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Penile Bone

Stefanie Freele

There are reasons why I didn't contact Sherii for twenty years. For one, I thought she was dead. Years ago, at a party, one of those post-high school get-togethers with clouds of greenish pot smoke and clusters of people conscious of loyalty and belonging-ness, feeling obligated to hang with old friends, yet on the verge of trying to meet new ones, I ran into Denise. She smoked quickly with brief drags, like a non-smoker who only smokes when she drinks, and pushed me on the shoulder too hard. “Did you hear about Sherii? Drove into the quarry. Drunk.” Denise squinted and took in a longer draw, while keeping eye contact. “Could have been us.”

Denise herself died two months later, although I didn't hear about it for five years since I was away studying acupuncture, not thinking about Denise whatsoever, but I did think about Sherii now and then, and how it could have been us that drove off the cliff into the quarry. We often got stoned at the quarry. There wasn't a rail, nor even a sign. Sure, a foggy night, anyone could have done it.

I meant to get the details from Denise next time I came home, but then Denise died drunk-driving too, only she was beheaded as she “sailed under a semi.” That's what Dad said in that stern don't-let-it-happen-to-you voice, as if I'd taken driving into semis under consideration. The other reason I didn't try to contact Sherii, as if I really needed another excuse, because, after all, I was basing my actions on the premise of her death, was the ten bucks I stole from her gym locker in seventh grade.

She didn't accuse me then. I stared back (while sweat rolled down between thighs) into her searching and tearful eyes and denied, “I didn't see anybody” even though I was the only one in the room while Sherii showered. We stayed friends through high school, but deceit kept us from being closer. The ten-spot issue happened over twenty years prior, and I wasn't in any hurry to call

attention to my crimes, even though making amends seemed to be the thing to do in your thirties, but Sherii's quarry-death made one less person needing an apology.

On the way to somewhere, during a week-long visit with my parents, I saw a woman at Circle K that looked just like Sherii, but with wrinkles around the eyes and a bit of a belly. She fumbled with her wallet to buy two quarts of Colt 45. Her green uniform pulled tight along the waist and a patch on her shoulder read, "Department of Wildlife." I eased closer and read the nametag. Sherii Fonstrup. It was her and she wasn't dead.

The ten bucks didn't enter my mind yet, but those love-handles held me mesmerized. Sherii had been a varsity track girl. I believe she hurdled. Or sprinted. Something around the track really fast, I didn't recall. This version defied my imprinted vision of tall, thin, giraffe-like Sherii. She turned around, perhaps because of my critical bulge-thoughts. Guilt flushed my face as she spoke. "Court? Courtney? Is that you?" She smiled big with coffee-stained teeth and I met her eyes, her large black pupils. Much larger pupils than someone should really have in a brightly lit convenience store.

"It's me. Sherii is that you?"

"Actually it's Shur-eee now. Still spelled the same. S-H-E-R-I-I. But I gave up the Sherii lost-her-cherry bit years ago. Now the accent is on the second syllable. What do you think? Better, eh?"

I couldn't get past her shiny black pupils, so huge and offensive. I irrationally hoped the cashier might notice and put a stop to her eyes, as if their size was illegal or, at the very least, immoral.

"Shur-ee works for me. Oops, I rhymed. I like it. Sounds French. Exotic."

She swept the beer off the counter before the clerk could stuff it into a noisy plastic bag. "I'll wait for you outside."

When the clerk handed back my change, the old ten-dollar guilt flickered. I looked for reasons to stall rather than walk out the front door to stand next to bulging Shur-eee and her iniquitous black eyes. She waited exactly in front of my primer-red hatchback and astonished me by taking a long swig of her beer, in public and in uniform.

"Whatcha been up to, Courtney?"

I searched for a topic we might get past quickly so I could get in the car. "It's been twenty years. Aren't we due for a reunion?"

"Never went to any others." She put her beer into a white government pickup and stood with her hands on her broad hips and faced me squarely. "Although our first one didn't happen until year six because of Spiegel's suicide."

"I didn't get informed of our tenth."

"Maybe there wasn't one, Court. I didn't care for the longest time what happened to everyone. Now I'm a little curious."

"I didn't keep in touch with many people. Went away to college in Boston, lived in Nepal, Bangkok, and a bunch of other places. I'm an acupuncturist. Only back for the week. Just visiting my folks."

"Come with, over to work. On Saturdays, I'm the only one. I'll give you a tour and we can hang. Fifteen minutes from here." She thumbed toward the lake and I followed her hand toward black clouds and rain lines in the sky.

I don't know why I agreed to follow her. Was it her forceful thumb? The negative ions in the air?

Gusts of wet wind pelted our windshields. We pulled into an empty parking lot. Her blurred shape ran toward a glass door and waved toward me.

We burst from the rain into an office with several desks, dwarfed by deer heads topped with extraordinary antlers. Musty rain smells and beer breath filled the room.

"I've never seen antlers that huge. Must be as wide as my car."

"Let me tell you about him." Sherii pointed. "That guy is on a quest to get laid. All he can think about is sex. If you're a female deer, look out. He'll maul you with those."

I thought she'd give me a scientific explanation. Her bluntness contradicted the authority of her uniform. "Isn't the Department of Wildlife supposed to help the animals? Preserve and all that. Wouldn't have thought they'd display deer heads."

"All rednecks in this place. Did you know that some animals have a penile bone?"

I almost laughed, but her shiny, yet flat black eyes weren't kidding.

She shook her head vigorously. "Some get in fights and try to rip apart the other's penile bone."

I couldn't tell if she was teasing and had developed an uncanny ability to remain serious-faced, or if she truly spouted a fact I'd never heard of. "Survival of the fittest?"

She moved quickly for someone so out of shape. "Exactly. Let me show you something." We walked out of the office and through a shop where equipment lined the room. She turned a red metal circle which opened up a giant door, about six feet wide. A cloud of what I initially assumed was steam floated out. However, when we entered, I found myself in a room-size freezer. Rows of stuffed bags lined the walls. "See." A frozen blood trail, the kind that came from dragging bodies, led to a pile of animal carcasses, mostly mountain lions. Being resolved to a mostly Buddhist/vegetarian philosophy didn't prepare me for the mound of what appeared to be haphazardly strewn wild animals. A bobcat's tongue jutted as if he was biting it and blood froze on his nose in a black smear. His eyes remained large and permanently staring at my knees.

I covered my nose and mouth. "What happened to them?"

"Hunters. Trappers. Idiots. Accidents."

"Why are they here?" Blackish blood, deep wounds, and hanging entrails dishonored the beautiful animals.

"Research. Or sent to the university."

I could feel her looking at me, but I couldn't decide which was more terrible, her black eyes, or the heap of bodies. "It's a room of death. They're frozen."

"Ain't going anywhere."

She moved into my line of vision for a moment and blocked the view. I wanted her to stay right there, where I couldn't witness the awfulness behind her.

"You have to see this one." She inched behind a stack of white boxes and kicked a small fawn out of her way. She just kicked a small fawn. It's dead but she kicked it. The stiff fawn slipped

awkwardly across the back of a black wild pig and landed with its head in the bloody hind end of a larger deer.

I instinctively leaned to catch the fawn. "I don't need to see any more."

"Came this far. Come here, Courtney." She didn't command, but spoke as if I wouldn't defy her either. Like her simple verbal nudge would bring me closer. And without reason, I stepped forward.

Without seeing its head, I could tell by the golden fur, I was looking at deer. Its hide ended raggedly along a stomach gash about a foot long. Sherii pointed inside the gash. I leaned forward to see the curled head of a closed-eyed unborn fawn, tucked inside its mother. "Coyote." She pronounced it ky-oat. "He's over here. Hunter caught him tearing her up. Smacking away at his half-alive tasty meal." The fluffier furred leg of the coyote stuck out from the pile straight at me, its paw aiming at my heart.

My chest shivered uncontrollably. "I've seen enough." A death smell pervaded my nostrils, which I found peculiar, as if scents should be frozen too.

She slammed the fridge shut and we warmed ourselves by the heater in the office. "That's unbelievable. Horrible. What do you do here?"

She opened her mouth, but then dashed out the door, not leaving me with much time to think, when she came right back in with her bottle of beer, not offering me any. I wouldn't have drunk anyway, since at the temple I took a vow not to put such substances in my body. She guzzled fiercely. "Never drink before four." She blinked and studied the line of liquid through the bottle. "I suppose I should have offered you some."

"I thought you were dead. Denise said you went off the Mainlen cliff into the quarry."

"I did."

"You did die? Or you did go off the cliff?" I laughed, but it came out jerky and short.

She sat behind the desk and I sat on a chair in front of it, as

if I was being interviewed.

She burped. “High school sucked, didn’t it?”

“I’ve had a lot of experiences since then. It seems like a long time ago.”

“I didn’t go to college.” She gave me a look that flashed anger, or meanness, I couldn’t decide which.

“You got a good job.”

She leaned forward quickly. “Did I ask your opinion?”

No one spoke and neither of us moved. A clanking sound from back in the building stopped the silence.

“I think I should go.” I put my jacket back on. “Thanks for-”

“I’m sorry. Sit. I’m just annoyed. Feeling sorry for myself.”

She took another swig, pulled out a pill from her top pocket, and swallowed it. “Here you are, educated, wearing a scarf, sticking needles into people, and disgusted by the locker.” She peeled the label on the bottle. “Here I am, fat, used to dead bodies, and surrounded by rednecks. Where the hell is Bangkok anyway and why would you go there?” She smiled sweetly as if to make peace with me, to forget her earlier abrupt behavior.

“I studied religion along the way. Philosophy. I believe in a certain concept of destiny.”

“You travel. I stay. You’re successful. I mop the floor.”

I didn’t respond.

“I’m the damn housekeeper. I’m the lofty Environmental Service Aide. My big destiny. God wants me to vacuum. He has a fantastic plan for me to shine toilet seats.” She slammed her empty beer bottle on the table, picked it up again and threw it toward a metal garbage can where it smashed. I found myself thinking that she’d get fired if her boss found the bottle in the garbage. She focused on the side wall. Her hand slowly crept to her front pocket and plucked out two pills. She chewed them slowly.

I leaned back and debated what to do. I finally settled on saying, “It seems that you’re in pain, Sherii.”

I expected her to leap across the desk and grab me by the throat, and I braced myself for it. But she stared at the wall for an

uncomfortably long time. Finally, just when I was about to get up and quietly leave, she spoke faintly. “Why did you steal my ten bucks?”

There it was and it was all so stupid. Why hadn’t I just admitted it somewhere along the way? I rushed. “I knew you knew. It was dense and I’m sorry. I’m even sorrier for lying about it.”

She cleared her throat and swung her head toward me, her pupils seemed to cover her entire iris; I could not find any color. “We weren’t best friends. But we were good friends. In seventh grade, you, me and Denise walked to school together almost every day.”

Had we? I forgot that it was that often.

“Why Courtney?”

“I wanted to buy lunch.”

Her arms flew up in the air, reminding me of goalposts. I wanted her to bring them down and fold her hands tidily on her lap, but she dropped them slowly, leaving one hand to hover in the air, pointing at my face. “Your mom always made you lunch. I remember. Mine was wasted. She’d say, ‘Tomorrow, I’ll make you lunch. Go to your room. Give me peace and quiet.’ Meaning go away so I can drink.”

I felt defensive but thought about what might have happened to Sherii when her mother found out she lost her week’s worth of lunch money. “You’re right. My mom did always make me lunch. Constantly in the same recycled paper bag. I just wanted to go through the lunch line like everybody else, instead of sitting at the table with my brown apple and yogurt waiting for all of you. Embarrassing. I wanted a chocolate shake so badly.”

She held a pen against the desk and pressed hard enough to dent the wood while she dragged the pen toward herself leaving a long scrape mark. “Thought you’d cop to it. I waited.”

I tried not to look at the desk, but remained there amidst the weight of missed opportunities for apology, swallowing my excuses, and finally retied my scarf just to keep some activity in the room.

Her mouth quivered as if trying to settle in on the right expression. It finally established a smirk. “I don’t feel so good right

now, Court.” She looked up at the ceiling, a little too high and too long for my taste, and tapped her foot in a rhythm. “Give me my ten bucks.”

I hurried through my coat pockets and brought out my wallet while trying not to let my hands shake. Hidden behind a picture of my nephew, I found my emergency twenty and almost threw it. The twenty didn’t feel like enough. “With interest.”

She let the bill lie in front of her, smoothed it with an unstable hand while I moved to the door.

Her flat voice followed me. “Denise died too. Didn’t she?”

Without turning around, I answered “Denise died too,” and stepped out into the rain.

The heavy door, with its reflecting glass, displaying a murky reflection of myself, slammed automatically, reinforcing my abrupt isolation. “Too?” I was left to face the drenching wind as the lock clicked, keeping Sherii safe from people like me.

In Northern Wisconsin, a Yellow Bus Is Reborn

Stefanie Freele

They decide to open a business. Work for themselves. They’ve been downsized: their jobs outsourced to a country they cannot find on a map. No more suits, no bosses with slick hair, no faxes, conference calls or lunch meetings with limp bread and dubious meat. Most important of all: no more indoors.

They love flannel shirts. They wear nothing but flannel and throw away — not even donate to Goodwill — the old work attire: starched shirts, ties, shiny shoes, black socks. They deposit their severance checks and mash their stiff jackets. Stuff the pile into a gray garbage can. Cover the old life with a crushed pizza box. Call it a day.

The business will be called “Red Flannel Shirt Dry Cleaning and Delivery.” They know men hate doing laundry, especially single men who’d rather be gutting a deer or frying backstrap. Men hate errands; they’d rather sit on the toilet scrutinizing *Shotgun News*.

They spend precisely one eighth of a second grieving the loss of their old jobs, their old selves. Why waste any time?

They buy the bus. It is a yellow bus of course. An old school bus with folding doors. They take turns opening and closing those doors, reminiscing how as a child, to be able to work the handle was forbidden but coveted. That glorious pshhhh of the air brake! They work the sloppy out-of-step windshield wipers, run down the aisle, split a tuna sandwich in the back seat while they plan their next steps: business cards, hats, an office.

A cabin on Loon Lake is purchased. The cabin. On a good day you can catch northern, bluegill, perch. Lots of birch and pine, a good sturdy driveway for the bus, and it’s just outside of Elcho, a decent town where a lot of decent guys work. Flannel shirted Northern Wisconsin guys.

They post the flyer.

The Dry part of Dry Cleaning is really a joke — one doesn't dry clean flannel shirts. They figure men will either go along with the humor or not know what dry cleaning is anyway. The shirts will be returned fresh; that's all that matters.

Men don't want to bag and label, so the customers' only requirement is to leave the address on the answering machine and throw their shirts out the front door. "Red Flannel Shirt Dry Cleaning and Delivery" will take care of the rest. Half off if the shirt is red.

Seven calls come in that first day. In the morning, they roar up the bus and slide down the icy road toward town. They pick up all the shirts in an hour and toss them in the new Kenmore. Dry cleaning shouldn't take only 24 hours; they figure a day off in between pick-up and delivery. They catch four perch to have an excellent lunch with lemon and garlic.

In the morning they pin a business card to each washed shirt and roar up the bus.

However, they forgot to write down which shirt belongs to what address. Some guys threw out a pile of shirts. Who belongs to whom?

