

RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

WEDDING CAKE

RPM 03, 14 May 2009

A Penny Dreadful for Nothing

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~ABOUT RPM~

Ruthless Peoples Magazine 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 a goodly Story is transcendent.

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 quite rough sometimes; do take care.

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Quiet

Brendan Detzner

Localisation:

US English

Reader guidance:

This story has swearing, torture, violence and death. If citizens agreed to have barcodes tattooed on their foreheads, this sort of trouble could be avoided.

Sleepy drove back to his building and took the elevator to the third floor. He heard Doc yelling as the doors slid open and saw a naked man with rope burns all over his body sprint past. Sleepy dropped the Chinese food and tackled him, got him on his back and hit him in the face. He kept squirming; there was blood streaming down his nose, staining his teeth and his mustache. Sleepy hit him again. The blow connected with the side of the naked man's head and he stopped moving.

Sleepy stood up, grabbed the naked man's ankles, and dragged him towards the apartment. A pretty older woman in a bathrobe poked out her head just as they got him through the doorway.

"You didn't see shit, ma'am!" Doc shouted, and they closed the door. There were still two take-out boxes lying on the floor near the elevator.

There had been seven of them originally, but the only orders they'd gotten were calls home for guys on the team, nothing

about what they were supposed to do with the target. It had been down to Sleepy and Doc for nearly two weeks. The target's name was Harry Nelson. They called him Harry when they had to call him something. Usually you called the target by their last name but Harry had stayed Harry for some reason.

They had nothing they were supposed to do except babysit the fax machine. It was like waiting for a girl to call you back.

“You’ve got good reflexes,” Doc said.

He finished up, took a step back, and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“Don’t know how he got out. Fucking Houdini, this guy.”

Sleepy was sitting on the couch. If they’d lost the target he’d have been dead, even if it hadn’t been his fault. Close call, but Sleepy didn’t feel it, he felt good. It was like a gap had opened up in his chest and given everything room to stretch out. Also, he had an erection, something that had been happening at odd times lately. He tried hard not to think about it too much.

Doc dipped into the kitchen and came back with a long carving fork. He waved its prongs slowly in front of the naked man’s face.

“Teach you to run on me, motherfucker.”

He’d been hitting the prisoner pretty hard over the last few days, beating him up, messing with his food, fucking with his head in different ways. Nothing that cut the skin, though.

“We need him in one piece,” Sleepy said, not sure if he was overstepping his bounds. Doc wasn’t the type to pull rank often, but he was technically in charge.

“He’ll stay in one piece.” He smirked and lowered the point of the fork, gently pressed it against the skin underneath the naked man’s left nipple.

Sleepy stared at the man's chest, then snapped out of it. "Shit..." He turned his head away and closed his eyes. "I'm gonna go watch T.V."

"You're welcome to stay," Doc said, but Sleepy went into the kitchen.

The television was sitting on the table on the opposite side of the room from the sink. Reception was bad; they didn't have cable; it was a security thing. The only show that stayed in tune was about a crime lab that used high-tech tools to catch serial killers.

The fax machine came to life, shaking the table as the machinery buzzed and the gears turned. Sleepy read the new orders as they came through. He read them again when they were done printing, then again, then one more time.

He opened a drawer and lifted up the Tupperware that contained the cutlery. Underneath was a stack of old order sheets. They were supposed to destroy them, but nobody wanted to be the guy who fucked up because he forgot something and didn't have any way to double check.

Sleepy dug through the pile until he found what he wanted, put it down on the counter next to the new orders, and read them both.

They were fucked.

He had to bang on the door for more than five minutes before Doc opened it a crack and stuck his head through. He was holding the fork. There was blood on the tip of one of the prongs.

"What?"

"The orders. I think we're in deep shit."

Doc looked past Sleepy, over at the fax machine, and put on his business face.

“Give me a second, all right?”

He closed the door. Sleepy could hear him talking.

I'm going to give you a little break now, but I'm going to leave this here to give you something to think about. See you in a few minutes.

He returned to the kitchen without the fork.

“What’s up?”

Sleepy showed him the new fax:

SORRY FOR THE WAIT BOYS. CONTINUE TO DETAIN
HARRY NEILSON. BURN AFTER READING.

“Probably just a typo,” Doc said. He didn’t look worried.

“No shit, which fucking one?”

“Keep your voice down, we got neighbors.” He was still staring in the direction of the orders but not at them. Sleepy paced back and forth across the kitchen, letting Doc talk. “Either Nelson is the bad guy and the first message had the mistake or Neilson is the bad guy and the second message had the mistake. It’s a coin flip.”

“It’s a fuckup. As soon as somebody realizes they made a mistake the whole operation is gonna get cleaned.”

“Relax, relax.” Doc crumpled the old orders into a ball and turned on the garbage disposal. “The new orders are asking for a Neilson. We’ll make sure we have a Nelson for them.”

“You mean a Neilson.”

“Yeah, that’s what I mean.” Doc laughed. “See, this is the whole problem with grabbing white people. If we got a Abdel mixed up with a Abdullah nobody’d care. I mean shit, we’re supposed to be fighting fucking terrorism.”

Sleepy just stared at him.

“All right, sorry, not funny. Anyway, we got to make sure that the guy we have in there is a Neilson. We have to wash him out like a pair of muddy jeans. Low protein diet in a pitch black room, the whole nine yards.”

“You know how to do all that?”

“Sure. I’m going to need help, though.”

“No. No way.”

“Come on. It’s not like you’re not an asshole. We’re all assholes here. You don’t mind hurting people.”

“Not like that.”

“So what you’re saying is, you don’t want to grab this guy’s balls and watch the look in his eyes when he goes from not believing what’s happening to not knowing what’s going to happen next. You don’t want to make him cry, you don’t want to make him beg. That’s not you.”

Sleepy didn’t answer, he just stood there.

“I’ll tell you what,” Doc continued. “There’s no reason to argue until we’re sure of the situation. How about we just go over in the next room and ask our subject how his last name is spelled in a way that we’re sure he’ll answer? You’re going to want to hear what he has to say firsthand, right? Just to make sure?”

