes without evidence that there might be at least 200 more marriages pending in the next six months. "What's even better," says Branco, "is that if the marriage ends in divorce the woman usually gets to keep her profits, and even continues to receive dividends from her Sugar Daddy long after the marriage is dissolved."

"The only downside to the program," laments Stone, "is that I can't marry more than one and make an even bigger difference!"

"We're working on that," replies Lockey, with a wink.

Where Little Old Women Go On Rainy Days

Linda Evans

Localisation

UK English

Reader Guidance

No cautions needed.

Eliza doesn't like little old women.

Little old women are dirty creatures who smell of mothballs and cocoa and toilet water and sit on the chair by the window like a pile of last week's crumpled washing and shelter from the rain.

Little old women don't buy any of Eliza's things, not the silken skeins of ribbon or the delicate hand-made lace or the silken scarves from Italy or the mohair wool in pastel shades.

Little old women browse and flitter and touch things and smell things and finger cloth and squint at buttons while they watch for the rainclouds to pass on by.

Eliza takes little old women who smell and sit and wait and don't buy and browse and touch and smell and squint and watch and cuts them into little pieces and puts them in hat boxes and sits them in the display window where the roof has a leak and raindrops drip onto the cardboard.

Eliza doesn't like little old men either.

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I Forget My Name

Casey Quinn

I forget my name
now and again
when the stress of it all
cracks my back like
a dead branch in the wind
and my head aches, pounds
from all of the number one
priorities jammed inside.

Pressure piled upon
responsibility
pushed down harder
by the powers that be
to squeeze every drop
of energy I have to give.

Left grasping
for air as
life tightens around
my neck and
pulls me under
year upon year
of the same
drum beat.

I black out
until you call

me by my name
and I remember
there is more
to this.

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[Short Story Library](#)
[ReadMe Publishing](#)

Casey's poetry collection "Snapshots of Life" is available under ISBN 978-0-9561552-0-7 and may be purchased [here](#) for \$11.36.

RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

~AFTERWORD~

First, my apologies for the delay to this edition. I would say that this is due to circumstances outside my control, but that would mean discarding an important article of faith. RPM editors control *everything*. How can it be otherwise? In the RPM Airship we drift above the Pyrenees, scouting for stories and the goatherds of Pan. We rain lightning and love down upon an admiring populace. We are not prone to worry, vacillation, pilonidal cysts or any kind of mortal infirmity.

Thus: the delay is not our fault. It is our *choice!*

In this spirit of editorial inerrancy, please consider taking part in our new competition: the War on Error. You may think there are spelling mistakes or unconventional typographical features within this edition. This is not the case. The truth is that we have meticulously and deliberately inserted minor quirks into the text specifically for your enjoyment. The reader who can return to us within 48 hours of publication with the greatest number of “little shining prizes” (as we call them) will receive \$20.00. To apply, simply email your list of delightful, playful quirks to editor@ruthlesspeoples.com.

Incidentally, why am I suddenly saying that ‘no caution is needed’ when RPM writers are at play?

Submitters: some sterner stuff, if you please.

Yours truly,

Dominic Hamer
Editor
London, 2009