They stake out each residence, trying to get the size of fellow as he leaves for work, or gauge his style by his name: Cody Kawalski, sounds like the kind of guy who would say *what else is there besides flannel*, so they leave the three Large blue and green Woolrichs at the door, hung professionally on the knob. Ned Frontletter, a name like that must belong to the two XXL Field and Stream quilted jackets, Nick Altoona, he must be the Cabela's fella, and so on. By noon they've delivered them all, content the sleuthing met the mark.

Since they are men who understand men, no complaint calls come in. Just in case they got lucky that first time they implement a tracking system on a clipboard.

They both want to carry the clipboard — important people carry clipboards — so begins their first argument.

In silence, one makes coffee; the other washes the lake-view window. They decide to take turns with the clipboard, or find jobs of equal importance so each can feel empowered.

Using the word empowered makes them disgusted. Because, after all, that's one of those officy-words they should have thrown in the gray garbage can with the shiny shoes.

After receiving eight more calls and knowing service doesn't have to be immediate — men wear their flannels for weeks in-between washing — they take a day to fish at one of the great secret spots known only by locals. At night, they hit their respective cabin bedrooms to rest before rising with the yellow dawn in the yellow bus.

Drop-offs and deliveries speed up. The money dribbles, expands, then pours. They have a discussion about expanding to work pants and then nix it: too complex. While duck hunting they thank the great grouper above that they're not stuck in an office.

A steady flow of calls comes in from nearby towns like Summit Lake and Starks. They even get a message from an old coot in Rhinelander who brought his Stormy Kromer Hunting hat *all the way* from Ironwood Michigan and *coudja tidy it up a tad?*

The bus is organized, given a seat for each size and category, from hooded flannels to threadbare thinnies. They know the power of a threadbare thinny, a man's favorite accompaniment, next to his rifle and his dog. Shirts worn thin are washed on delicate, folded lovingly. They even consider a tissue wrap, but then say *tissue? who are you kidding.*

Once, they dub themselves Bonnie and Clyde. A fight heats up, no one wants to be the woman, and neither fancies a shot in the head. Skip the shooting, save the fresh fish. A good thing comes from the quarrel: it is agreed that to live on the edge, one must not pay taxes.

In their old life, they paid taxes. No more. No way.

Eight bluegill later, they lunch on the dock, amused about that moment of almost- tissue-paper, planning a new skiff with their never-again-going-to-pay-taxes money, and ponder the perfect size

for a fish bucket. It is imperative that this be determined before the afternoon is over. Bucket-measuring talk takes an enormous amount of vigor from them, they can barely put their rods away, take their boots off. They hit the hay early, each willful head on an *ah-that's-nice-we're-hard-working-guys* pillow.

Leaving Lake Baikal

T.M. De Vos

They had been on the island for a week in a tiny room that smelled of cedar, with a window that rattled when the other guests walked past. The roads turned to mud when it rained and cows wallowed in the deep tire tracks. There was a big escarpment half a mile down where they played cards and a cluster of dusty stores in the other direction where they went to sound out the jagged letters on snacks. Sometimes the shopkeepers turned away from them; even here it was better to lose the sale than listen to someone talk.

The lake was cold, too cold to swim in. He talked her into a fishing trip, where they trolled for *harius*—sinuous, shimmering graylings that swarmed in the boat's bottom. The earlier catches floated after awhile, showing white bellies, their pinhole cloacas. The live ones kept below the waterline, burrowing beneath their dead.

They'd stopped to catch grasshoppers for bait: strange, red-tipped ones that buzzed like cicadas. She cornered a brilliant green one the size of a mouse. It breathed patiently as she pointed. He didn't want to touch it either, and they kept their eyes on it as they backed away. The captured ones whirred in their bottles, mouthing the dead stems.

The fisherman baited their hooks and cast for them. You could see the bait sink, the grasshoppers swelling like puffed rice in the clear water. She caught the first *harius*. The fisherman snatched it from her hook and painted her cheeks with the tail, twice on each side: *Baikal tradition*. She shrieked gamely. The fish slapped around laughably in the thin ether.

They stopped for lunch on a tiny beach, all rocks. The fisherman built a fire and chopped the fish for their soup while his little son shored the boat. The *harius* still had their scales, fins grey now,

the rainbow boiled off. She drank only the broth and gave him the meat, grey and felty as a sweatshirt cuff.

She was getting cranky, tiring of the chatter in Russian and wanting the fish smell off her face. It was hard for her to tune people out; she hated to be trapped in a car—or on a boat—without any say in when they stopped. He usually tried not to take her out on trips like that. Her fatigue of other people came on suddenly and sharply, and the frantic look she got when she'd reached her limit made it impossible for him to enjoy himself.

She was always happy to let him go off by himself. He'd rented a bike from the hostel and traveled the perimeter of the island and taken a walk through every *arrondissement* in Paris while she stayed behind. When he returned from the strenuous, sunny activities, he was always gladder to hear that she had sat outside or gone sightseeing than spent her time in the room, reading. He knew she lied to him sometimes, having himself passed through the areas she had claimed to occupy. He never called her on it. It was a kind of loyalty towards him: she knew he would never fully understand how happy she was in her own custody.

It was different, traveling with a woman—one he had brought with him rather than picked up. He was responsible for bringing her back, making sure she was safe even when he felt like being alone. She would move in with him when they got home; her things were already in storage, her old bed slept in by a subletter.

He knew it was his job, the way it had been to watch over his sister: walking her to school when she was younger and paying a visit to the ex who didn't get the message. He was fit, not bulky, but tough: he didn't need much sleep, and he was as quick as he was muscular. There was much on his side, he figured, even in a strange country.

They were sick after the fishing trip, so violently ill even he thought they might not make it. There was no plumbing on the island: the bathrooms were unlit cabinets with a hole in the floor.

All night they passed each other on trips to the outhouse or to the stairs, where they vomited into the weeds. Any water he took, he brought up twice.

By morning they were both exhausted, with nothing left in their bodies to expel. He ventured out in the afternoon for real Coke. By evening they could eat a little rice and even bought their minibus tickets back to Irkutsk from the little *touristic* dome on the corner.

They were slow to wake and grungy the next afternoon, figuring they'd shower in Irkutsk. She ran ahead to the square of dry mud where the buses parked and boarded while he threw all the supplies into the backpack. Someone else tried to push into the seat she'd saved, but she kept covering it, saying, "*droogoi...*" and making gestures back at the cabin. He raced over, tottering under the weight of the pack, just as the driver was about to make her cede it to a kid with a rat tail.

He had just been off his guard for a minute. Just a minute. He'd fallen asleep on the way and awoke at the rest stop groggy, still tasting the seasoning from the potato chips they'd shared. "*Shashlik,*" she'd sounded out, picking through her coins.

At the two low-walled, roofless buildings, she took the packet of tissues and disappeared into the line of women. He passed through the men's side quickly and headed past the store into the open—what was it? Taiga? Tundra? What did you call the empty grasslands in summer? He could see the minibus, still parked, its doors open.

It was nice to be alone for a moment. He was tired just then of having to protect her, to guard that warm furrow, rolled tight as an elephant's ear inside her skirt. He took some time out in the open field, taking note of the insects and the sounds they made, the stripes on their legs. He would tell her about them when they were on the road again.

After a few more minutes, he made himself turn back. The other passengers were pecking at little packets of chips and stuffed breads that flies kept landing on. She wasn't in the cluster. He peeked inside the door, expecting to see her reclined with her eyes closed, or reading. She wasn't there. Neither was the driver or his sidekick.

He rushed over to the space between the low buildings where the sidekick was pacing and smoking. He tried to pass him to the rear of the men's building to see what he was guarding, and found himself in a shoving match. There was a muffled sound. He called her name roughly, still bouncing the other man off him.

The driver emerged, jogging up to his friend. Together, they managed to pin him to the wall, shouting in rough-accented, beery Russian before throwing him hard against it one last time. The driver picked up the can of Siberian-label sitting on the ground and they shook themselves out, walking slowly towards the clump of passengers. The others hadn't seemed to notice the scuffle.

He rounded the corner to see her squatting on the dirt slope, skirt gathered in her fist. A sound like a bucket being emptied erupted beneath her. He turned, instinctively; they had always agreed about a closed-door policy for the bathroom. When they'd visited each other at home, they turned on the faucet to drown out the sounds.

When the sound fizzled, he turned back to her. She was still crouched, staring out at the vacant land. He ran over and knelt next to her. Her legs were open and he could smell her in the heat, incubated and bacterial as a dog's yawn.

He rushed the driver again. The other passengers, not knowing or not caring, held him back while the driver pawed the ground

and yelled. She stood next to the men who were holding his arms, her eyes on the ground. The driver finally went back around and started up the minibus, sliding his beer can into the cupholder with a click.

The sidekick got close and said something roughly, ending with "Okay!" He let go and backed warily toward the passenger door. A man with a little English translated: "You no make problem, we can go."

"I'm not getting in there," she said, throat full of gravel.

He paused. Other buses would stop, maybe tomorrow morning. This one had been the last to leave today. He tried to think logically through the paralyzing duel of adrenaline and shaken-off sleep: they had used most of their cash, there was no ATM here. The next minibus and the next were likely to be full, given the crowds coming off the ferry. He thought of the turned backs of shopkeepers, receptionists, clerks, when the two of them had appeared at the counter with their overpronounced *brivet* and *pazhalsta*. He would not be able, even with the phrasebook, to explain what had happened.

The minibus began to move, its door flapping like a broken wing. His passport and hers were inside, along with their bankcards, their guidebooks, their clothes.

He took a running jump inside, falling sideways across their seats.

The van stopped, knocking him onto the floor. He looked out at her.

"Come on," he said, using his surest voice, the one that would make her follow.

He tried to explain in a hoarse whisper: they would have been stuck in the middle of nowhere, irretrievable by their families or their country. Marooned at the rest stop, they would have been even more vulnerable to the mercies of the inhospitable Siberians. This way, there was at least a chance of reporting the driver to the police, if they could attract an officer when they arrived in Irkutsk.

She snorted.

Frustrated, he jerked his leg and gave the back of the driver's seat a sharp jab with his knee. The sidekick turned around and gave him a look.

"Oops," he said, sarcastically.

As they pulled into the station in Irkutsk, he scanned the area for a police car, anyone in a uniform. She jumped out of her seat, bag across her chest, and stalked across the street past the gingerbread houses with the Decembrist plaques, their windows so low they knelt onto the walk. The driver and his sidekick had disappeared behind the station, leaving the luggage to the passengers to sort out. He thought about dropping a match into the gas tank or messing with the ignition. He worked his book of matches from his pocket and weighed them between his fingers. No, he reasoned, there were too many people: he'd get caught or someone innocent would get hurt. He yanked the straps of the backpack and began his encumbered stride after her.

They slept in a hostel that night in a room with eight others. He curled around her in the bottom bunk as she forced headphones deep inside her ears, the music leaking out. She had always hated the sounds of other people's sleeping, even his.

It was impossible to tell where the water on her face was coming from. When he reached for the wet mesa of her cheek, she jumped a little and swallowed, but lay inert.

Irkutsk was their first step on their way back across that massive continent, whose landscape they had watched from the train windows as it scrolled past flammable villages and flinty rock. They had shared fresh raspberries and bowls of spicy noodles, balancing them carefully on their way back from the samovar. They had been yelled at by the *provodnitsa* for offenses they could only guessed at and spent the five-hour customs check at Naushki playing cards on the porch of the post office, next to a cow. Anything they might have laughed at was behind them now.

It felt wrong to look at the pictures he had taken of the two superficial, uncomprehending people who had posed by the locomotive at a station stop and under the Candyland turrets of Saint Basil's. He deleted the ones with either of them in the frame and kept only the ones of landscapes or buildings. He could undo that much.

They needed each other, in some sore, silent way, like veterans who needed to be around others who had been there. He brought her takeout or chocolate or some perishable thing she could out-live, like a flower.

Sometimes he held her. He didn't know if she would ever be able to do more than that, or with him. He deferred to her in everything, down to her need to pretend it was only he who needed the contact. Sometimes she needed to turn him away. He let her.

He tried, even in his fantasies, not to force himself on the imaginary girls—even to guide them closer. They had to come to him, in their cutaway clothes and impossible heels, like rickety does. He never let himself reach for them until he was sure.

Getting in the Car

T.M. De Vos

It's an imaginary space, like the oil paintings of battlefields or miracles: you know that there was no held moment or banner brought out with the date; the wounded would have to fall in real time; the savior would have to look somewhere other than up. And, like those paintings, new details were constantly being uncovered: there was a witness, the gun was in her mouth before the end, she was thrown out and perhaps lived for awhile.

I don't remember if the make of the car was ever noted, but I pictured one of those longish cars from the 80s, the kind a kid with a gun could get his hands on in 1994. It's light blue in my imagination, like the Magritte-ish clouds the old masters painted around angels. There's a tire in the trunk, an iron, and that smelly old rag that shows up in every trunk.

It's a comfortable car, the kind you'd put your feet up in, or jump into if your ex swung by and invited you for a ride. It starts as if it's waiting and shrugs into a run; it's a car to hang out in, to crawl in, down the side streets where the popular kids' houses trickle into industry, where you can see the smokestacks by Outer Drive and wonder if you're breathing that black batting. The locks click like suitcase latches, you have to press them as you start rolling.

You can horse around in it, no one's going to pull you over—a trio of kids on break, jolting down side streets and making skids. The pre-holiday frost on the rear window is just softening, like a cold mug of root beer you're about to drink. There's a girl with you in the back, and you're playing that game where you tease her for awhile and then give her a rough touse. It's how you flirt: shove each other around a little and, when it's dark, kiss her.

When you take it out, you can see the shock on her face: she's seen them on TV, but it looks different here, more solid. You toss it back and forth between your hands like it's hot, you twirl it on your finger and whistle, you make some feints like you mean to use it.

She's telling you to stop, in the same tone she uses to tell you to shut up in class, when she's done goofing around and wants to finish her work. You're getting mad now: she doesn't have you on a leash anymore, you already got it from her.

It's not that you mean to, it's just that your friend kept making that hype-it-up sound and laughing at you. All three of you knew she was outsmarting you again—*just like old times*—and you needed your balls back for a second. So you start teasing her, asking her what else she likes in her mouth, and does this new guy know?

She's stubborn. She won't take the insult, scared as she is, and you find her palate. Your friend has shut up; he's not hyping anything now. You look at her face: she's not yours, even now, when you could lead her down the street by the teeth. You want to clench your fists and you sort of know doing that could make something happen, but your nerves jump forward and you let them.

You've never seen it before, you can tell when someone is there and then gone. She was breathing, you knew she knew you, but there was no resistance. The car has rolled to a stop next to the tracks, but your friend's not turning around yet.

Your face is hot, and you're sorry, but you're pushing the passenger's seat forward and unlocking the door. You're grabbing her under the armpits, and she's not a big girl, but it's hard to move her now. Even when you'd pick her up kicking and shrieking and throw her over your shoulder, she must have been helping you. *Help me, man*, you say, and your friend leaves the key in and walks around to your side. He doesn't agree, and you know it, and he doesn't speak to you, but it's like when you break something at a store, like the remote car or the little dog that does flips at Kaybee's. You have to hide it.

You put her down gently, as if laying her on ice. Now that she's out and you know the car is clean, you let yourself feel what you've done. Your friend doesn't look at you; he's not going to give you hell about it.