Doc opened the door.

The naked man was on the floor. His chair was tipped over. He was still tied to it but he’d gotten one of his arms free and he’d been able to drag himself over to where Doc had left the fork. He’d cut his own throat.

Sleepy and Doc were silent. Doc approached the body.

“Guy had a real talent for slipping out of a rope,” he finally said. He crouched down, took a closer look. “Fuckin’ Houdini.”

They left the corpse in the apartment and drove around for a while. They found someone; he was wearing a flannel shirt and he was by himself. Just walking down the street at four o'clock in the morning. They stopped the car.

“Is there something I could help you guys with ...”

Sleepy punched him in the throat. He gagged and fell forward. Doc grabbed his neck and choked him until he was unconscious. They carried him over to the car and threw him in the trunk.

They gagged him, wrapped some bungee cords around his wrists and ankles, and slammed the trunk shut.

They got further orders three weeks later. They still had to sit tight for a few more days, but they could come home after that. They had Harry locked in the closet. He knew what his name was; it hadn't taken long.

Their last night at the apartment there was a thunderstorm and the TV didn't work. They played Scrabble. Sleepy had a Q and a bunch of vowels. He knew there was a place for them somewhere, but couldn't quite make it fit.

“I'm glad everything worked out,” Doc said. “You have a real touch, you know that?”

Sleepy didn't say anything.

“It's nothing to be afraid of.”

Sleepy looked away from the board.

“Is it normal?”

“Beats me,” Doc said. “But they never have trouble finding people.”

Sleepy dumped his tiles into the bag and got seven new ones.

“Your move,” he said quietly.

Doc put his letters down right away.

“My advice would be to enjoy it,” he said. “While it’s something fresh. Before it’s just a job.”

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Le Tunnel

Liam Owen Davies

Localisation

UK English

Guidance Note

Contains some mild swearing, a French funfair and depravity. Reader discretion is advised.

Domenic le Poulet fished his chubby fingers beneath the layers of his suit-jacket to pluck his silk shirt from his sticky armpits. Paris sweltered in the heat with him. The sunlight scorched off the beautiful buildings making it hard to see anything, even through the tinted windows of the limousine. Pascal, Domenic's driver, knew better than to look at his employer in the rear-view mirror no matter how much enjoyment he could derive from the (self-proclaimed) Great One's discomfort. The driver kept a gargoyle's demeanour and continued to seek the most traffic-free route from the city while Monsieur le Poulet's face blushed hot and his nether regions grew slick with sweat. A heat wave was no blessing to a fat man, no matter how powerful he was.

“Pascal you fool – get a move on.”

The driver nodded and took an instinctive right turn. Domenic watched the Eiffel Tower sink behind the foreground as they sped uphill away from the Seine. Soon they were at the Place de Clichy, turning the roundabout beneath the Moulin Rouge and heading north through the district of Clichy towards

quieter roads. Twenty minutes later, once clear of Paris, they found their bearings and headed toward Domenic's flagship theme park: Pouletville.

Monsieur le Poulet was an hour and a half late for Philippe Manyard's presentation, which made him happy. He thought of Manyard sitting alone in his office, twiddling his thumbs and trembling with anticipation of his arrival. *It'll teach the little shit to fool around with my daughter*, Domenic thought, *if the new ride fails it's his neck*. He would have fired Manyard sooner if the young designer hadn't possessed such a genius for creating popular theme park rides. Domenic arrived with the express intention to look for any possible fault in Manyard's work.

They entered the park through the security entrance to the south. All the rides, except for the new Manyard site, were deactivated and his employees—who manned the cafés, ticket booths, crepe stands and ice-cream kiosks—were all leaving for the day. The limousine weaved between hulking attractions that dotted the fabricated landscape like high-tensile steel dinosaur carcasses. As the car drew nearer to the office where Manyard waited, a flicker of an image flashed across Domenic's consciousness: his twenty year old daughter, naked, wrapped around his ride designer; bared breasts, toned stomachs, derrieres grinding, things that made him feel livid with envy.

He gritted his teeth.

When he entered the offices Manyard glanced at his watch and sighed.

Was this dog questioning his lateness?

He motioned Manyard to sit down with a sweep of his chubby hand and squeezed himself into the leather recliner by the window.

“It’s none of your concern, Monsieur Manyard, as to when I attend. Concern yourself with making sure that you are here before me when I do. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Monsieur Le Poulet. I’m sorry.”

“Good. Begin.”

Manyard sauntered over to the Powerpoint screen and turned on the projector with a remote slide controller. The screen flickered to life, revealing the Pouletville logo: a chicken wearing a baseball cap. Its wing feathers formed fingers, and the idiotic fowl stuck both ‘thumbs’ up to anyone who cared to look. Doppelgangers of the thing were plastered over every spare surface of the park and, during opening hours, unfortunate employees were detailed to walk around in chicken costumes and pull the same pose for bemused families. Manyard cleared his throat and clicked the remote. The bird faded to a faint watermark and the legend ‘Le Tunnel’ appeared over it in a bold white typeface.

“Hate the name already,” said Domenic, lighting a cigar.

“Le Tunnel? But it’s quite suitable.”

“Change it.”

“Well, if you see what it actually—”

“I said I don’t like it.”

Manyard stared at his employer for a few seconds, debating whether or not to continue his protestation. Upon seeing Monsieur Le Poulet’s curdling visage he decided to press on. He clicked and the slide changed to reveal a series of graphs, budget breakdowns, pie diagrams and profit margins.

“Monsieur Le Poulet, where this design has already succeeded lies in the fact that I have been able to use local building contractors to erect it. By avoiding the use of specialist constructors we have saved ourselves nearly eighty percent of

the usual labour and material costs. This new ride has cost only a fraction of the price of a roller coaster, for example, and to top it all, I envisage we could charge at least thirty Euros per ticket.”

Domenic was impressed but disguised it by interrupting with three slow arrogant claps. If the boy had excelled himself with the new attraction he couldn't really fire him.

He had an idea. He'd have him killed instead. It was a no lose situation: greater profits and Manyard either dead or fired.