The two of you back away, looking. You get in the front seat now, and the two of you will go somewhere normal, where you

won't have fun. You'll keep asking each other what's wrong, aggressively, trying to get each other to fight.

She might still be alive, on the cold stones next to the tracks. You hope she'll sort it out and walk home and talk to you in a few weeks when she's done being mad. It's happened before, when a few of you were sneaking out for lunch: you burst out through the side door, leaving her there to get caught. You brought McDonald's back for her, but she wouldn't eat it; you had to tease her for a couple of days before she'd give you that mock-slap on your forehead and curse you a little before falling back onto your shoulder.

Zack Time

by Barry Friesen

The Suicide Hotline shift ends early enough that Ian gets home at five in the morning, and Zack is waiting, t-shirt on backwards. He is three; every five in the morning is Zack time.

"Catch," he says, reaching up. Ian puts him on top of the fridge and Zack flings himself off and giggles when he's caught like a soccer ball.

The November sidewalk is frosty. A block away, the bakery opens, their ritual.

"Two," Zack says. The doughnuts are so new that they sag. They melt in their mouths.

At the park Zack burrows beneath maple leaves. Ian runs in circles, "Where's he gone?" until he bursts upward like a firecracker, victorious, cackling at his father's astonishment, knows it's pretended.

Then the stupid red fire truck in the park, which Zack loves, despite steering wheel and levers and switches welded frozen, immovable. Whoever had done that had no kids.

Finally, the newspaper box, half a block from the house. Zack is fascinated with the box. Ian takes out change; Zack reaches for it with tiny hands.

"Let me," he says. "I'll do it."

They listen to the satisfying gargle of coins swallowed by the slots one at a time, but Ian stares at his son's perfect little hands. The woman on the suicide phone had cried for an hour. "Moles on my hands," she'd said. "Everywhere. Some are longer than my fingers."

The door to the newspaper box is spring-loaded and Zack likes feeling strong enough to pull it down himself with one arm. With the other, he reaches into the box for a paper and turns to hand it to his father, who is thinking of moles everywhere and how he could do nothing.

But the door swings up into locked position, trapping Zack's arm in the narrow gap.

Zack cries. Ian goes cold inside, pats his pockets for change—no change—and tries to rip the box open with his bare hands. It's frosty, slippery, his fingers catch on something, there's blood. Ian pulls at cold steel around the small arm, looks up: no one, it's winter, it's too early. He calls, loud; tries the box again.

He can't do it. Zack's hurting and Ian can't make it stop and something grabs him by the throat, no no no.

"Zack, I have to get the crowbar. I'll be right back."

Zack cries louder and Ian runs *away* from him and would rather have had his legs cut off than do that. His eyes flood at the house door as he works the key. He crashes into the closet, the toolbox, grabs the crowbar—it feels like five seconds since he left Zack; it could be five minutes; time is a twisted black ribbon.

He's breathless back at the newspaper box. Pushes through a few people by then in bathrobes and pajamas trying to comfort a screaming little boy. As he inserts the crowbar and wills the door to snap open, sirens shriek in stereo pain, fire trucks arrive from two directions. He can feel the vibration of men in rubber boots running.

Everyone breathes the same sharp winter air as Ian pulls Zack into his arms and the relief is like death. Zack's fine, and it's over.

Ian pushes the words through like a bullfrog, "Thank you, all."

He carries Zack home snuggled under his chin in milky silence. Ian smells his hair and thinks of bee stings, bike falls, girl troubles, moles, deaths—how he can do nothing to protect his son from what's coming, what's folded into the tapestry ahead like a bright red thread.

First Recompense

Sabra Sanjani

Part I

She stood on the roof of the Yadin Memorial Center. Passers-by saw her first. Others began pulling cars over, getting out, and crossing the lawn to stare up at her. What the hell was she doing up there? How had she gotten up there? Even in Israel, it was not something one saw every day.

A few spectators asked what was going on. Most kept silent, waiting to hear what the girl might say. Maybe, she would just jump.

Why was she wearing only a white thong? Some murmured about a stick in her right hand that glimmered in the sunlight. When she screamed, "Zionism is the lie of Satan," mouths fell open.

"Herzl and Ben Gurion lied to you!" she cried out. "The State of Israel is a blasphemy, a defamation against true Judaism, against true Jews who have lived in peaceful harmony with Muslims for centuries!"

Four people came from the building beneath.

"The State of Israel must be dismantled! The native citizens of Palestine must be given back their homeland, with our apologies! If we must endure a hundred years of humiliation and punishment for the crimes we have committed, so be it!"

"Ah, she's a follower of Rabbi Weiss and Cohen," an older man shouted. "A damned radical."

A woman nearby said, "Weiss and Cohen are not rabbis. They're liars. They only make trouble for us."

"Naturei Karta! They're the ones from Satan," a young man with a beard and wearing a kippah interjected.

But in a moment, the girl changed all of their minds.

"Listen to me, Israel! I am the one you must follow! I am the voice in the wilderness, the voice of God! I am she whose coming

is from of old, and when I die for you, when I lay down my life for you — then you will listen!”

With the glimmering stick, the girl suddenly slashed both of her wrists and held them out to bleed. A gasp went through the crowd, but no one turned away.

As the wind whipped her hair, blood trickled under her forearms and the girl’s chin fell to her chest, the image of Christ crucified.

“My god,” a woman said. “Somebody stop her.”

The audible reaction increased.

“If you listen to my words,” the girl cried out, lifting her face, “you will know the way to peace, the way to salvation. Give this land back to the Palestinians — it has always been theirs, not ours! True Jews abhor and renounce Zionism! True Jews love peace, not robbery!”

With this, to the horror of everyone, the girl slashed her throat. Blood flowed over her bare tits.

“Stop listening to Labor, to Kadima, to Likud! Listen to me, because today I will die for your sins! Stop building beyond the Green Line, and start dismantling the hives of our fucking infestation!”

Not satisfied that she was bleeding fast enough, the girl sliced again at her throat. She dropped the razor and stepped, face down, arms extended and bleeding, to where the roof ended. Dark-red droplets fell from her nipples as her toes curled over the edge.

When the crowd realized how this might end, a second gasp followed.

Inside the hall, a memorial service had been under way to honor a family recently killed in a plane crash. As the mourners came out they joined those on the lawn, looking up with them in horror.

“My god, it’s Rachel!” a woman gasped.

“Someone help her!”

A man’s deep voice called out.

“Rachel, honey, don’t do this.”

This speaker’s voice was American, and Rachel loved it now just as she had loved it throughout her life. His had always been the voice she hoped to hear when she was in trouble. This time, the voice had come too late; there was nothing the broad shouldered man in the cowboy hat could do to save her ass.

Ten days earlier, two sexy girls were drinking Turkish coffee from an authentic finjan several doors from Steimatzky’s Books on Ben Yehuda Street. They were flirting without shame with two guys wearing IDF fatigues who were across the room. The men were having rugelach.

The pretty redhead kept her voice low, but not so low that the guys couldn’t hear her every word.

“I like it best when he comes in easy, you know, just a soft, exploratory little poke.” She giggled.

Her friend was stirred to protest, cheeks reddening, and bright red lips becoming a smile.

“Oh, gawd, no. He needs to rip into me. I want him to offend every raw nerve and make my thighs burn like fire!”

“Shhh, Abigail!” the first girl scolded. “It’s okay to be racy, but you always go porno.”

The guys smiled at them. At that moment a young man came in from the street carrying his books in a back pack strapped over his shoulder.

“It’s all right to say whatever you want to say openly,” the second girl argued. “It’s the twenty-first fucking century. We’re a free country. My pussy is liberated.”

“You really need it bad. Am I right?” the other girl teased.

She looked past the newcomer as he ordered something at the counter. He was blocking her view of the IDF guys. She knew they were still watching, still interested.

“Well, then, how do you like kissing?” she asked her friend.

“Oh, well, kissing is ninety per cent of fucking,” the other girl said, glancing past the guy at the counter toward the soldiers. “I’ve

cum a number of times just from kissing. It's just like fucking, except with the tongue for the cock."

She glanced back at the soldiers, both of whom were amazed at her candor. Sniggering between themselves, one of the guys lifted his hand toward the girls.

Just then the young man with the backpack stepped back from the counter and reached into his jacket.

"The Beautiful Land will be clean when all of you are dead — you fucking Jewish whores!"

The explosion blew the fronts of three stores into a street, where tourists and regulars strolled moments earlier. There was nothing left of the girls, the guys in their fatigues who were flirting back, or the young man with the back pack. Pieces small and large were found of the owner of the breakfast nook and several shoppers two stores away. Five pedestrians died instantly. Two were decapitated.

Several minutes after the blast, bits of litter still fluttered onto the street, while blood still gurgled in the throats of the dying. A man dressed completely in black stepped forward and cleaned off a section of sidewalk.

He pulled an aerosol can from his coat and shook it. He then sprayed the initials "N. E. B." on the pavement in big easy to find letters.

The Jerusalem morning was still radiant. Light breezes blew through leafy trees.

Rachel looked quickly into each of the windows of an old, rusted van before waving the driver through her check point. She took a deep breath then swallowed some bottled water. Three feet away, a blue sedan rolled to a stop.

Hand on her weapon, the twenty-year-old IDF private stepped to the sedan's window, then happened to glance over the roof of the car. An obviously pregnant Palestinian girl was approaching quickly on foot. She was now no more than thirty meters from their check point.

The girl was waving both hands wildly over her head. She was now close enough for Rachel to see how ragged and homespun her chador was. The girl cried out as she advanced towards the check-point, "Ptzatza!" and then, "Yaaaa Allah! Yaaaa Allah — ptzatza!"

The soldier nearest Rachel shouted, "She's got a bomb! She's asking God to save her!"

Five soldiers now pointed their rifles at the approaching girl, whose chador was whipped by the wind. She wailed loudly, and Rachel could see that her legs were trembling. Her knees were close to buckling, and her stomach was swollen.

"Pitzutz! Bomb! Yaaaa Allah — yaaaa!" She hadn't stopped yelling.

The soldiers circled the pregnant girl as she dropped to her knees and raised her hands high. The nearby civilians began to scatter frantically seeking cover behind the closest structure. Some simply threw themselves face down on the ground as if paralyzed.

The soldiers and the pregnant girl were still shouting at each other, their words all confusion and panic. The girl was warning them away by pointing to her belly and screaming those same words, "Ptzatza! Yaaaa Allah! Pitzutzim!"

Rachel's heart pounded. One of the soldiers suddenly turned and pointed straight at her, the only female soldier at the checkpoint.

"Private!" he yelled sharply, then motioned her to come.

Rachel pointed to herself as a question, and the soldier shouted, "Yes, here! On the double!"

She pushed between the cars and then ran to the soldiers and the pregnant terrorist. The girl looked to be at least a year or two younger than she was.

"Yes, Sir," she said to the Rav Samal Rishon, the First Sergeant, who repeated what everyone already knew.

"She says she's got a bomb."

"Is she pregnant, or is that the bomb, Sir?" Rachel asked.

The sergeant's chest patch identified him as Aryeh Nir. He spoke quickly, "Both. She says they didn't think we'd stop a pregnant girl."

Another soldier, a Meysar Mishne, a 2nd lieutenant named Benny Shaul, got her attention.

“Private — “ He stopped to check her name. “Private Dayan, talk to the girl. Calm her down.”

Rachel snapped, “Yes, Sir.”

Making eye contact with the girl, Rachel stepped past her fellow soldiers. A hundred different voices of onlookers and soldiers bled into her ears, and she struggled to block them out.

When she realized that Rachel was coming towards her, the kneeling girl shrieked and waved her hands violently to warn her back. Rachel ignored the warning. She didn’t stop until she was standing directly in front of her. They were close enough to smell the fear in one another’s sweat.

“Yaaaa Allah — help me! I don’t want to die,” the pregnant girl cried in mangled English.

Rachel spoke as calmly as possible, hoping her tone might cover the reality of her pounding heart, dry mouth, and knocking knees.

“What’s your name?”

The girl’s eyes widened, as Rachel reached down with both hands and helped her back to her feet.

“I am Nada Yunis Al-Khatib.” The girl shook as she spoke. Rachel noticed the initials N. E. B. sprayed on the sleeves of the girl’s blue dress.

“Nada, I’m Rachel.” Rachel took care not to break eye contact; if she had any strength, any courage, she wanted the girl to recognize it and take strength from it.

“Nada, we aren’t going to hurt you or the baby — but you must stay calm,” she said.

The girl nodded furiously, then started crying louder and more passionately than before.

“My father and my husband say it is my duty to die for Islam — but I don’t want to die.”

Rachel said, “You’re not going to die.”

“Yes, yes, mashallah, mashallah!” the girl cried.

“And neither is your child,” Rachel repeated emphatically.

“Yes, yaaaa Allah! Yes, jazak-allahu khayran!”

“You’re welcome, Nada. I’m staying right here with you,” she said, and added in a quavering voice, “If your ass gets blown away, then so does mine — we’re in this together.”

The girl closed her eyes tightly and began whispering a prayer. Rachel gripped her hands and felt Nada’s tears when they fell on her chapped knuckles. She wished that she too had a god she could pray to. She had jettisoned many things between childhood and the army. Faith in anything more immediate than herself had been one of them.

That evening, as she stood naked under the shower spray, Rachel could hear the TV through the open door. Naomi, a fellow soldier and her best friend, sat on a sofa in the living room watching news about the Palestinian girl who came to the checkpoint with four sticks of C4 taped to her thighs.

Naomi ignored Rachel’s pleas to turn the volume down. She was excited that her roommate was being called a hero all across Israel.

“You’re famous! The whole world saw what you did today!” Naomi called out, as Rachel began rinsing her hair. “Listen!”

The newsman sounded like he was just beyond the shower curtain.

“The explosives were carefully removed from the girl after many tense minutes. While the men worked to complete this dangerous job, a young Israeli soldier, a girl of the same age, calmed the pregnant bomber by holding her hand and stroking her face repeatedly.”

“Please, turn it off,” Rachel asked a second time.

“We’re going out,” Naomi called back. “My treat!”

Naomi couldn’t see that Rachel’s shoulders were trembling under the shower and that she was covering her face with her hands. The sound of the water masked Rachel’s crying.

Rachel still wasn't in the living room when Naomi turned from the set and started to shout, "We might have..."

Turning back to the TV, her face stricken with grief, Naomi whispered, "...we might have lost you today."

The dimly lit rave club was packed. As bodies undulated to the rapid tempo of bass-heavy music, lasers attacked dancers from every direction. Pink, blue, and green butterflies of light pulsed angrily through murky drifting fog. Foam sprayed from elevated cannons while scantily clad girls gyrated on platforms above the dance floor.

Naomi was trapped below by a tight circle of guys, all with bones in their pants, she was sure, all with bad intentions. Her costume left nothing to the imagination. It was little more than thin yellow and black strips from a torn Palestinian flag.

Rachel was one of the topless girls on a platform at the front. Wearing a camel-toe thong, she was soaking wet. Her eyes closed, she shook her body shamelessly, displaying all the good things God had given her. The singer's sexy voice threatened to blow apart the speakers — *I wanna be your bitch tonight, wanna be, wanna be your bitch tonight!*

In coming here tonight, her single goal was to drive the events of that day as far from her mind as she could. She visited Dante's Descent with Naomi at least twice a week. When there, they escaped who they were and what they did for a living. But tonight the routine was overshadowed and quickened by undefined urgency.

Doing XTC stamps with cartoons of Golda Meir and Ben Gurion, Rachel had been ecstatic, cock-a-hoop, since arriving. She intended to get fucked as many times as possible by sunrise. Just before morning, the doors would close and Jerusalem's underground ravers would scurry away like vampires threatened by sunrise.

In two hours, she had dropped to her knees three times and blindly kissed, licked, and sucked what was offered by men whose faces she didn't recognize, whose cum she greedily swallowed,

and whose stiff members she nearly tore from their trunks in her enthusiasm.

Eminem was rapping *Shake That Ass*, with Nate Dogg, when Rachel felt herself enveloped by a flash of light so bright she was sure she had been vaporized.

She found herself outside, her sweaty, nude body embraced by the cool breeze of night. She was being pulled headlong through darkened, unpaved streets, a mob of twenty oddly dressed and angry men surrounding her. She heard herself gasping.

"What the hell are you doing to me?" she cried out, her voice filled with terror. "Where the fuck are we going?"

They offered no explanation. Twice, when she had fallen on her face in the dirt, they pulled her back to her feet by grabbing a fistful of hair, slapping her ass and then her face, spitting on her.

"You worthless whore!" one shouted.

Another slapped her tits as hard as he could, and before being pulled away by the others took her down with both hands around her throat, choking the life from her.

At the wall, they pushed her away, wiping her stench from their hands. She fell on old uneven stone, her nose bloodied and her ankle twisted.

She turned around, wiped the blood from her face, and then saw him. The others in the mob backed away and turned silent. They were frightened of him. Rachel knew who he was instantly and she knew why his disciples had followed him without question.

He knelt and casually scratched the dirt with his forefinger. Everyone stared at him. They were still gripping the rocks they had surely meant for her skull

Without looking up, and with unnerving calm, the stranger said quietly, "Let he who is without sin throw the first stone."

One by one, the stones fell to the dust at their feet, and one by one her accusers retreated into the shadows. The stranger brushed away whatever he had been writing in the dirt and rose to look at

her. She couldn't bear to have his eyes on her. She felt like a mud covered sow in the wallow. But when he came close she didn't see the fire of condemnation in his eyes, only a tenderness that broke her heart. Tears mingled with the blood on her face.

He touched her soiled cheek, smiled and quietly said, "My daughter, your sins, which are many, are forgiven. Go and sin no more."

Naomi was shouting at Rachel, as she led her over the parking lot to the van.

"What do you mean what happened? Don't you remember? Shit! You fell off the goddamned platform, you may have broken that guy's back when you landed on him. I gotta get you to the ER, because you split your fucking head open — there's blood all over your face."

Ten minutes later, Rachel was wheeled into the ER on base, her face still washed in crimson and tears. And, try as she might, Naomi couldn't keep her friend's hands down, which she kept raising, as though at a Pentecostal worship service.

"I saw him, Naomi! I saw Jesus! He came to me, he saved me, he washed my sins in his blood — I'm forgiven and set free!"

Naomi bent cheek to cheek, getting blood on her face — "See if there's any other way you can think of to get us kicked out of the army and be disgraced in Israel!"

The boy walked along the side of the road, puffs of dust kicking up when his heels struck ground. Every third or fourth step, he glanced back over his shoulder. He was near the Al Fawar Junction South of Hebron on Route 60, and he had become separated from his friends who had brought him from Ashdod by car.

He didn't know how long it would take to reach home and family. His heart raced. He was desperate to see them, to be held, even to be punished, however harshly, for running off to a party with friends.

He knew that by the time the sun slipped from the sky he must be as far away from here as he could be, but there was plenty of light when the car rolled to a stop behind him on the deserted road. He turned, his mouth opening in a smile to greet his long lost friends. He couldn't imagine how they'd found him; he was just infinitely grateful and that was all that mattered right now. But the six coming out of the car weren't his friends. He walked briskly, praying under his breath for God to save him and to spare him despite his disobedience.

It was a stolen ax, with a long handle and a blade sharpened for splitting logs. It severed Doron's head from behind. The blade drove all the way to his chest cavity. His body dropped into a heap. Only then did they jerk the axe away from his corpse.

His body was urinated on, defecated on, and then set afire.

When Doron's body was discovered six hours later, it lay beside a cement bridge upon which three words had been spray painted in blue — New Exodus Brigade.

Part II

Like herded cattle, men, women, and children came rushing through iron-barred traps and cages to reach the gates of the check point. Here, surrounded by tangled barbed wire and cement berms, lines of Israeli soldiers trained in crowd control tactics met them.

"Go back! No! Go back!"

It was the theme song of the crossing, rising time and again over the din of a thousand conflicting voices in four defiant languages.

"Next time, have your papers in order," one soldier barked into a woman's face, ignoring her tears.

"But I am born in Jerusalem," an old man wailed. "I have a right to pray in El-Aksa before I die!"

"Not without the right permits," a soldier answered.

"Back! All of you! If you push you can't come through!" Another voice ordered.

Her head stitched, her face pale, Rachel was determined to stand her ground. Splitting open her head at a rave club wasn't reason enough to miss work. All hands were needed on the last Friday of Ramadan.

Here there was pushing and shoving and voices raised in anger. And, as always, there was the crying of women and children.

Rachel stood as part of a human chain of soldiers. Each time the people surged en masse to break through, the soldiers joined hands and held the line against them. Other times, they met them face to face, dealing with each case as swiftly as possible.

The teenager from Nablus seethed, "We have every right to worship at the mosque."

Rachel, standing toe to toe with him, shouted back, "Not without the right permit!"

"I told you I forgot the damned permit. I'll bring it next time."

"Which does nothing for you this time!"

When he turned away, Rachel choked down two gulps of air and looked up to find a mountain of a man taking his place. Bugs on a windshield came to mind, as she looked up past the man's belly and into his face.

"Now, of course, I am crossing," he informed her. "You can do nothing to stop me."

"Your permit, please," she said firmly, extending her hand.

He chuckled gravely, stepped forward, and gave her a push.

"Shioaw!" Rachel shouted. "Don't push me!"

He did it again, this time using more of his strength, nearly knocking her off her feet. She quickly regained her footing, while he looked away, ignoring the impudent mite before him, choosing instead to address those on either side of her.

"Someone please remove this ugly little ass wipe," he said disdainfully.

"Show me your papers," Rachel snapped in the general direction of his enormous belly.

"I will not show you anything."

"You want to pass, you show me the right papers," Rachel

repeated defiantly.

"Kiss my ass!" he thundered and put his hands on his hips.

She called him a son of a bitch in his own tongue, and he struck her shoulders with both hands, sending her stumbling back on her ass.

"Hey! Hey!" other voices shouted, as soldiers on all sides took notice and joined hands over her to keep the bully away.

She scrambled to her feet just in time to see the giant come unhinged, shrieking at the top of his lungs, doing all he could to break through the line to get at her.

"She's a vulgarity," he clamored, spit flying everywhere.

As he was muscled away, he managed a last look back at the target of his rancor. "Damned slut — shlok'keh, hohsh b'teezuk!"

Rachel hadn't noticed the officer standing beside her, until he put his hand on her shoulder and said, "You're too small for this."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he directed her away from the melee, saying, "Go over there."

She hurried to another part of the line, where the mob was just as determined to cross. A Second Lieutenant welcomed her with, "Stand right here, and don't let them get the best of you."

She turned to an old woman, who was wearing a threadbare chador.

"Papers, please," Rachel said.

The woman presented her permit.

"Stop being so nice," the soldier beside her snapped. "You aren't a waitress. We don't say please to these people."

Rachel thought to herself — *Well, maybe we should.*

She glanced over the old woman's permits.

"These are in order, you can pass," she said, but the woman put her hand on Rachel's arm and looked urgently into her eyes.

"Please, my daughter is ill."

"Where?"

"Over there," the woman pointed through the mob.

After some effort, Rachel saw a young woman at the rear of a group standing behind a high metal fence.

Wearing the khimar, with arms folded, the woman was surrounded by three small children, who Rachel could see were emotionally distraught.

“She has no papers,” the old woman informed her.

“Then she can’t go through,” Rachel said.

“Her husband, he runs away, he takes papers,” the woman explained. “I have papers, but she does not.”

“I can’t let her through on your papers,” Rachel said.

“Please, she must see doctor. Mebbe last chance to save her.”

“Only you can go through on these papers.”

“But she is dying.” The woman’s grip became firm. “I am her mother, and my daughter is dying.”

Rachel glanced around. Nobody was watching her and there seemed to be a lull on both sides.

“Take me to her,” she told the woman, who turned and led her through the mob into enemy territory. Following close, Rachel spoke over the woman’s shoulder.

“Do the children know how ill their mother is?”

“No, they cry because they have no food today.”

They were bumped by people on every side. When they came to the woman, her children crowded around.

“I need to speak to her,” Rachel said.

“My daughter has never spoken. . . . She is born without words.”

Rachel made eye contact with the young mother. The mute woman did her best to smile, but her response was understandably sullen. Rachel hurriedly took small bags of M&M’s from the pockets of her uniform, handing one bag to each child.

“They aren’t much,” she told them. “You’ll need to share.”

They nodded, keeping their eyes turned down and away from the Jewess.

“Bless you for giving the children food,” the old woman said and grabbed Rachel’s hand as she gazed into her face.

“I pray now every day that God will give you big husband, very much blessing, and long life.”

Rachel knew she was out on the shakiest of limbs. It could be

knocked out from under her at any moment. Her job was crowd control. Getting personally involved was the fastest way to get your ass chewed.

Her mind was working on the problem, when the sound of heavy feet on the asphalt caught her attention. She turned to glimpse the furious rhino in full charge. She and two of the children were knocked rolling, but she alone was the target of his fury. Kicking her again and again, the giant, whom she had narrowly survived only minutes before, meant now to finish her. Blocking kicks to her face left her chest and stomach open. He zeroed in with deadly accuracy. His second kick drove the wind from her. The next seemed to tear both tits completely off.

When one of his hobnail boots came down squarely between her legs, she grabbed her crotch in agony and didn’t see the kick to her face.

“So, what the fuck is N. E. B.?” Rachel asked Naomi as they walked from the hospital, two days after the attack.

The newspaper in her hand detailed the recent death of the thirteen year old Jewish boy along Route 60 in Hebron.

“New Exodus Brigade. They’re saying it’s a movement growing faster than anything we’ve seen,” Naomi answered.

“How many attacks so far?”

“Eight in the last ten days. Seven were fatal,”

Naomi pulled out the keys to her van as they approached it. She continued, “They say they’re going to murder Jews until we leave the way we came. They want another exodus, only this time back to Egypt.”

Rachel snorted, “On foot, yeah? With a guy named Moses leading the way.”

“Fuckin’ A,” Naomi laughed. “Charlton Heston can split my legs any day, just like he did the Red Sea.”

“Maybe they’re just some guys lashing out,” Rachel said. “Or do they seem organized?”

“We think they have meetings, leaders, and ranks, the whole bit,” Naomi said, as she circled her van then got behind the wheel. “They mean to murder us till we piss our thongs and get the hell out of Dodge.”

“New Exodus Brigade,” Rachel sighed. “Well, every club should have a catchy name.”

Rachel thought to herself, *You’ll die in this shitbox — you don’t fucking get out, you’ll get your head ripped off some goddamned night and be forgotten sooner than yesterday’s piss.*

Naomi started the engine, silenced the radio, and fixed her friend with a deadly serious stare.

“I know you’re thinking of re-enlisting, but you seem to have a serious bullseye on your ass, and whoever’s marked you hasn’t missed yet.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Rachel said and turned to the window. Something told her not to look at Naomi.

“I do worry,” Naomi’s voice shook. “You’ve been in the hospital twice in four days. Next time might be the morgue ...*yakiri*.”

Rachel turned from the window. Naomi’s face was wet with tears, and Rachel fell into her arms.

“I can’t lose you,” Naomi said, squeezing her tightly.

“You’re not going to,” Rachel whispered into her ear.

“You’re careless,” Naomi said, “and so goddamned hot headed. Sometimes you scare the shit out of me.”

“I’ll try to be careful,” she told Naomi then pulled her still closer. “I’ll work on my temper and try to think before I act.”

“Promise?”

Rachel wiped Naomi’s tears and kissed her wet cheek.

“Absolutely,” she whispered.

They released each other, then stared into each other’s eyes. When their lips brushed, Rachel flinched as though startled awake. Their mouths came together hard, in a crush of wet lips and excited tongues.

They had never kissed before. Neither had they expressed any special attraction. But when Naomi whispered the word *yakiri*,

or darling, Rachel had felt herself pushed in a harrowing dive to the rocky ocean. She now held Naomi’s head with both hands, her eyes closed, her heart beating. Naomi’s kisses were intense and aggressive, her tongue dueling Rachel’s.

“Neshama Sheli,” she breathed between kisses — My soul!

Knowing Naomi was still at work, Rachel chose to walk home after getting her stitches removed. And in her mind, that ended the forgettable incident at Dante’s Descent. She had been drunk and also ripped on ecstasy. Now sober and reasonably sane she knew she had been lucky that nothing more happened that night than seeing Jesus and falling onto the guy dancing below her.

The bruises left by the checkpoint monster’s boots were another matter. It would take time for them to go away completely. They had begun to fade on her face and tits, which were still sore, but felt fine every time Naomi kissed them.

Rachel’s pace was fast; she’d be home in ten minutes. That was plenty of time to freshen up for her roommate. The sky was blue. The trees were green. People all around were cheerful and friendly. When she remembered she had the next two days off, it was all she could do to keep from skipping.

She hadn’t yet spoken the words in her mind, but the symptoms were undeniable. In the middle of her crazy, mixed up life she had swerved ass backward into something wonderful. But for the moment, she wouldn’t speak of it to anyone, not even herself.

She kicked up onto the curb, giggling inside. Never before had she felt like this. They had done it no less than eight times in the two days since she had left the hospital, completely blowing out the carbon with the kind of orgasms neither had guessed were anything but the stuff of fiction.

How the exact spot was immediately familiar to her she would never know. It was in passing two office buildings that she glanced to her right and stopped dead in her tracks. Maybe it was the unusual formation of the old stone wall behind the buildings, or

maybe it was something else. But the wall did appear to be very old, even ancient.

Perhaps the place was easy to remember because of who had been waiting for her there; certainly any place associated with the Son of God would be forever etched into a true believer's mind and memory.

Stepping between the buildings, she stared long and hard at the dark stain on the wall. And when she crossed the small parking lot, she wasn't surprised that the ugly red mark was exactly level with her nose and mouth and chin, which is where she had struck the wall when the rabble had thrown her against it.

There was still a feeling of his presence here, along with a residue of the fear she had felt when at the mercy of the violent crowd. This was the exact spot.

"You think you're special because you gave candy to the children?"

It was the voice of an old woman, but Rachel saw no one until she turned to her left. She flinched badly, for there, sitting in rags atop an ant-covered mound, was a hag so withered and cruel looking that not even Shakespeare could have dreamed her up. Her hair was a tangle over her head and shoulders, while the expression on her face was deeply cut by the lines of age.

Rachel was as frightened now as she had been when bullied by the mob. She started retreating at once.