May as well kill him either way.

“So,” said le Poulet, “tell me about the ride.”

Manyard took a deep breath, clicked the remote, and the slide revealed an image of Pouletville's newest attraction. The artist's impression revealed a sunny corner of the theme park with a long building, clad in black slate tiles. The depiction of people exiting the ride at the end of the building showed grins and hands over mouths and wide eyes and joyous screams. Another click on the remote revealed a cross section. All that lay from entrance to exit was an enclosed walkway: *Le Tunnel*.

“Is that it? A Tunnel? A corridor?”

“Technically, yes,” said Manyard. “That is what I've had built.” The young man beamed hopefully.

“You mean to say that you've spent the last six months on commission ... and all you've done is design and build a corridor? No cars, no track, nothing?”

“That's the beauty of it. It's so simple; so elegant.” Manyard walked over to the screen and pointed to the entry point of the cross sectioned diagram. “The person buys a ticket and enters here. This is what I call the ‘light-lock’. It is a room with no natural light. When they enter, the door behind them will close and, after a few seconds, the door opposite—which leads to the

tunnel—opens. This way the tunnel will always be unlit. It will always be devoid of light.”

Domenic shuffled his weight, rubbed his temples and groaned.

“The tunnel runs for a hundred metres,” continued Manyard. “All the person has to do is walk to the other end. When they get there they press a large wall-mounted button on the wall to open a door to another ‘light-lock’, the tunnel will close behind them and they can go on their way.”

“You’re fired.”

“What?”

“You’re fired.”

“What is it that you don’t like?”

“This whole thing’s absurd. It’s nonsense.”

“No, please don’t fire me. Try it. I promise you won’t be disappointed. The ride is psychological. The maintenance costs are virtually zero apart from shampooing and vacuuming the carpet. Please, try the ride Monsieur le Poulet!”

They shared half a minute of silence, then Manyard sat down. Domenic sat back and, upon noticing that the hands Manyard had placed over his mouth were shaking, he smiled.

“Okay,” said Domenic, “just so I don’t jump the gun, I’ll consider keeping you on staff, if as you say your ride works.”

“Thank you.”

“On one condition.”

“What condition?”

“That you never see my daughter again.”

After a few seconds, much to Domenic’s surprise, Manyard nodded in meek agreement. He had assumed the designer would have shown a bit of grit considering the conditions imposed, especially in the light of his daughter’s announcement that she

had fallen in love with Manyard only a month ago. Regardless, his daughter was to be his once again; he would have her all to himself.

Twenty minutes later they were outside. The entrance to Le Tunnel was a grand fibreglass façade. A molasses black awning formed the mouth and throat of the behemoth.

“And only one person goes through at a time?”

“Yes,” said Manyard. “The whole thing is a sensory deprivation experience. The ‘ride’ comes from *inside* the person as they are left to press on through the darkness”

“Let’s do it. I don’t have all day.”

Manyard led him through the awning and pressed a button on the wall. The door slid sideways with a hum of electric motors, and sunlight illuminated a room that was about double the size of a telephone box. It had another set of electric doors on the other side.

“Okay,” said Manyard. “Go in. I’ll close the doors behind you and you will be in complete darkness. A second later I shall open the doors ahead of you. As soon as you’ve crossed over into the main corridor the second door will automatically close and lock behind you. The only way out is to get to the door at the other end. There will be a button on the wall next to it. Press this and the exit will open.”

“Fine. Let’s see if you are as good as you say you are.”

He shuffled into the small room.

“Enjoy!” said Manyard to Domenic’s back.

Domenic didn’t like the impudent tone in the young man’s voice and whirled around to admonish him only to see the door draw across Manyard’s face.

Was the man smiling?

When the door had locked shut he was shrouded in darkness. Then the door behind him whirred open. He followed the sound; turned his bulk to face the tunnel. In the absence of light he couldn't see the doorframe, so he spread out his hands before him to feel his way. His left struck the edge of the entrance and he shuffled through. The door closed behind him and he was locked in, just as Manyard had said. He put an arm out to each side but felt nothing.

Clever, Manyard, he thought. You made the tunnel wide to disorientate me, did you? He moved to his left and, after two sideways steps, he met the wall with his hand.

The tunnel was air-conditioned, and despite the sweat drying in the clefts of his crotch, he felt comfortable in the cool. He shuffled forwards, tentative, unsure as to whether Manyard had any surprises in store for him. As he pressed on he became conscious of his heartbeat quickening. He took a few deep breaths to calm down but his aspirates seemed noisy in the blackness. He stopped still and remained there for a few seconds holding his breath.

What am I afraid of drawing attention to? It's only an empty tunnel. Then he realized: this was Manyard's brilliance. The darkness provided a blank slate for the mind to create its own demons.

He massaged his left breast to subdue his jiggering heart. It didn't work so Domenic put his back to the wall and slid down to seat himself upon the floor. He felt carpet with his fingers. He wondered if it was coloured. It seemed odd to him: looking in the direction of his hand and not seeing anything. He looked across to the other side. The opposite wall could be one or even five metres away. There was no way of telling. And was that a ceiling or just a dead starless sky above him? The only way of

finding out would be to make a noise loud enough in order to judge by the echo, but for some reason he didn't want to do that. It was as if his mind were telling him that some dreadful beast lay dormant, somewhere in the space with him, and he was scared to wake it.

He decided, at least, to define the opposite wall. He crawled forward and outstretched an arm. Some coins clinked as they budged in his pocket and he froze. He twisted his head each way, irrationally expecting to feel hot demonic breath on him. None came. He reached out his hand and touched the wall. He shuffled up against it and emptied his pocket change onto the carpet.

Domenic looked back toward the wall he had been sitting against just moments ago. It was exactly the same view. Indeed it was exactly the same view as when he held up his hand, inches in front of his face. He blinked to confirm whether or not his eyes were open. Apart from a pervading calm when he had his eyes closed, there was no difference in what his eyes drank. It was as if Philippe Manyard had made him disappear. Was that the little bastard's plan? To be rid of him so that he could take his daughter away? Did he plan to marry her and inherit Pouletville? Leave him to rot in this infernal tunnel?