"You think when you're good to your enemy's children you're better than they are."

Rachel told herself not to answer; if she held her tongue the hag might go away. It was only a hallucination, either from being kicked in the head or from doing so many damned drugs.

But the hag wasn't finished. "A great wrong has been done by Israel. Jacob is guilty of stealing The Beautiful Land from those who have always lived here." She slid from the anthill and approached Rachel, who had stopped backing away.

Just a few steps separated them. The hag raised her finger and pointed it straight into the young woman's face. "Someone must pay for these sins."

Rachel was surprised by the sound of her own voice.

"God gave us this land. It's in the Bible, and it doesn't matter what they say or what you say. It's our fucking land — they're trespassing, and so are you."

She turned away and stepped toward the street, which had reappeared along with the roar of the passing traffic.

"Your name is Rachel," the hag said, and Rachel felt two withered hands pulling at her.

She spun around, her clenched fist coming up, but the old woman was gone.

Rachel was much closer to home, when she heard the raspy voice again, every bit as real as her own.

"You have been chosen," the hag resumed, and Rachel stopped in her tracks. "You will make the first recompense, or there will never be peace here, only war."

The next thing Rachel knew she was running along the sidewalk.

"Where are the damned drugs?"

When Naomi came through the door, she was confronted by a woman gone mad. The apartment had been ransacked. All of their things had been tipped over, kicked aside, or turned upside down.

Rachel, in only a thong, was soaked with sweat. Her hair looked like she had been practicing Krav Maga for hours and hadn't yet taken a shower. She screamed, "I know you took them — just like you did before!"

"To keep you from getting kicked out of the army," Naomi answered.

"What gives you the fucking right to play God? Give them back or I'll kick your ass from here to base!"

Naomi laid down her purchases from the store and came the rest of the way into the room. She stepped around the overturned couch, coffee table, and book shelves. The books littering the carpet were all Rachel's. Knowing how her friend revered books, Naomi

was forewarned about how bad it was this time.

“Why do you need drugs again? You’ve had a bad week, I know, but haven’t a few good things happened to you?”

Rachel’s eyes raced back and forth, narrowed menacingly, and Naomi knew the love they had spent hours giving and taking had slipped off the table.

Something enormous was at play here, and with plenty at stake. Naomi was smart enough to know that if she didn’t tread carefully the immediate situation could turn catastrophic.

Rachel stamped her feet.

“Where are my fucking drugs!”

“I didn’t hide them,” Naomi said, telling the truth.

“You’re lying,” Rachel shouted and stepped ominously toward her. “You always take them, and I need them goddammit!”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“The whole damn world is fucked,” Rachel bawled, her face twisted. “We’ve got to give it all back to whoever the hell we took it from!”

“Who? Hamas? Hezbollah?”

Naomi was rewarded with a two-handed shove into the wall.

“Don’t make fun of me!”

“I’m not! What’s wrong with you?”

Rachel turned away, her hands in her hair, her eyes opened wide, as though seeing some private vision of hell.

“We’ve got to give back the land we’ve stolen. We’re fucking trespassing, which means the bastards we thought were in the wrong are in the right — and we are all totally fucked.”

“Did you see something weird again?” Naomi asked.

“There will never be peace until I’ve paid the price for our sins,” Rachel said with deep conviction.

“Okay, first you see Jesus and now you are Jesus.” Naomi hadn’t intended sarcasm, but that’s how it sounded.

Rachel pushed her again, harder this time.

“Don’t make fun of me, damn you,” she threatened. “And give me back my drugs. Why would you do this to me?”

“Rachel, even if I had your drugs I wouldn’t give them to you, until you tell me why you’re so fucking unhinged.”

Naomi didn’t see the punch coming. When she woke an hour later the house was even more trashed than before. Rachel was gone. Naomi’s cell phone was ringing from her pocket.

“Where the hell are you?” Naomi snapped.

Rachel sounded like her old self.

“I’m at dad’s airport,” she said, “in the snack bar, while he takes Mom and Davy up flying.”

Naomi slid down the wall to sit on the floor.

“Oh, yeah, the new plane,” she said, moving her hand to her jaw. “You sound okay. I guess you got your hands on some good shit.”

“Yeah,” Rachel said, “and I’m sorry I hit you.”

Naomi heard her friend sniffing.

“I’m so sorry I hit you, baby,” Rachel whispered. “I’m so fucked up — I wouldn’t blame you if you never spoke to me again.”

“I love you, Rachel,” Naomi told her. Tears trickled down her face. “I don’t want to marry you, because you can’t give me kids or a family, but I’ll never love anyone more.”

They cried together until Rachel whispered, “I better go. People are staring.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“They’re just up for a few minutes,” Rachel told her. “I wanted to go, but I was sick to my stomach.”

“Can you see them?”

“Yeah, they’re just circling mostly,” Rachel said. “I love you.”

“Come home soon,” Naomi told her, “and I’ll take you flying, too. Kisses.” Naomi disconnected.

Rachel was in a dream state. She felt tingles of heat and deep longing. She went to the big window at the far end of the snack bar. It was a better view here, and it looked like her dad was already bringing them back. The white dot in the blue canvas of sky was

her whole family. Rachel hurried downstairs to make sure they could see her watching from beside the runway.

By the time she got downstairs, her dad was dipping one of the plane's silver wings, like a great seagull. He was headed straight for the runway over some far buildings and fences. There were other planes on other runways, with tanker trucks nearby. She imagined the friendly chatter inside the cabin and she wondered if they could see her standing outside watching them.

In another moment, Rachel realized she'd misunderstood the scene before her. Not far out, and from very low altitude, her dad banked the plane steeply to the right. And then, as if her father were playing around to scare his passengers, it twisted all the way back, banking steeply left. The plane swerved.

Rachel saw the fuel truck. The plane dropped.

Oh, god — ! Daddy! Lift it! Lift it! Oh, god — no, Daddy!

She heard the massive explosion that followed. The fuel truck was an orange and black tower of flame. She ran onto the runway, but others hurried to stop her.

"Nothing you can do, honey," she heard one deep voice say, his massive hand on her forehead, his arms wrapped around her. "They're gone. All of them — son of a bitch!"

Rachel puked on the tarmac. Still retching, she dropped to her knees and pounded the ground with her fists.

God! God! God — no!

She heard her own screams.

No! God! Don't do this to us!

A very big man, who smelled of oil and grease, had pulled her into his hairy arms.

Why would you take my family — God?

She started clawing at the man as she gasped, Why would you do this to us — *God! No! It's a fucking dream, a goddamned nightmare — no, God, no!*

When she couldn't cry anymore, she stopped pounding the man's chest. All that was left was her, the man and his tender words, and the sounds of sirens.

For days, that was all Rachel could remember, that and the orange burning flame, which remained in the corner of one of her eyes. When she had been a little girl, she had stared too long at the sun during an eclipse. Her father had warned her, but she was excited and didn't want to miss anything. That dark spot had stayed in her eye like a time stamp, affecting everything she saw, burning like hell whenever she cried.

Tom, her god dad from Colorado, sat with her in the front row during the memorial service in Yadin Hall. He had flown over at once and hadn't left her side since she had run into his arms, just as she had a hundred other times when he'd flown in to visit her family over the years. His presence made up for Naomi's absence. Her best friend couldn't get out of working a double shift and was unable to be at her side.

People were rising, one after another, all of them sharing memories about her folks and her bratty little brother, Davy, who today would have been twelve. Rachel didn't want to cry, didn't want to make a public spectacle of herself. Every time she felt herself caving in to emotion, she turned to Tom. He would look into her eyes, wipe the tears away, and squeeze her hand yet again.

"Daryrush was a shrewd businessman," Mr. Meir was telling every one. "I always said, I never want to do business with anyone else, because he is so honest. Still, I never once come out on top."

Everyone was touched. Everyone chuckled.

Rachel glanced to her right to see what Davy would think about one remark or another, but he wasn't there anymore.

"Ori was a brilliant woman," Mrs. Suissa said. "You don't get appointed to head up three major charities if you are not a woman of exceptional intellect and grace. No one was ever discouraged in her presence."

She was to Rachel's left, a woman so out of place in this

gathering of finely dressed mourners that Rachel thought at once of the rotten apple in a barrel of shining red ones. The woman's hair was heaped in tangles, her clothes tattered, and her face was creased with so many lines she was nearly disfigured.

Rachel couldn't pull away from the sight of her, and the hag didn't blink the whole time their eyes locked.

"I need to use the restroom," Rachel whispered into Tom's ear.

When he nodded, she kissed his cheek, leaving her lips beside his mouth for much too long. People could think what they would.

And then Rachel left, even as Mrs. Gera was extolling her late mother's habit of visiting the sick in hospitals.

As she hurried from the hall, from the midst of those who had known her most of her life, Rachel couldn't guess how long it would be until she was returned to them.

Blood soaked her white-linen thong, turning it deep red. Her tits and stomach were covered in stripes of blood which dripped off her to be caught by the wind. She felt weaker now than she could ever remember feeling.

"Ben Gurion, Mrs. Meir, Moshe Dayan, all of them were great leaders," she was still ranting, trying to say everything she imagined the hag wanted her to say. Anything to get the devil off her ass, anything to bring her loved ones back.

"But every one of them were wrong! In this tragedy, there is no partly wrong, no little bit wrong — these great people, our leaders, all of them holy people, were totally wrong!"

Now there were those in the crowd who had heard enough. They shouted back, challenging her even as others urged her to sit down. Three men at the back of the steadily growing crowd had been yelling, "Jump to the goddamned pavement and be done with it."

She saw that Tom had come outside. She could tell that he was pleading with her to stop, but Rachel dared not look at him or listen. His was the one voice that could make her stop, so she shut him out. Her toes curled over the roof's edge as she continued

to rant.

She was doing this for all of them; she didn't think they would agree, or understand, but this was her duty, and Rachel always did her duty.

"You will make the first recompense," the crone had told her.

Rachel shouted, "And why in God's name does Israel need Palestine? We could start again on the moon and create a fucking paradise! You all know this! It is undeniable! If Moses were here, he would cast shame on this generation! If Father Abraham, or Jacob, or King David, or Solomon were here they would denounce this generation of Jews and cry shame! Give Palestine back to its rightful owners! Give The Beautiful Land back to the beautiful people we found here when we came to take it! Give Palestine back to the Palestinians — and then fall on your faces and beg their forgiveness and God's mercy!"

She glimpsed Tom standing below just before her body tilted a centimeter beyond the point of return. She heard the crowd gasp as she fell.

In that instant, she saw someone reach out. After that there was only darkness, only pain, only the far off echo of her own voice begging God to bring her family back. After a moment, that was gone too.

"The Naked Oracle", as she was dubbed in the papers, would regain consciousness after five days and two surgeries to relieve pressure on a brain that had struck asphalt.

Her goddad's broken arm mended as did his fractured collar bone. He would wear a neck brace for six months. Every time she looked at him she would grit her teeth in shame. But there was this, too. With every day that passed, she would feel a little more deeply loved.

And from that day to this, a small circle of orange flame still shows in the corner of her eye. Whenever she cries, it burns like hell.

The Company of Strangers

Jessica Erica Hahn

Teresa storms one way down Bourbon Street and I go the other, my hands balled into fists. She thinks it's cool to get drunk when she's never been to New Orleans before, she's never squatted, and she doesn't even have the fucking map? And then to argue about drinking *more*, just 'cause we're not getting carded? I never should've asked her to travel with me.

I stop at Esplanade Avenue, where the night reeks of rotten vegetables. Someone's behind me; I expect Teresa's ponytail and oversized UCB sweatshirt, but it's a cowboy leading a sad pony with dollar bills folded into its mane, its hooves clicking. My stomach flutters at the thought, what if I can't find Teresa?

I quickly retrace my steps to where we had our spectacle on Bourbon Street, and I stand in the air-conditioned blast outside a bar, next to a photo of a girl my age, in panties, her legs folded over her shoulders. People at the bar suck down Hurricanes and watch yesterday's stupid O.J. Simpson low-speed car chase. The bouncer shakes his meatball head at my description of Teresa. I feel dizzy, but I tell myself: I'm a woman, I'm 19, and I will survive.

I head for Jackson Square, chewing my nails, passing through Pirate's Alley where there's a bookstore I'd taken Teresa to, but she's not here. The plaza before the cathedral is empty of Tarot card readers, artists, gutterpunks, Lucky Dog carts, and one drunken co-ed. No familiar face peers out of the three-story brick buildings, or from the garden where General Jackson rears up. My forefinger stings where I've chewed the nail and I taste blood.

Teresa had insisted on scarfing down *beignets* at Café du Monde this morning, when we got in, but the café is dark and quiet. Sweat drips off my face as I make my way to the Mississippi, thankful for the breeze. A couple is making out on the Moonwalk. What if Teresa's waiting at the squat?

I run, people looking at me like I'm a purse-snatcher as I

whoosh past, stopping outside of Walgreens, breathing hard, my hands on my knees. A police man on horseback trots up. I wonder what he thinks of me, dressed in black, my hair a rat's nest, an old backpack draped over my shoulders. Hot oaty breath comes out the horse's flared nostrils, and the cop's face is a mean mug. I walk away.

My sense of geography is muddled once I'm downriver from the Quarter, even though I squatted here a year ago. I'm disoriented on the other side of Elysian Fields Avenue, walking down dim, pocked streets, past shotgun houses. One of my hands curls around a can of pepper spray, the other holds an Army knife.

At Desire Street, I inspect my hand-drawn map. It's already falling apart at the folds, the chicken-scratch writing bleeding in the humidity. A dozen mosquito legs land on my arms. I'm so lost, I could cry. There aren't any people, or even a liquor store.

One house has light on—a blue glow flickers on a screen door, and canned laughter emanates from a TV inside. It's a ramshackle house like the others, paint peeling on its clapboard, fronted by a gallery, with a wild yard.

The gate squeaks as I enter. "Hello? Hellooo?"

A huge man appears, holding back a barking German Shepherd. "Who's that?" A second dog shows its fangs, growling like a wolf.

"Sorry to bother you!" I say, holding my map high. "I think I'm lost." I talk fast, like I'm hitchhiking, to show him I'm harmless. "I'm not from here, but I have this map..."

Both dogs bark but the man snaps a command in some foreign language, to which they respond in perfect, disgruntled obedience, sitting on their rumps. The man is wearing brown pants and a T-shirt—but what's most noticeable are his height and girth, how he fills the doorway. The porch light throws his features into relief, makes his face a mask, difficult to decipher. Cow-licked blonde hair waves above his face, and his jutting forehead reminds me of a Neanderthal—but there's curiosity and stillness in his gaze, and his jaw relaxes.

The man approaches me, one hand reaching out like a chunk of ham. “May I see your map?” He turns my map over and over, his big speedbump of a forehead furrowed as he reads. “Off of Almonaster?” he cries with a twang, digging one hand into his hair for a deep scratch. “You gone too far. You need to go back to Franklin, and that turns into Almonaster, but it’s a long ways to the Ninth Ward.”

“Isn’t this the Fauborg Marigny?”

“You in the Bywater. You ain’t from here, are you?” There’s something like sympathy in his gaze.

“I’m passing through. And I’m meeting my friend at this warehouse.”

He shakes his moon pie head and sucks his teeth. “The Ninth Ward ain’t a good neighborhood.”