He visualised Manyard's smile as he had locked him into the ride and was on his feet fast enough to feel his gut and haunches wobble.

"Manyard!" he screamed. The echo startled him as it bellowed back in both directions. He spun around, now unsure which direction he was facing. He walked on and immediately banged his face against the wall at a diagonal. Staggering back he felt the warmth of blood spit from his nostrils over his chin and suit; it tasted of old coins as some dripped through his parted

fat lips. The sticky liquid plastered his shirt against his skin. “Bastard!” The tunnel repeated his curse back several times.

He had to get out. He put his left hand to the wall, held his silk tie to his bloody nose with his right and staggered as best he could toward the exit. He had only made some thirteen steps or so, when he reached the door. It wasn’t quite the one hundred metre long tunnel he’d been told. Still keeping his nose stuffed with necktie he flapped his free hand around the doorframe for the button. Where was it? Had Manyard really entombed him? His blood pressure was set to rise again when he realised he’d stepped approximately the same distance that he had when starting off into the tunnel. He must have walked along the other wall with his left hand. He’d led himself back to the entrance.

He wondered how long he had been inside. Domenic sat down against the door and stared ahead at the one hundred metres of carpeted nothingness in his way. His blood was clotting now and he could afford to take his tie away from his nose. It stung as he broke it from the crunchy rings of blood caked to his nostrils. The brief pain cleared all notions that Manyard was behind some kind of conspiracy against him. He was sure the boy feared him. All his paranoia had proved was that this ride was a fantastic mind trip; on the upside this meant *money*.

Domenic le Poulet was in charge of his faculties once more: He could have the designer murdered instead of firing him. And he would be left to enjoy his daughter all to himself again. Thoughts of her lean, naked body—the spit of how her mother’s had been in life—flickered like a super eight projection in his mind’s eye. He closed his eyes, undid his zipper, and let his turgid penis out to enjoy the air. He mentally replayed the secret images he’d obtained from the planted cameras in the garret he’d

bought her. Initially, he'd fought his impulse to have the cameras installed, but Julie looked so much like her mother, especially now she'd blossomed into a young adult, that whenever he watched his daughter it almost felt as though he'd never had her mother killed at all. No! His wife was still alive, in her twenties, and deeply indebted to him, just like before ... The secret films were his way of building up to a moment when Julie would have to submit to him in the flesh. He stroked at his hard stub and enjoyed the peace the darkness gave him for the first time. The noise of his slapping crotch filled the tunnel with echoes of his lust. He released in a hot spurt over his fingers and he rolled his head back against the door, letting the conditioned air work on the veil of sweat glossed across his forehead.

Then, suddenly, his bliss was interrupted by the memory of how he'd discovered Manyard's relationship with his daughter. It rushed to the fore of his brain, now that it had been emptied by orgasm. He had been watching fresh footage of his daughter in his home (he always downloaded remotely). To his surprise, that day, his daughter entered with Manyard; kissed him with a tenderness that had made him burn with envy. He had grabbed the phone and stabbed in her number to stop the act from going any further.

"*Allo? Papa?*" she had said—but at the same time it dawned on him that the nightmare on his screen had already happened and couldn't be interrupted. He hung up without saying anything and watched the rest of the footage in tears.

Manyard was well endowed too, which had upset him. He couldn't even see his own penis. His vein-threaded barrel of a gut obscured it.

The tunnel was silent apart from his breathing. Domenic got to his knees and wiped the semen on his hand into his trousers. The

void that had swallowed him was mesmerizing, and the release of masturbation had left him feeling vulnerable. He feared what he couldn't see. He feared the fact that, alone in the dark, he had no distractions; no decoys from the evils in his life. His remaining four senses were hyper-acute as they strove to overcompensate for the loss of his eyes. His skin lingered on the memory of self-abuse. His nose sucked up the stench of the sweaty flab beneath his clothing. His tongue drank moisture from the air in a vain attempt to slake an awful thirst. And his ears picked up *everything*. His heartbeat was amplified from within. Swelling of wood in the tunnel's structure sounded like the creak of approaching footsteps over floorboards.

Then, suddenly, there came a scratching noise from his left.

He scrambled forward and rolled onto his back, hyperventilating. It was definitely a noise. He was sure of that. Although sense dictated it was something rationally explainable or mundane his mind came up with no explanation other than that some kind of monster had been watching him from the darkness. He trembled and his eyes welled with tears. His flaccid member nosed out of his flies. His stomach squelched involuntarily.

The noise came again and he shat himself.

Defying his bulk, he sprang to his feet and ran along the wall screaming. In his head he was sure he could hear the creature's footsteps in pursuit. *Or were they his own?*

He blundered on regardless, slapping his hands against the wall as he went. He tripped. He got up. He ran again.

"Help me! God help me, please!"

At the moment Domenic began to pray for reaching the far end of the tunnel he crunched into the door at the end belly first, losing all ability to draw breath. He gritted his teeth for the

pursuing beast's strike, but it never came. All the same, he scratched at the door and screamed. He didn't want to be trapped with his own demons any more. Remembering what Manyard had said about the button he ran his hands feverishly around the door. He felt it. Pressed it. The door to the second light-lock zoomed aside causing him to topple through and he pulled his legs past the sensors, still imagining a vicious claw snatching at his ankles. The door thunked shut automatically—

—and another door opened, bathing him in the light of a buttery sinking sun.

He crawled out and rolled onto his back and wiped the tears from his eyes. Something blocked out the sun's rays.

"Monsieur le Poulet?" It was Pascal. Philippe Manyard stood by his side.

"The ride is good?" Manyard asked.

Domenic held his tie to his nose to cover the break.

"Monsieur le Poulet? Is that your penis?" asked Pascal, flabbergasted. For a second Domenic stared up at the two silhouettes above him. He twisted his hands in front of his face to block out the blinding rays of the sun. Then he closed his eyes and tucked himself back into his trousers.

He sat up, wrestling against the weight of his stomach, and pointed a finger encrusted with his bodily fluids at Manyard.

"You are finished!" he said, teeth bared, exposing gums as purple as his face.

"Monsieur le Poulet, what have I done wrong?" asked Manyard. Pascal was giggling behind him.

"And you're fired too, you disloyal bitch-man!" he shouted at the chauffeur. "How dare the pair of you? Look away this instant! You're both dead if you repeat any of this to a living soul!"

He felt his chest tighten.

“Then I guess, Monsieur le Poulet,” said Manyard with a gentle smile, “you will want me to keep the copies of this hidden away?” He tossed a small package onto Domenic’s lap. Le Poulet didn’t have to open it to know it was a video recording. Philippe Manyard leaned close and bared his teeth.

“You are not the only one with secret cameras, Monsieur. Leave Julie alone... I have copies.”

Manyard turned, placed an arm around Pascal’s shoulder and led him away to the limousine.

“That noise you heard in the tunnel?” said Manyard, stopping to turn back. Domenic looked up.

“I knew you’d put something dangerous in there,” Domenic le Poulet wept.

“It was a mouse.”

The two employees laughed. Pascal got in the front of the limousine and Manyard in the back. Domenic knelt in the dust, bloody and spent, and watched his car drive off towards Paris without him, his reason to live gone with it.

Wine for Two

Jamie Eyberg

Localisation

US English

Reader Guidance

No cautions required.

He looked out onto an empty street and tipped the sign into the window like every morning. The orange lettering and black and white background shouted “OPEN” to the world. He went back toward the cash register hoping today would be the day things got better.

Since his wife’s death ten years earlier, hit by a car in front of the shop on her way to the post office, he had seen his business decline. The whole neighborhood had been in decline, but her death was a breaking point for the small Main Street business community.

Money was never great; selling snorkeling and diving equipment in the Midwest was an idea his father started. The novelty had done well at first, but once that wore off it had merely become a way to make a living, even in the lean times. Profit slipped away when the lakes and rivers started to dry up and turn putrid. Shortly after that, most of the shops on Main Street had either moved into the strip malls at the edge of town or shut their doors forever.

He didn't have anything else so he continued the business, thankful he didn't need much and not wanting for anything.

It was nine in the morning.

He reached behind the cash register, as he did every morning, and pulled out a feather duster to give his wife's picture a quick swipe, knocking dust off. He was just starting to clean the air tanks when the door opened.

He turned his head, wondering who would be in at such a early hour. He wondered who would be in at all.

"Can I help you?" he called to the front of the store. The woman who had entered looked out of place and lost in the surroundings.

She smiled politely and shook her head before starting around the shop. She picked up snorkels, examined them and placed them back carefully the way they had been.

He replaced the duster and watched her. At every pile of equipment she came upon she would pick up the top piece, turn it over in her hands and then put it back; then she would take another step and repeat.

She was beautiful; dark hair, high cheekbones, Roman nose. She didn't seem to wear any make-up but she was sharply dressed in a black woven long-coat and a brimmed hat. Her shoes looked like they had just come from the sales rack, untouched by any of the grime that covered the streets and sidewalks from the few passing cars. She paid him no mind as she continued to browse.

"Are you sure there isn't anything I can help you with?" he asked, happy to have the curious customer.

Again, she turned her head, smiled gently, and went back to looking through his wares.

“Have you been diving before?” he asked. He looked out the large display window thinking that perhaps someone would join her shortly. He saw no one else on the street. Not even a car.

She didn’t turn to face him, but nodded. Her hair bounced with the nod.

She remained at the store for hours, picking up the merchandise and putting it back after careful examination. He continued to watch her, shifting his weight from one foot to the other; he didn’t dare sit in the old swivel chair he usually occupied.

Finally, as the day was getting on he gathered up his courage. He made his way from around the counter and started toward her. The line of her ankle stretched out from beneath her coat and brought back memories he had long since forgotten.

He remembered times at the river with his wife, the way she would daintily dip her toe in the water before she stepped in, and then slowly immerse herself until just her head remained. Her long hair would float on the surface behind her.

He regained himself as a car drove by. It accelerated past the storefront and disappeared down the street. The woman watched it drive past now empty storefronts and barren parking stalls.

“It used to be busier,” he said.

The woman picked up a diving fin and turned it over in her hands.

He noticed her fingers. Slender, tapering to well trimmed nails, polished to a shade of red he couldn’t place. It was brighter than a fire-engine but natural, like a bold apple begging to be eaten. He wanted to go and hold the woman’s hand at an impulse but he held back.

She continued her way, more slowly, around the store. She had almost made her way back to the door. It was nearing three

o'clock and for six hours he had been watching the woman with the same interest she was showing the stock on the aging shelves.

Finally, she made it back to the door. She made no motion to leave but did not turn back into the store either.

He watched her as the clock behind the counter ticked off the seconds until closing time arrived. He made no motion toward the sign in the hazy window. His only customer of the day remained, statuesque, in front of the door.

"Shouldn't you be closing up soon?" she finally asked. Her voice was a notch above a whisper, and if not for the absolute silence in the store and the street, he wouldn't have heard her.

"Pardon me?"

"Shouldn't you be closing up soon?" she said. She did not raise her voice or change her tone as she repeated the question.

He watched her a minute longer, waiting for her to turn or move toward the door but she did neither.

Finally, he started toward the window next to the door to turn the sign. He brushed past her, the coat moving slightly with his fingers. He took the sign from the window with a sigh. The vacant street beckoned him, a lonely path to his empty house where he would sit and watch re-runs of shows he didn't care for the first time. A picture of his wife would be sitting next to him, watching him from the end-table next to a glass of wine and the remote control.

He thought of his wife and of the woman that stood in his doorway. Another car drove by. He still held the sign but he glanced back in time to see her flinch. Her hands clenched tight.

He put the sign into its spot. "Can I call you a cab?"

"You could just walk with me," she said.

The old man looked down at his worn shoes.

“Where are you going?”

“Anywhere you want to take me.”

The answer lifted him as her coat touched him on the way to the door. The tips of his fingers brushed her hand. He held back the urge to take her fingers and hold them..