I think, why, because it’s black? The skin on my neck tingles. Maybe I should get out of here now, get away from this Aryan.

“My friend is waiting for me. Thanks for your time.”

The man shows me his palm. “Lemme walk you up the road a piece.”

“What?”

“I’ll just fetch my bicycle,” he says, clomping onto the porch. “It’s safer if you let me walk you, you being a young lady and all. I’ll ride my bicycle home.” He locks one whimpering dog in his house, and carries a rusty Schwinn on his shoulder as he leads the other dog, yipping and dancing, down the front steps. “Pardon me,” he murmurs, passing through the gate. “Can I see your map again?” As he mumbles and scratches his head, the tip of his tongue pokes out the side of his mouth. Maybe he’s a little slow? I see wrinkles and a greasy scalp through thinning hair, and smell old man deodorant, something like spicy mothballs. I’m guessing he’s on the deep-end of forty. He tucks his shirt in and we go.

Busted concrete and encroaching vegetation on either side of us make walking on the sidewalk a challenge, and this man is big as a Clydesdale. I’m still holding my pepper spray, hidden in a pocket, thinking this man better not start acting weird. “Let’s

walk in the street,” I suggest, taking a deep breathe when we get in the middle of the empty road. “My name is Una, by the way.”

“Pleased to meet you, Una. I’m *Peer*.” We shake hands, one clammy hand against the other. I notice a gold cross on a chain around his neck, and wonder if he notices my silver pentagram, but he says, “Per is P-e-r. It means ‘rock’.”

“Oh? I think Una means ‘the one,’” I say, “But she’s from *The Faerie Queene*.” Per nods, but doesn’t give any indication of having read Spenser, so I ask, “Who’s this dog?”

“This one’s Hans; he’s the baby. Ulrika is his Momma, but she’s getting soft and has to stay at home.”

Besides the noise of the night insects, the only sounds are the clump of my Doc Martens and the pad of his penny loafers, one squeaky bike wheel, and the click of doggy toenails.

“What brought you to New Orleans, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“It’s summertime, and I love this city.”

“You been here before?”

“Yeah, one time, under different circumstances. I’d been accepted to Tulane—”

Per isn’t listening. Hans growls at a figure at the end of the block, and Per shortens the leash. The stranger crosses the street.

Per clears his throat. “So you was saying?”

“Oh? I’m traveling with my friend, and we got in this morning.” I sigh. “It’s embarrassing, but we fought, then lost each other. She’s probably at this warehouse.”

“A warehouse hotel?”

“No, it’s abandoned, a squat. Some kid at the Drop-In Center on Rampant drew me that map to it.”

Per’s chewing his lips like they’re sausages. Shit, he’s going to get preachy, or advise me. Well I won’t explain that I feel caught between two worlds, the one of work and college versus the one of wandering around, being a bum. And if Teresa hadn’t ruined my day, I’d be happier now than I’d been in a year.

But Per surprises me by saying, “You been to Verti Marte on

Royal? No!?! They got the best jambalaya, the cheapest étouffée, and the biggest stuffed potato—with *real* bacon, and cheese and onion, mmm.”

“Maybe you ought to go home and eat?” Secretly, I’m wishing he’d go away. I don’t trust that he won’t get weird, and sure enough, he starts gnawing his fist, saying, “I’m always hungry.”

I knew it. He must’ve been a special ed kid. My fear dissipates, some. I guess I’m thankful he’s walking with me.

Five or six blocks later, Per says, “I think that’s your warehouse.” He points to a dilapidated building at the far end of a brown field, then crosses his arms. “I’ll wait on the street while you check your friend is there.”

Tiptoeing alone through the weeds, glass sparkling underfoot, I think, “Be scared. You can’t help that. But don’t be afraid.” Who wrote that? Some Southern writer... But I’ve reached the front door, a black rectangle, and my heart starts leaping, imagining crackheads inside. Per and Hans stand on the far side of the brown field behind me, the moon tiny and cold above them, and I feel gratitude for their presence.

“Teresa?” I fiercely whisper into this steamed up port-o-pottie, seeing only forty-ounce beer bottles, Styrofoam containers, and wet clothes in the trapezoid of streetlight. “Teresa?!” There’s a scuffle, a body moving, a deep grunt. I jump outside and run across the field, back to the street.

“My friend’s not there,” I say, my throat constricted, one hand on my thumping chest. Forget Teresa, I think of my father, who died from a heart attack when I was a baby. “Can you show me how to get to the Quarter? I’ll find a cafe and drink coffee all night.” We walk, my legs feeling like jelly.

“You can have coffee at my home,” Per suggests as we walk down the street.

“Thanks but I’ve taken too much of your time. I’ll be fine in the Quarter.”

Per pulls the neck of his T-shirt with one finger. “It’s not safe to wander round this town. Ain’t you worried?”

I shake my head. “I feel pretty safe right now, walking with you. And you know, I believe the Universe will take care of me.”

“You’d be safer inside,” Per says. “You can watch TV with me and Hans and Ulrika, before Momma gets home.”

“Your mom?”

Per’s big forehead shadows his eyes, but he’s frowning. “Momma works graveyard shift. You can leave before she gets home.” As we walk, he keeps mumbling, “I’m just saying so.”

What would my Mom say if she was here? “Una, get the FUCK out of there!” Imagining my mom standing here, one finger quivering, so mad her tongue’s in a taco, frustrates me. Two thousand miles from home and my mom still tells me what to do?

“I’d love to stay for a cup of coffee, Per. Thank you.”

Per’s face changes from quizzical to pleased, his mouth opening into a goofy grin.

Two armchairs hog most of the living room, as does the TV on the long bureau slopped over with magazines. The air smells of mentholated cigarettes and b.o., but I haven’t seen Per light up. I go to the bathroom, through a bedroom where a large bed takes up most of the space, and shelves are cluttered with religious statuary and porcelain dogs, and through a kitchen done up in a rooster theme. The bathroom reeks of cinnamon apple and mold; a half dozen deodorizers dangle from the louvered shutters. I hover my ass above the squishy plastic toilet seat as I pee, thinking what am I doing? I should just leave. My reflection in the mirror shows me looking haggard with raccoon rings of eyeliner, a red nose, and frizzy hair. Angry pimples flare up on my neck. I wash my face and pat my hair with wet hands.

Coffee’s burbling in a pot, and when I plop down on the armchair closest to the front door, I decide I won’t leave, not yet. I remember now. William Faulkner said to not be afraid. What would he do in my shoes? These feet ache from all the wandering around I’ve been doing. Small white moths bat against the screen and Hans comes up for a scratch on his noggin. Everything feels comfortable.

Per extends a tray of animal cookies after shoveling three in

his mouth. “Do you like *Happy Days* or *The Andy Griffith Show* better?”

I flick a wet crumb off my arm. “Actually, my favorite old show is *Good Times*.”

Per’s shoulders sag and we settle down, the dogs curling into canine loafs on either side of their master. We drink cup after cup of coffee, and watch reruns late into the night. At four a.m., while David Carradine creeps around an episode of *Kung Fu*, I start nodding off.

“You can sleep on Momma’s bed.”

I think, no freaking way. Is this not some fucked up Goldilocks story crossed with *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*? Yeah, Momma comes walking home with her bunions aching and sees me in her bed. Next thing you know, I’ve got no legs and Momma’s got a bloody ax.

I fight a nervous yawn with a frown and flared nostrils. Still, I follow Per’s pointed finger, considering the bed, then the statue of Mother Mary. Just to lie down and put my feet up would be nice. I can stay awake. And the front door is ten feet away.

“Maybe I’ll just lay down?”

“You do that. That’s fine. I’ll wake you up before Momma gets home.” Per stands, plucking a stinky crocheted blanket off his armchair.

Almost strangers, almost friends, we stand oddly side-by-side. We each have separate concerns—Momma being the foremost for both of us, I’m sure. Per sits back down as I enter the bedroom and perch on the edge of the bed. “I’ll put my shoes on the floor,” I say to the empty doorframe, hearing Per fumble with the clicker. Now more than ever, a score of unacknowledged rules still apply.

As if reading my mind, Per says, “I won’t bother you none, I won’t.”

I wonder if I’ll live through the night. Being here is revealing just how odd I am, how I don’t know Teresa, or even myself. I’m not such a good person—I wouldn’t let a stranger into my mother’s house, and certainly not to sleep on her bed. This can’t be reality;

these hands and arms must belong to my doppelganger.

I align my shoes against the ruffled bed-skirt and lie down, gripping my canister of pepper spray. My backpack is my pillow, and the crocheted blanket is over my chin, its stinkiness reminiscent of my childhood dog. Against my best intentions, my eyes close.

Someone has touched my big toe. My eyes jerk open. Per is at the foot of the bed, a silhouette, but he withdraws with immense care, murmuring, “Oh sorry sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.” A physical impression tingles through my sock. Did he pinch my big toe? Floorboards squeak as he retreats into the living room, where the TV chatters. There’s a whoosh as Per settles into an armchair. Did he actually pinch my big toe? My thoughts chase themselves around. Should I get up? I’m so tired. Per must’ve accidentally brushed against my foot. He’s harmless but weird, kind of like Sloth, that monster from *The Goonies*. He’s okay. And my eyelids fall shut.

“Wake up, it’s five-thirty,” comes a soft voice. Per’s head peeks around the doorframe, one hand waving. “Momma’s fixing to come home.”

Nothing gets me out of bed faster than that warning. I lace my boots and run fingers through my hair, suddenly aware of a rich smoky smell. My stomach rumbles and I salivate. Blue light from the TV casts a ghostly hue on a plate loaded with fried eggs, slabs of bacon, and grits glistening with margarine. A glass of orange juice stands next to a mug of coffee. Per smiles behind his hand.

“That’s for you, Una. But—but I’m sorry I gotta ask you to eat quick.” He glances at the door. I sit down and cram food in my mouth, sending compliments Per’s way.

The eastern sky is bright but cloudy, and though my shoulders ache where my backpack straps are, I’m excited as I step outside, breathing the cool morning air. “Goodbye, dogs,” I coo to Hans and Ulrika. “Thank you for not biting me.” I turn to Per, saying, “You’ve been so nice,” then wonder if I could reciprocate such kindness to a stranger. I’ve never picked up a hitchhiker. “Why did you help me out, Per?”

He looks wistful. “When you knocked, I thought of the Good Book.”

I cross my arms, thinking, oh Jeez. “Well, I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, Per. I don’t normally enter strange houses—except abandoned ones.”

“I don’t normally open my door to strangers.” Per veers towards me for the *coup de grace*. “To be truthful, I thought you might be an angel.”

“What? Me?” Can angels be this disheveled, this smelly? I bite my lip to not laugh.

Per looks down and pats Hans on the head, spittle flying from the dog’s jowls. “Y’never know when you’re being tested.” Somewhere a mockingbird imitates a car alarm, and we’re distracted by the sound. “Would you stop by sometime so as I know you’re okay? You can meet Momma.”

“O-okay,” I agree, but the truth is, I won’t return. “Goodbye, and thank you.”

Dawn breaks as I plod on the dew-damp streets towards the Quarter. The sky promises rain but for now the storm gathers itself on the horizon. I’m so tired I can barely think. Many blocks later, there’s a green and white striped awning on Decatur Street. Men in white aprons are washing the pavement in front of Café du Monde.

Deer Collage

Carol Reid

At the top of the trail Arlo wound Shadow’s leash twice around his hand to keep her still. He felt for the collar buried in the ruff of ginger fur around her neck, found the ring and leaned closer to spring the clip. The toe of his boot bumped up against what he expected was a tree root, but when he looked down he saw a perfect little ebony hoof and tawny stalk of foreleg. No trace of crusted blood remained. Not a tick or fly moved between the fine brown hairs. It lay on a bed of crumpled ferns, rimmed with crystals of frost.

Shadow was way ahead already, baying at the remembered prey of her youth. Her setter nose was gone and her eyes were going, but the terrier in the mix kept her moving. He let her go off into the woods alone and remained where he was, studying the cast-off piece of the deer carcass.

Arlo could feel the damp cold seeping through the soles of his boots. After a while he trudged down to the clearing and found Shadow standing stock-still next to the old rabbit hole, her useless snout planted in the earth. It was dim under the canopy of old cedars and quiet. Arlo felt tight and edgy, but couldn’t make sense of why. He clipped the leash back onto Shadow’s collar and walked her back up to the road. She took no notice of the deer leg, none at all.

Arlo’s wife, Liza, had a lot of questions when he got in later than expected, but he didn’t want to answer, so he told her about the deer.

“Where exactly?” Liza asked.

“Near the top, near the road.” Arlo shook his head before she asked the other question. “Not in the gully, no.” He tapped his own leg at the knee. “Just the lower leg and hoof.”

“Where’s the rest of it?” she asked him and when he didn’t answer, she asked the dog.

Arlo poured himself a cup of tea and sat down in his chair. His wife slung her camera over her shoulder and headed out to get a shot of the deer leg. Last fall she had found most of a black bear low down on a logging road, dumped just a few steps into the bush. Not once but on three occasions. The pictures she had made of the mutilated bears were published by the Outlook Community Journal and many letters to the editor ensued. Arlo didn't know who to blame for the bear situation.

He watched her jog down the driveway, brilliant in her cherry red duffel coat, round as a teapot. In the summer she had shaved her head for the cancer charity at her office and now sported a gray-white bristle on the crown and iron grey tufts around her ears. He ran his hand over his nearly bare scalp and kept looking out the window until she was out of sight. He would have liked to say that he had her beat in the hair department but it wouldn't be true.

He could hear Shadow in the kitchen, her tongue sloshing through the water bowl, then her creaking sigh as she tried to settle down comfortably on her rug. A thought that crossed Arlo's mind sometimes was that either men live too long or dogs live too short. Today however he thought about the piece of deer and the little mushroom caps of bone that seemed to sprout from the branch of fawn-colored hair. Shadow had been a hundred yards ahead, deep in her old-dog memories. How long had he stood there?

The dog had been hoarse and played out by the time he came for her. A crust of muddy dirt ringed her nostrils and she coughed and rumbled in her chest. And now she wheezed in her sleep. Flecks of dirt drifted from her muzzle onto the rug with her every breath.

Arlo sat up a little straighter as the sound of an axe splitting wood carried over from his neighbor's back yard. Neil had a shed full of split logs and kindling already, Arlo thought. He must have got accustomed to heat in the house while his partner Step faded away. For the three years that Neil and Step had lived in the big A-frame next door, Arlo had respected their privacy and was glad enough that they'd done the same. In the weeks since Step's passing Liza had mentioned several times that Arlo could feel free to go over there if he wanted to.

Arlo heaved himself out of his chair and put his teacup in the sink. He felt there must be plenty he could talk about with Neil, once he broke the ice.

Liza was back already, holding up the camera like a trophy.

"Got a bunch of great shots. And I got an idea," she said.

The idea was that she would print out these shots and the ones of the bears. Then she would cut up pieces of the prints, lacquer them together and take a shot of that.

"With any luck it's going to look like a deer," she said as she kicked off her boots into the corner. One boot bounced off the wall and Shadow flinched and half-raised her head.

"Sorry, dog," Liza said, rubbing Shadow's patchy old ears.