“Ladies first,” he said and motioned as elegantly as his old body would let him. She glided past, just enough to allow him to lock the door but not out of reach. He started past her and turned west waiting for her to follow. He had made it a few steps down the sidewalk, being careful not to step on the broken pieces of cement or the large piles of pigeon droppings, before he noticed she didn’t follow him. He looked back to see her standing next to the shop door.

He walked back and reached to her. She looked at his hand but did not take it.

“Am I going the wrong way?”

She looked toward the sun starting to get low in the sky.

“No,” she said, and took his hand in hers.

They walked for many blocks. It had been years since he had gone on a walk; the last one had been with his wife. It was one of her favorite things. She enjoyed the setting sun and the scampering of the squirrels in the oak trees and along the sidewalks. She liked watching the children play on the playgrounds in the summer and listening to their laughter on snowy hills in the winter. He thought it almost made up for the fact that they never had children of their own.

It was something he always regretted, putting it off. Business would be better the next year, he always thought, and she would always smile faintly and nod her head in agreement until it was too late.

Now, he walked along with a perfect stranger. He watched her as she watched the squirrels play by the sidewalks and stared wistfully at the parks that had become empty over the years and yet they walked on. Neither said a word as they made their way.

He wanted to tell the lady about the times he had at places on the way, but he didn't. Every time they came to a spot that was special to him she gently squeezed his hand and he couldn't help but squeeze back.

They walked to the edge of town. Past the town lay a cemetery, the same one where his wife was laid to rest so many years ago. Gently, the woman squeezed the old man's hand. It was a firm grip, one that made him hold her hand tighter.

Together they stood at the end of the sidewalk facing the cemetery and the setting sun, until slowly she released her grip. He tried to hold on but her fingers slipped his grasp.

“But—”

He started only to be silenced with her eyes. He watched her move across fallen leaves and through the headstones until she walked out of sight over a hill.

He watched until the sun had set and the streetlights cast dim shadows on the street. Then, he turned to walk back to his empty home. His shoes didn't seem as heavy on the broken streets and sidewalks as before. He noticed children running home for dinner with their families and squirrels scattering in front of him as he walked.

When he got home he pulled a bottle of wine from the dingy white Frigidaire, took two glasses from the cupboard and filled them both. He tipped one to his lips and placed the other next to her picture.

There Was That One Time

Grant Hettrick

Localisation

US English

Reader Guidance

Contains strong language.

You fell asleep there, but you woke up here. Started in the bed, ended on the couch. Dismissed by your wife like an ill-behaved child—and doesn't that sum it up?

And who is she to judge? Like you asked to be fired in the first place. As if you intended not to pay the rent. Well, actually, on this one, she has a point, though five to one odds at the track and a tip from a reliable source is enough to tempt even the most circumspect of spirits. It's really simple math.

Back on point, your sniveling last night was repulsive. Mewling, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," over your wife's shrill peals. By the way, what a harpy. No offense intended and what would you do about it anyway? No, I feel quite safe painting the landscape, calling a harpy a harpy if you will. Reprisal is not in your makeup; you lack some essential element. Pride? Courage? Conviction? I don't know, pick one. Pick them all.

To be fair, there was that one time. Seems a lifetime ago, but I remember. I was there. One of the few times—maybe the only time—when I wasn't embarrassed by our association. Yes, I definitely nudged you that day, practically shoved the baseball

bat in your hand. But the rest was all you and what a thing of beauty. The last few swings, when her skull caved in, may have been overkill, but I can't say she didn't deserve it, the condescending shrew. And the way you covered your tracks, your performance with the police; pure genius. That day, you were fire and you were ice. I sat on your shoulder and applauded.

That was ten years ago, my friend, and I haven't applauded since. I thought you were on to something. What a cruel tease. No, you don't think so? Tell you what I'm going to do. A test. Follow me, quick, in here. Open that drawer and take the knife. Not the butter knife, idiot, the carving knife. See how it glistens? Sharp, yes? Now, hurry, to the bedroom before she wakes.

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www.ghettrick.blog.com

Lena

Keyan Bowes

Localisation

US English

Reader Guidance

No caution needed.

At first, Rajan thinks he's imagining her.

He's a four-hour hike from the main gate of the nature sanctuary and not expecting to see anyone except perhaps an occasional villager illegally grazing his scrawny cattle. Certainly not a woman in an impractical silk sari, boating on the barely navigable river among pebbles and sand bars.

Rajan isn't supposed to be camping here. He tipped the guards. They'd been dubious anyway, mentioning leopards, hinting at worse. Tigers? Unlikely, those were all gone. He really had to get away from the crowds and traffic and pollution that were the hardest part of readjusting to India after California. He needed to be alone.

Rajan hails the woman. In the twilight, the violet of her sari seems to blend into the dusk. The boat beaches near his solitary camp, and she holds out her hand. Rajan hurries over to her. A jungle crow flies down to perch on the neem tree in the middle of his campsite. It caws loudly, a desolate, longing sound.

Her huge tragic eyes under arching brows remind him of Lena, his lost lover. Lena, whose new car is a rusting wreck behind Gopal's Garage. The woman's black hair is loose about

her shoulders and her sari brushes the ground with a silken, sad, uncertain rustling. Her fingers are cold in his palm. The well-remembered scent of jasmine mingles with the smell of damp river earth. Rajan finds her impossibly attractive.

“Were you waiting for me?” she asks. As though assuming he was, she leads him into the dry summer grass near his tent, draws him in to her and kisses him on the mouth.

Who are you? he wants to ask but fears to spoil the moment. Her lips are as cool as her fingers, yet they awake a corresponding heat in Rajan. He kisses her back, urgently. She reaches slender fingers under his waistband, pausing to caress shivering skin, then pulls his clothes away as they lie on the grass.

“You look so...human,” she says. She raises herself on one elbow, her hair cascading down, shining in the half-light.

What? Who is this woman? He starts to ask but the crow caws loudly again, interrupting him. It flaps off to a nearby tree, dislodging a berry as it lands.

Rajan turns again to the beautiful girl lying in the dry golden grass and notices her feet: slender, with toenails delicately painted... pointing backward.

One of Lena’s stories comes back to him.

“Churail!” he shouts. He jumps up and runs.

The woman’s face changes, becomes suddenly hideous. She reaches out for him. An arm extends all the way across the clearing, blocking his way.

“Such a hurry you’re in! You were trying to go somewhere?”

Her other arm also stretches out. He is caught and pulled back to her.

“What name were you calling me just now?”

Rajan shrinks away.

“Nothing,” he says. “Just some story. I didn’t mean to yell out loud.”

“Oh, it’s okay. I would hear even if you had whispered it. Churail, that was what you said, yes?”

Rajan nods, even as he struggles to free himself from her grip.

“Feet on backwards, stretchable limbs, beautiful features that turn ugly once recognized, right?”

Rajan nods again, trying to avoid staring at her ghastly, gaunt and ominous face.

“Eats you if it manages to seduce you, right?”

Rajan nods. He is still alive.

The churail smiles her terrible smile.

“The eating’s optional ... but we can try.”

Rajan is weak at the knees and would have collapsed into the grass had she not been holding him. She lays him down. “Legs feel like rubber, right? So do mine.” Her legs suddenly become as long and stretchy as her arms, like rubber bands. Then she shrinks back all of her limbs to their proper proportions and runs her cool hands down his chest.

Rajan tries to pull back, but he’s in her grip and terrified. Churails seduce you and consume you. That’s what Lena had said, after that last fight. He struggles briefly in desperation, then freezes.

If he closes his eyes, he doesn’t have to see her gaunt face, her wild disordered hair. She is breathing heavily. The cool hand running down his chest is ... sexy. He opens his eyes for a minute, sees her lips elongating and reaching down for him. He moans and quickly shuts his eyes again. Her lips are soft on his, soft and alluring. He responds blindly, his passion rising. Her

long fingers reach for him in impossible ways, her mouth moves down his naked body.

A loud insistent caw, close by, shatters the mood.

“Stupid crow!” she shouts. She extends a hand, picks up a stone and flings it. The bird dodges the missile and flies into the clearing.

“Oh, blast the stupid crow!” she says, rising. The bird flaps past; she releases Rajan and gives chase. He gets up cautiously, hardly daring to move.

Crows carry dead peoples' souls. My aunt feeds them rice-balls. There'd been a power cut that night. It was too hot to sleep. They had sat under the stars and Lena told ghost stories. A small-town girl, and superstitious, she'd become furious when he needled her about it. She had driven off in anger in the dark. The brakes had failed.

Rajan edges out of the clearing, then runs. He scrambles up the darkening path. Halfway up the hillside, he turns back to look. He has a glimpse of a woman in a filmy sari flying into the trees. The lineaments of satisfied desire, airborne.

But then the woman is on the path in front of him. Her mouth's open wide, and all her teeth are fangs.

Devotion

Carrie Morgan

Localisation

US English

Reader Guidance

No caution required

You pick up the simply framed picture again. It is fingerprint stained and battered at the corners but still treasured. Sitting on your bed and staring at it, even though barely any of the weak evening light can fight its way past the heavy curtains, you trace the unseen features; memory showing you the curved lips, rounded nose and laughing eyes. I watch you exhale and fall back, the bed embracing you as you lie there, the picture held loosely in your left hand, down by your hip.

You stay that way for a long time.

The light has finally given up trying to find you when your silent contemplation is interrupted by three soft taps at the door. You sit up and shove the picture under your pillow, smoothing your hair back and looking expectantly at the door. It opens a little, and he asks nervously: “Hello?”

“Hey, yeah, come on in.” you reply, your voice seemingly cheerful—but I can see the tension in your shoulders, the carefully controlled hitch in your breathing, your nails anxiously digging into the flesh of your thumb.

He pushes the door and stands framed in the entrance, the hall light providing atmospheric ambiance. You say nothing, listening to the movement and voices of the people exchanging farewells downstairs. He shifts on his feet; hands in his pockets, now clasped in front of him, now tugging his shirt straight; his eyes flickering awkwardly round the room, settling on your odd-socked feet. “You ...” he coughs past the frog in his throat, “you okay?”

“Surviving. And you?”

Rigidly polite; not encouraging him to stay but neither pushing him away. From beyond the open door, footsteps thump across the landing and down the stairs. He glances over his shoulder, looks back at your socks.

“Yeah, I’m fine. People are leaving now; they send their best wishes. I told them you needed some space, wondered whether you—” he’s interrupted by a final call of goodbye, a pause, and the front door slamming closed downstairs. Both of you exhale as you visibly relax.

“Hey,” you say again, your tone now warm and welcoming. He steps towards you, and you stand to meet him, your body against his, his arms resting on your hips, a hand against the middle of your back.

“I missed you,” he says softly, and you shush him with a clichéd finger to his lips, which he kisses gently before taking hold of your hands, tangling his fingers with yours. You sit back down on your unmade bed, bringing him with you, his arms circling you, his lips on yours. And now you’re sliding down, letting his hands wander, tracing your face, your body, under your clothes, skin to skin ...

The clink of framing glass pushed to its limit goes unnoticed by both of you.

Later, when you're both gone, I move back into your room and uncover the forgotten picture. My face smiles back at me, happy and healthy as I was in life. The dates of my birth and death etched in the frame on either side of that single word:

Devotion.

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Scratching the Surface

Laurie Paulsen

Localisation

US English

Reader Guidance

Some people do not like the idea of their eyes being touched and if you are one of those people you should not read this story. Also there is some swearing.

Vincent stared at his reflection in the mirror, the fluorescent lighting turning him a pale unappetizing shade. He opened his mouth, trying to peer down his throat. Nothing. Nothing in his nose, either. He stuck a fingertip in his ear as far as he could and twisted, hoping to get at it, but he just couldn't reach.

The itching was unbearable.

He searched the bathroom and found some alcohol, but no dropper. After considering, he soaked a cotton ball and squeezed it into his ear canal, tipping his head to hold it in. He even hopped on one foot to help it along, but it still wouldn't reach.