Arlo wondered if his wife noticed the gristly lumps that had formed along the old scar on Shadow's neck, where the footpad of Cody's dirt bike had caught her. He didn't mention anything. Shadow was too old to put under the knife; her heart and lungs would never make it through the anaesthetic. Quite often he checked the calendar to make sure Liza hadn't made any appointments with the vet. The last thing he wanted to know was the date when Shadow might die. He was afraid that he wouldn't resist wanting to go down with her, although he was convinced there would be no happy hunting ground afterward. If he'd believed for a minute that he could be with his son again by dying he'd have checked out long ago.

He heard the printer in his wife's office chugging to life as he went outside. The weather could be worse, he thought. No snow yet and the pearly grey sky was breaking up a little, allowing some brightness through. He raised the door of his shop and took down his Makita from the shelf. He set up the workhorse on level ground and unspooled the extension cord. He could see Neil clearly though the leafless tangle of blackberries that made a hedge between their properties.

Neil was sending up steam from the exertion of splitting wood. His blanket coat hung from the bare branches of an apple tree. A ring of rough-cut kindling lay scattered around the chopping block.

Arlo went back into his shop and pulled an old soft towel off a length of mahogany, then carried the board carefully outside. He ran the back of his hand down the grain, just once, feeling the satiny warmth of the wood. Then he took a ruler and flat pencil out of his pocket, just as Neil plunked himself on the chopping block, taking a break. He looked over into Arlo's yard and raised his chin in greeting. Arlo responded in kind, then followed the line of the extension cord and pushed it solidly into the outlet to the side of the shop door.

He sneaked a look over at Neil's house as he walked back down to the workhorse. All the curtains were drawn, except over the big picture window on the ground floor. The glass looked nearly opaque, most likely from grease and wood smoke from the stove.

Liza had talked about going over there and helping Neil out with the cleaning, but if she had, he must have turned her down. When Cody died all those years ago, when Shadow was still a puppy, Liza had cleaned house with a vengeance, making it so bright and sanitized it brought tears to Arlo's eyes. Thank God she had eventually let it slide, especially since she took up the camera.

He flipped the power switch and positioned the router over the length of mahogany. The motor buzzed, whiny like the dirt bikes that day in the bush. There were two schools of thought about those dirt bikes then, especially with the use of helmets, which made fathers foolhardy and sons cocky beyond reason. One was that you couldn't get hurt bad on such a little machine; the other that if you wore a helmet and kept an eye out there was no problem whatsoever.

No question, Cody lived for speed, for the gut-dropping thrill of jumping the logs, throwing up arcs of dirt and mulch from the spinning tires. Taking the puppy along had been an out-and-out mistake. Arlo suspected it then and knew it now. It had been a harsh way to be proven right. He caught a whiff of burnt and refocused on the board. Scorched, goddamnit. Goddamnit.

Inside, in her office, Liza arranged the prints on the worktable and looked for images in light and shadow. Fern shapes mimicked antlers, shriveled berries became eyes. The little hoof, quadrupled,

would pretend to be itself. She scissored out the necessary pieces and fixed them to the backing, growing less satisfied by the minute. And she could hear Shadow in the kitchen, yipping in her sleep. She wished Arlo would just let the old girl go. Two years ago Dr. Barnes had said with authority that Shadow was on the outs. Thirty dollars would buy her an easeful passing. Pain, he said, is the interest on borrowed time. Dr. Barnes should have been a poet, Liza thought, as she swept the unfinished collage into the trash.

Arlo had put Shadow back in the truck that day and from then on had seen to the dog's ailments himself. Nothing he did made up for Cody's death. How could it? He carried a load of guilt on his back, had carried it for more than a dozen years. But she had never taken anything out on Arlo. Never taken it out on Shadow. She hadn't forgotten Cody's loopy grin when he strapped on Arlo's old Bell helmet. Too big by miles but it satisfied the law. She hadn't forgotten his skinny arms, tea-brown downy sticks revealed by the cut off sleeves of his Harley sweatshirt. She hadn't forgotten the pride and terror of knowing that her son had no fear.

The memory of the bear carcasses, ravaged for snippets of their organs, rose up and pushed away other thoughts. The conservation office still hadn't pressed any charges, an outrageous thing. Half the town knew who was responsible. It was only a matter of time before it happened again.

She went to her pictures file on the computer and brought up the images on the screen. Mounds of once-sleek black fur, now dull as slate; the noble heads, eyeless and slack-jawed as if frozen in a final mournful moan.

She printed out a stack of flyers and arranged them neatly on the kitchen table. After her nap she would tack one to every telephone pole in the neighborhood. She would paper the window of the corner store and let them dare to tell her to take them down.

Liza stretched out on the daybed and pulled the granny-square blanket over legs. She put on her music and let the gentle guitars lull her away. At least Shadow was resting quietly now, she thought, as she drifted asleep.

When Arlo came down for another cup of tea the house was silent and cooling fast. He glared at the kitchen window and pulled a roll of weather stripping out of the junk drawer, then set it down on the table. The chunks of wood in the stove were smothering each other, so he rearranged them and the fire caught again. His wife was still on the daybed, pulling deep sleep sighs out of her chest with every breath. Shadow was stretched out on the kitchen rug, not breathing.

Arlo watched the dog for a whole minute to make sure, and sometime during that minute his eyes overflowed and he bit down on his thumb to get a hold of himself. Then he folded the braided rug around the dog's chest and carried her outside.

Neil could see him through the naked brambles and stood up from where he'd been sitting on the chopping block. Arlo walked through the dry blackberry canes with Shadow in his arms. It wasn't that hard. Most of the canes snapped and yielded. He caught a couple of scratches on his cheek and the bare crown of his head, but the rug protected Shadow's body. In seconds he was on Neil's property. He sat down on the cold stone steps and told Neil about the day Cody died, tossed over the handlebars when he swerved to miss Shadow and hit the fallen cedar trunk at full bore.

"Dog was just a pup then. Goofy pup..."

Neil nodded and leaned his weight on the axe handle, listening. When Arlo was finished talking, Neil knelt down, lifted the corner of the rug and stroked Shadow's muzzle.

"Thing is," Arlo said, "I don't want to just take her to the dump."

A little later Neil said, "Step had this footlocker from when he was in the Navy. I've been hanging onto it but the damn thing's musty as hell."

Neil brought the box outside and Arlo tucked Shadow and the rug inside. The two men each took a handle and carried the box to the burn pile. There was a tent of evergreen boughs and garden debris there already. They re-arranged the boughs so that the box was heavily covered with the driest branches. The evergreen scent

was clean and fresh and Arlo felt a touch of unfamiliar lightness around his heart.

It was beginning to get dark by the time they got the fire going. Arlo looked over at his house and saw the light go on in the kitchen window, a pale yellow glow against the gray-yellow backdrop of the November sunset. The darkness seemed to take on substance, like a long telescopic tunnel focused on a little square of light. It was like looking into a dollhouse, constructed perfectly to scale. He could see the breakfast table against the far wall and the spindle lamp in the corner, wearing its shade slightly askew. He could even see his tiny wife, wandering up and down the length of the kitchen counter, stopping in front of one cupboard, then another, opening and closing the cupboard doors.

Ghost Mother

by Cezarija Abartis

I remember when I was alive, and I happened to saunter by a mirror as I was eating a perfect pear with freckles of ripeness, the image of my mother might float up underneath my face, for a moment making mine wavery and watery. Here there are no large mirrors, only the pocket mirrors we had in our purses.

Last week it was my father's face. Yesterday it was my mother's face but young and dreamy—eyes shining, bereft of the tears that filled her eyes in her old age. Of course, she had good reason to weep then—alone without her husband and without me because I had died too. “Under the doctor's knife,” Mother would say in her old-fashioned way. I never recovered from the surgery after my car drove out of a parking lot and into a semi. Wrong place, wrong time. I had finished teaching my class on the *Odyssey* and intended to meet an old friend at the exhibit of Turner's ghostly seascapes in the museum across town. I have a terrible sense of direction and there were detours and it was raining. I got lost, so I stopped to ask for directions at the convenience store. It turned out to be an inconvenience store.

When I first arrived here, I looked for Mr. Beymer, the teacher who inspired me to become a teacher too. I thought we would have long and satisfying conversations about *Hamlet*. I have not found Mr. Beymer, but he must be dead, for he was thirty, forty years older than I. So many old people here, shuffling along, but what surprises me are the crowds of young people—they died of fatal illnesses, I suppose, or, like me, in car accidents.

One teenager held a small, solemn baby in her arms and looked around, searching for somebody. I wanted to befriend her, but she did not speak English, and I don't speak Russian. I followed her for a second, until she disappeared into a crowd, and I heard her joyfully shout, “Mama!”

I watched over my alive mother, whispering in her ear when a car was bearing down on the corner where she was waiting for the light to change; I whispered to tell her to step back from the woman who was going to sneeze viruses all over her; I nudged her out of the house before the flood carried it away. She attended to me when I was a child and caught pneumonia. I saved her life seven times. But not that last time. I watched over her like an angel-daughter, but something distracted me and then I fell asleep, and she had a heart attack, an acute myocardial infarction. It wasn't very cute, she said (my funny mother), as she lay on the floor, wanting to pass. I tried to compress her chest with my transparent hands. But it was too late. An ambulance arrived, thanks to the neighbor's call. But it was too late. Mother disappeared into transitional processing.

When my father died years ago, she decided to take up the violin. She practiced Kreutzer's *Etudes*. My teeth hurt when the bow screeched and scraped. This was when I was alive. After I died, it did not hurt to listen to her play, . She still had bad tone, bad attack, but I did not care. I sat invisibly in the back of the room and nodded approval, as if I were the mother, as if I could be seen. She went home after her lesson with Mr. Major, laid her head on the kitchen table, and wept. I could not stop her tears.

Mother wanted my little Eva to study the piano, but Eva preferred the flag corps. I watched over Eva too. And my dear husband, Daniel. The ghostly life is busy.

My last conversation with Eva was loving. Daniel and I had decided that she could have the kitten that she'd been begging for. We intended to take her to the Humane Shelter to choose one the following week. I walked her to the schoolbus and kissed her cheek. I smoothed the collar on her jacket and told her to be good in school. “I always am,” she said. “I'm just like you, Mommy.” She gave me a big smooch. That was four years ago, though it seems like eternity.

I thought that teaching was hard enough, but it was only practice for the afterlife. I wanted to be the keeper of all the people I loved, but I could not stay with them in the same way: they could not talk to me. I could talk to them, but it was a one-sided

conversation, not very gratifying. The other spirits floated next to me and said they were waiting for their families to die and join them. I found this horrifying. I did not want my Eva to be cut down in life, nor my Daniel. When he remarried, I was even moderately happy. She was a friend of mine, another teacher. I was content to wait till the end of the world for them.

I overheard Daniel telling Joan that he had a dream about me. In his dream, we were newly married, and he was old but I was young. We sailed on an ocean liner to Antarctica, where we built an igloo. “And did you live happily ever after?” Joan asked, her eyes tense and wide.

Daniel shook his head sadly. “I woke up.” Then he smiled and patted Joan on the shoulder as if she needed consoling. I was close enough to see the tear on his eyelash.

One time my mother offered me a pear, but I would not eat it. We had been fighting about my going to a college in another state.

“We can’t afford out-of-state tuition,” she said.

“I want to go to Iowa,” I said. “That’s where Jimmy is going.”

“Jimmy.” She flapped her hand through the air in disapproval. “You deserve better. You’re so much more than that dope.”

“I want Jimmy, only Jimmy,” I shrieked.

She bowed her head and sighed. “I’m sorry I called him a dope. Here, have a pear. I bought pears. I know you like pears.”

“I don’t want your pears. I want Jimmy.” I ran out of the room.

When I was a small child, I thought my mother was beautiful with her calm eyes and hair clouding around her face; when I was a teenager, I wanted to separate from her; and when I grew wise I wanted to find her and embrace her.

Sometimes I would hear a sound—a click of a heel or a whisper of cloth or a crunch, as if someone bit into an apple or a pear. I would turn, but no one was there. This time, I looked farther off.

I heard a kitten meowing for its mother. I picked it up and held its warmth in my hands. I carried the kitten to a bench. It sat on my lap and played with the cords of my jacket. We both felt the sun on our faces.

I caught a glimpse of my mother strolling with her mother. I shouted and jumped up. They approached and sat on the bench beside me. We embraced and held hands, the kitten purring in my lap. “You remember Grandma?” Mother said, relaxed and stretching her hand out to caress my forearm and then pet the kitten. “I’ll take you to your father.” Mother and I had a lot to catch up on.

She told me about the books she had read, the violin pieces she had practiced, that she loved me, that she had a pear for me in her pocket. I told her about the discovery of planets in faraway galaxies, that I watched over her when she was alive, that I listened to her practice the violin, that I searched for her.

She leaned toward me. “I was right here,” she said. “Right beside you.” She patted her heart.

Daddy's Bundle

by Anca Vlasopolos

Ursu leaned against the door jamb, terribly out of breath.

"Come in," Sabina urged him. "Sit." She motioned him to an overstuffed easy chair in the living-dining-study room. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, fine," he said, reaching inside his briefcase for the jar he carried at all times, on his doctor's advice. He opened it, took a swig, capped it carefully, and put it back in the briefcase.

"I could make you a cup of coffee, you know," she said.

"I don't want to bother you. Besides, I can't wait that long. Dr. Reuter said to take a swallow whenever I feel out of breath. That damned elevator! You should be flattered. I wouldn't walk up seven flights of stairs for anyone else."

She looked at him. What age does to us, she thought. She remembered his rosebud of a mouth, lips tender and soft like petals. Now, in his fortieth year, his smile was no more than a line across his face.

"I'm not asking you for sacrifices," she said.

"I know. I come to you as usual, the supplicant," he said and bent over his briefcase again, this time to take out a sheaf of papers.

"Don't let us start that again," she said. "You're paying me and taking a risk giving me the job. That puts me under an obligation."

"Let's not talk about it." He waved his hand in the air as if to dismiss the matter.

They moved to the table and chairs situated directly under the ceiling lamp and serving as the dining area/study in the room. It was a large, spacious place with a high ceiling and generous windows, and Ursu liked coming here, even leaving Sabina aside, something he hadn't been able to do for any extended period of his life.

As they read to each other, one in German and the other in Rumanian, proofreading and editing, they made small talk between

pages, at the end of long paragraphs, timing their conversation to fit the interstices of the text.

"How's Sandy?" Sabina asked.

"The eternal question, the eternal answer. The same."

"But she's not the same, Dodo," Sabina reproached him.

"Not in size, certainly," he sighed. "Not in her aspirations any more, either." He sighed more deeply.

"Are you going to tell me, or do I have to interrogate you?"

"Are you sure you want to hear?"

"Oh, for godssake!"

Dodo could still drive her crazy after all these years. That one thing hadn't changed with age. The same as when she'd first met him, at the Bucharest Jewish Federation Charity Ball, when she was sixteen and he twenty. She could recall everything about the ball, the candelabra, the exquisite tiny sandwiches, the syrups, the beauty contest. He had been the one delegated by the students to approach her. She had gone with a girl friend, feeling awkward about her shabby dress, the good one, her only. She would have so wanted to be among the young ladies who were either preparing for college or coming out of finishing school. Her academic career had been cut short by her father's bankruptcy. She had managed, on her own, to prepare for the baccalaureate and pass it with high commendations from the examiners, who kindly asked her about her future plans, without knowing they were pouring salt in her wounds.