Several months ago, he'd noticed a sharp increase in his hair loss. And then the itching started. Dandruff seemed the logical answer, but the medicated shampoos hadn't helped. In fact, the itching had gotten worse. The doctor sent him to a shrink, and the shrink sent him to the pharmacist. The drugs did nothing but fuzz his thinking, so he quit taking them.

He leaned over and picked up the bottle of whiskey sitting on the back of the toilet, taking a deep swallow. When it had first started, the itching had been all over his scalp, as if larvae had hatched just under the skin. He'd scratched like a motherfucker, sometimes breaking the skin, but nothing helped. The itching only got worse.

Vincent walked to the closet and took down a hanger. The itching had migrated over the last few weeks, and was now deeper inside his head. He couldn't always tell where it was, sometimes his sinuses itched, sometimes deep inside his ears. Right now, he could feel it behind his eyes. Constant, maddening; it refused him sleep, he lost interest in food. Drinking seemed to be the only fix.

He leaned in toward the mirror again, his soft belly resting on the edge of the sink. Straightening the hanger, Vincent took another drink, and then set the bottle down with a clatter. Looking himself in the eye, he stretched his lids wide with thumb and forefinger, and then jammed the straight end of the thick wire deep into his eye socket. He screamed, the muscles in his face spasming, fluid from his ruined eye streaming down his cheek and nose. He corkscrewed the hanger, and then yanked it back out, the remnants of his deflated eyeball sagging from it, his exposed optical nerve extending from his face. He had no words. Screaming like an animal, gripping the curve of the sink faucet, he kept working. Bits of flesh fell into the sink, leaving viscous smears as they slid down to clump over the mesh covering the drain. Minutes passed, in which Vincent spent more time gripping the counter for support than for exploration.

He took a deep breath, and then another, and returned to his task.

Fuck fuck fuck that hurts. Jesus fuck fu—what was that? He paused, the hanger in his fist.

Knocking. Loud, insistent knocking at the door.

Vincent blanked, panic seeping through the pain, his limited sight scanning the bloodied wire in the sink, the splashes of crimson on the mirror, his face and chest.

“Mr. Fannelli?” More knocking, progressing to pounding. “It’s Joe. The Super. Open up.”

Vincent swung around, losing his balance for a second, and grabbed the towel from the ring by the vanity. He took a few swipes at the fresh blood, doing little more than smearing it. *Shit.* He stomped to the bedroom, pulling on a shirt he found on the floor.

“Uh, be right there, Joe.” The shouting made his socket throb, his heartbeat pulsing agony.

He pulled on a ski mask, shaking his head. *This won’t look suspicious.* And the itching was returning. *God.*

Vincent strode to the door, unhooked the chain and unbolted the deadlock. Opening just a crack, he peeked out, hiding the ravaged half of his face. “Joe.”

“Heya, Mr. Fannelli.” Joe tried peering farther into the room, but Vincent blocked him. “I got a report of yelling. You know anything about that?”

“No.”

“And you’re okay?” Joe squinted, concern on his face.

“Migraine.”

Joe stared at him for a few seconds, and then nodded. “You sure? You’re slurring a little.”

“Migraine. Gonna get in bed.”

Joe tilted his head, and Vincent closed the door. He leaned against the doorjamb, exhausted, sore. And it slid back in full

force, undaunted, mocking him. The itching was merciless, like fire ants swarming over his delicate flesh. His brain seemed to writhe under the onslaught, reduced to unthinking escape, swelling against the inside of his skull. Vincent bit into his hand to keep from screaming again, sobs beating against his palm. Tears streamed from his remaining eye. He was so tired; hadn't slept or eaten for days. *What can I do?*

Vincent inhaled, tugging off the mask. He had to get to it, dig it out. *And fast, before I lose it completely.* Deliberate steps to the bedroom, and then left to the bath. He picked up the hanger again, looked into the raw, jagged flesh inside his empty socket. He took his lower lip in his teeth and slowly pushed the hooked wire into his ruined face one more time. He didn't realize, but he bit through his lip during that first thrust. After a few seconds, he grayed out for a moment, and then his vision returned. Sweat beaded and tracked down his temples as he worked, creeping farther into his head. He vomited without altering course, the viscous fluid seeping into his shirt, cooling his belly as it dried. He had no choice.

As if it knew he was coming, the attack intensified, a frenzy of bees inside his meninges, stinging, imbedding poison deep inside his cortices. He sobbed, bloody saliva running down his chin, his lips pulled back in a grimace. The wire scraped on, digging deeper, scooping out bits of bloody meat until Vincent could see. He saw, understood, and then lost all reason, gibberish pouring from his throat like graveled despair. He slid to the floor. *God oh God oh God—*

His fingers crept up to the hole in his face, and then with ginger exploration sought confirmation. Pain no longer registered as shock settled over him, and he calmed. His hands and feet felt sluggish. Three fingers inched their way deep inside

his head, past his inner ocular cavity, and as they grasped the offending strands and tugged, he thought before passing out:

So, that's where my hair went.

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<http://www.dullyelloweye.blogspot.com/>

The Wish

Lauri Keye

All senses
heightened,
everything
lightened,
Harmony
and Hope—
The ability to cope
with whatever
comes along—
May the
whole world
know this,
Our Love Song

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RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

~AFTERWORD~

I hope you have had an interesting ride with this issue. For an editor and a reader, one of the real pleasures of this issue has been the time lag between receipt of these stories from our noble writers and their publication. It gives me the opportunity to enjoy them afresh. For me, it's a rare privilege to be able to sit down and thrill to these works.

No expression of thanks should ever become classed as standard, so allow me to whoop to the heavens, once again, Stewart Baker for his diligence and care in poetry selection and Josiah Franco especially for his support on avant-garde works. And also Babs Griswold who will be giving this edition her tender and merciless proofreading eye.

To our writers: thank you for joining us. We are all aiming for something and, judging by reader responses, we seem to be within touching distance of hitting the marks we hope to make.

Finally, to you, our readers. Keep that feedback coming in. Just click this link: editor@ruthlesspeoples.com and let us know more of what you would like to see.

Yours truly,

Dominic Hamer
Editor
London, 2009