He came to her hesitantly, begged her to stand for Queen of the Liberal Arts students, so they could sell tickets and raise money for scholarships, for needy young men, naturally.

"We're sure to make a lot of money if you stand for Queen," Dodo said. At the time, his surname was Rapaport, but in the late thirties and early forties, when all the young men with unfortunate last names who hoped for professional careers changed them to something Rumanian, preserving out of sentimentality the first initial of their Jewish name, Dodo had broken with custom and

romanized his name altogether, to Ursu—the bear. At the time, it didn't fit, he so slim, pensive, byronic with his mane of curling black hair and his full lips and soulful eyes, but in time he'd grown into it.

"Will you stand for Queen?" Dodo had pleaded.

"I think you're making a mistake," Sabina told him. "There are lots of attractive girls who are much better dressed," she added.

Dodo had looked at her, shaken his head, and laughed. Gently, he'd taken her elbow in his hand and led her to one of the many full-length mirrors on the walls around the dance floor.

"Look at yourself," he commanded.

Sabina looked. She saw what she was always seeing—a pale, oval face with startlingly sad, large eyes. She shrugged and tried to move away from him.

"Don't you see, all eyes are on you, you're like an apparition, the return of Queen Esther," he whispered, then turned beet red and disappeared. She didn't see him the rest of the night.

That was Dodo, blowing hot and cold. About two years later, when her father's fortunes had improved and he could at least pay her tuition for Normal School, she thought that Dodo and she had come to an understanding. But every time they came close to announcing their engagement, he'd pick a quarrel with her, usually about her family looking down on him.

"Why would anyone look down on you?" she'd ask.

"Don't tell me you didn't see the look in your aunt's eyes when I told her my father's name, and she recognized it!"

"Dodo, for one, I'm going with you, not your father, and, two, why would anyone look down on him? Just because he makes a living painting houses? Everybody says there's nobody better in the business."

"Sure, the business," Dodo said. "And we know just what they mean by 'business.'"

"What?"

"Labor, unclean labor with one's hands. Haven't you lived long enough to have learned the prejudices of our people?"

"I guess not," Sabina shrugged. "Besides," she said, "my family's socialist. I've never heard them talk that way about work."

"Right," Dodo would say darkly, and disappear for a couple of months.

When Sabina got her first teaching job in a small Moldavian town, Dodo made her promise to write and remain faithful to him, although he made it clear that he didn't believe in her attachment. She wrote him letters full of the enthusiasms and disappointments of the young who are committed to their vocation. She wanted all her pupils to do well. She couldn't believe her encouragement and example were not enough to lift everyone above mediocrity. She found it especially hard to deal with the adoration of the girls who remained below-average students. Dodo's letters to her were dark with forebodings about her faithlessness. She became so unhappy when she received them that she decided to terminate the engagement. "We must stop torturing each other," she wrote him, charitably, for her share in torturing him had been completely inadvertent. That was the end of that, Sabina had thought.

Larger events overtook them. Sabina was deported to a work camp in a distant province. Dodo went on with his journalistic career in Bucharest, always fearing discovery that he was a Jew, waiting along with the others to see whether they would be taken to the German lagers. Bucharest Jewry, if it could elude the indigenous Iron Guard, remained safe from Nazi deportation. Moldavian Jews died in droves during pogroms and, later, in labor camps. Most of the ones from Transylvania, who had been given over to the Hungarians and shared the fate of other Jews under the Nazis, never returned from the lagers in Poland and Austria and Germany.

Of course, after the war nothing was left of the Institute for Jewish Girls where Sabina had found her first job. She came back to Bucharest, to a family halved by the effects of terror on bodies no longer young. Her father was dead; her beloved aunt, who had taken responsibility for her when Sabina was just a baby and her mother died, also dead; three of her father's brothers dead. But the people of her generation were alive, and their optimism about a change of

government and its promise of equality gave her hope. She found work as a teacher in the new Translation Institute. She found a furnished room to rent. Out of her first month's wages she had ordered herself a dress. She was just coming home from the last fitting at the dressmaker's when she literally ran into Dodo as she turned a corner.

"My god," he exclaimed, turning white. "You're flesh and blood," and he began weeping.

"What did you think," Sabina laughed.

"I've so often thought of you, and thought you dead," he moaned.

"Thanks a lot," she laughed again.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," he sobbed, holding her alternately against him and then at arm's length, as if to convince himself that the body in his arms was one and the same with the person he had believed a ghost.

They made promises to see each other, soon, but they made no definite plans. After all, Dodo was now wearing a wedding band on his ring finger, Sabina noticed, and he knew she'd noticed.

They met again before Christmas in the narrow downhill street leading to St. Joseph's, Bucharest's main Catholic Church.

"Here we are, all the Jews left in the country, going to Mass," Sabina said when she saw him. She was on the arm of a man Ursu recognized as the chief negotiator of the Film Industry's Syndicate, which had been keeping journalists busy with its radical demands for improved working conditions for ushers and projectionists.

"Well," he said, trying hard to enter into her playful mood, "if that's the only place you can hear Handel, you can sup with the Catholic god."

As they went into the church, Sabina introduced him to her companion. She asked whether he had time to walk with her after the performance since Andrei had to leave early to go to a meeting. Dodo agreed, with a constriction of the heart. They would be just friends from now on. When they came out, still dazed by the music in the acoustically perfect space of the cathedral, Sabina didn't hesitate to open the painful subject.

"They tell me your wife bears a striking resemblance to me."

"Yes," he said. "When you can't afford the original, you make do with a copy."

"That's a terrible thing to say."

"She's not what she appears to be."

"Dodo, in fairness, which one of us is? And what, in that thick skull of yours, made you think you couldn't have had the original?"

Dodo almost staggered. He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, in the dying light of the solstice afternoon, and turned to face Sabina.

"I could have had the original?"

"There was a time, yes," Sabina smiled, trying to break through his solemnity. By god, he was a married man, a father yet. "As I recall, we were almost engaged."

"You don't know how this is going to embitter my life."

"Dodo, you're so melodramatic, as usual," she tried to lighten things up.

"You think so, do you," he said, then led her to a coffee shop where, because of the late hour and the season, they practically had the place to themselves.

Over coffee and pastry he told her his life's sorrow, something he felt he'd brought on himself by marrying a woman for her looks. Gigi was beautiful. Unlike Sabina, she came of a lower-class Jewish family who regarded her marriage to a young journalist making a name for himself a stroke of good luck. They married during the war. They had a child shortly after the end of the war. Dodo confessed having been far more excited about the pregnancy than Gigi, who mostly worried about her figure. The birth had been difficult. Gigi had already been in labor for twenty-three hours when the doctors finally decided to use forceps. Without anesthesia, Gigi suffered such pains that after the birth her eyes and cheeks were blotched with broken capillaries. She looked as if the forceps had been used on her. The baby, on the other hand, was beautiful and, but for two tiny indentations by the temples, unmarked—or so they thought. As she grew, she seemed to develop normally. She

was now a lovely four-year-old, with black hair and eyes the color of jade. But the doctors already warned the parents not to expect development above a five-year-old mentality.

"That's nonsense," Sabina exploded. "How can they possibly know? Why do you believe them?"

"My dear, my heart, listen to me. It's like the students you wrote me about, those gay captivating letters that drove me to despair because, idiot that I was, they weren't about me. There is nothing you can do to raise intelligence if the brain is damaged. Even if the brain isn't, there's only so much."

"But is the brain damaged?" Sabina followed his lead in talking about the organ as if it were unattached, as if it didn't live inside a little girl.

"Yes, beyond doubt. They say it wasn't the forceps. It was the long labor. Either way, they're responsible, but I'm the one who has to live with it."

"Wait and see," she soothed. "They don't know everything. Besides, there are new discoveries in medicine every day, operations, all sorts of things. She's still so young, something can be done."

"You make me all the more unhappy," Dodo said, tears welling in his eyes and steaming his glasses.

"Why, dear heart?"

"With you, I might have been able to keep a shred of hope, of light. But she doesn't care. She wants no part of the child, she wants no more children with me. She blames me."

"Dodo, you chose her. Don't speak that way about her. It's no good."

"Yes, I see how it might look to you. I'm telling you the truth."

Dodo had not exaggerated either his daughter's disability or his wife's moral deficiencies. When the child was eight, Gigi managed to escape from Rumania with a false passport and go to Israel, where she annulled in her own mind her former marriage and its defective product and proceeded to marry a wealthy older man with whom she had three unremarkable but normal children.

Over the years, Sabina and Dodo settled into the friendship

of people who had known each other since youth and had seen each other through a multitude of troubles. Sabina's own husband, Andrei, died in jail. He had been arrested and condemned to a life sentence for attempting to contact the Israeli embassy with evidence of the Communist government's discrimination against Jews and Hungarians. Sabina could never be sure, since the details of his death, as well as his corpse, were never released, but she suspected that he might have died under torture. She, too, had had a daughter, who shocked Dodo with her quickness. He would look at Adele with such a mixture of longing and resentment that Sabina would subject the child to spells against the evil eye the moment Dodo left them. Dodo had found a second wife, Naomi, a woman ordinary in her looks but with the quiet, rock-solid ethics that made her give unstinting attention to a teenager who acted as a five-year-old.

The apartment door slammed so hard the windows rattled.

"Adele, is that you?" Sabina shouted.

"Yeah, it's me," Adele came into the room, dropped her schoolbag against the side of an armchair and sank into it, her legs dangling over one armrest, her head propped against the other.

"Hello, Adele," Dodo said.

"Oh, hello, Ursu," Adele replied, as if she'd just seen him.

"Your mother's been showing me some of your essays," he said. "They're very accomplished."

"Hmm," Adele said.

"Let her go, Ursu. She's in one of her moods. Probably something happened at school." Sabina never called Dodo by his nickname in front of others.

"Yes, something happened at school," Adele said excitedly, swinging her legs down and sitting forward in her chair. "Not that you'd care about me being humiliated in front of the whole class!"

"What happened," Sabina said gently.

"Oh, nothing. Just that the witch made me look like a fool in

front of everyone, including the inspector. AND, she was wrong, wrong, wrong, as usual.”

“You want to give me details, sweetie?” Sabina inquired.

“Look,” said Dodo, “I’m clearly in the way. I’ll go now so the two of you can talk.”

“Let me walk you out,” Sabina said, and the two of them headed for the door.

On the landing, they stood, Dodo hesitating.

“God, to see her so full of fire, so alive,” he sighed.

“It’s not all a bed of roses, you know,” Sabina smiled.

“Oh, don’t be hard on her. I know she can’t stomach me, but that’s because she must guess how much I would have liked . . .” He stopped. “You know,” he added, “my niece Yolanda is getting married. Sandy said to me, ‘Daddy, will I ever get married?’ And it’s useless to pretend otherwise—her body is the body of a woman, and she has desires, and the world is full of bastards ready to take advantage of her.”

Sabina took his hand in hers.

“Don’t worry so much. You need to take it easy, for her sake.”

“Don’t you think that thought haunts me? What will happen to her when Naomi and I die? What end will she come to, one of these beastly ‘institutions’? It’s enough to drive me mad!”

He’d told her of these fears so many times before. What was there to say? What reassurance?

“Go now, dear heart. Take one day at a time. Take it easy on the steps. Give me a ring when you get home.”

They kissed lightly, on the cheek. Ursu punched the button for the non-functioning elevator with his whole palm, gave Sabina a rueful smile, and began the descent. She stood looking after him, seeing his stooped back, his portly body, thinking of his poor damaged heart, of the jolt of caffeine the doctor had recommended to keep it beating.

Sabina slit the thin airmail envelope open, and it fell out. She so wished Zamfira would use the old custom of an envelope with

a black border when she decided to bombard her with obituary confetti, newspaper clippings that she enclosed sometimes without reference to the death, as if obligated by a code of honor to inform her friend in Cleveland of the disappearance in Rumania of another of their mutual acquaintances. That way, Sabina could perhaps steel herself against bad news instead of anticipating with pleasure Zamfira’s gossipy letter and then find herself reeling from the sting of one more broken tie to the world she’d had to leave. She put her bifocals on.

“Dodo!” she exclaimed.

She couldn’t help but imagine his last moments of consciousness, his nightmare come true of the child left unprotected; Naomi had died a couple of years before.

“Dodo,” she sighed. “Only fifty-seven.”

“Mom,” Adele, who was visiting from Philadelphia, came in, slamming doors in her wake even at twenty-seven. “What is it? Mummy? Why are you crying?”

“This,” her mother showed her the little scrap.

“Oh, my. I’m sorry. I know how good a friend he was to you.”

“He always thought you didn’t like him.”

“I didn’t care one way or another about him. But when he started about how he knew I didn’t like him, I started resenting him.”

“Well, darling, it was complicated. He looked on you as the child he might have had.”

“Yeah, if he’d married you, I know,” Adele smiled. “But I’m glad you didn’t marry him. I hope you don’t mind, but I really did like my father better,” she gave a tentative little laugh, not wanting to seem callous about her mother’s grief.

“Yes,” Sabina sighed. “So did I.”

He should have left the office hours before. But the big hubbub about the misprint in the morning papers, the Security police coming to interrogate some and arrest people had left everything in an uproar, and he needed to see to it that the city edition was

put to bed without mistakes of any kind. When he looked out the window, he was surprised at how dark it had gotten. It was evening, but still, in late spring . . . Then when he tried to look at his watch, he couldn't make out its face. He reached to switch on the desk lamp and felt the familiar vise grip of the angina. He bent over for his coffee jar, his eyes seeing only blackness before them, caught the jar in his hand and felt it slip, and then, for one long moment, he saw it roll away. He knew instantly what that meant, and in that brief illumination before the final dark he exulted in his freedom, his hard-earned freedom, from responsibility.

A year after Adele's wedding Sabina was invited, insistently, by her closest cousin to come to Israel for the cousin's daughter's wedding. The family had not only come to Cleveland for Adele's wedding but had been so attentive and generous that Sabina felt honor-bound to accept the invitation, despite the financial burden it placed on her, now that she was living on a teacher's pension.

It was a large reception. Her cousin was a member of the press corps, and the affair was held in the garden of the Press Corps House in Tel Aviv. Another cousin, seated next to Adele at dinner, pointed to an attractive woman their age at the other end of the table.

"Do you have any idea who that is?" the cousin asked.

"Why? Should I?"

"Don't you think she looks a lot like you?"

Sabina definitely did not think so. There was an unpleasant vagueness about the woman, despite her preserved looks.

"It's not Dodo's ex-wife, is it?"

"It certainly is," the cousin said, triumphantly. "And she's never owned up to her having been married before, and having had that unfortunate child, and never having bothered to get a legal divorce."

Later, as the older people helped themselves to the desserts and mingled in the jasmine-scented garden while the young made

off to the dance floor inside, Sabina noticed Gigi doing everything she could to stay away from her. She kept looking at Sabina from behind wedding guests, her eyes pleading. Sabina hadn't thought of Sandy for some time. Now she wondered what Sandy's life had come to after her stepmother's and Dodo's deaths in that god-forsaken country where even healthy babies were being warehoused in so-called orphanages. She looked at Gigi, dressed to kill, and pretended not to know who she was.

Contributors

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Cezarija Abartis' *Nice Girls and Other Stories* was published by New Rivers Press. Her stories have appeared in *Wigleaf*, *Waccamaw*, *Story Quarterly*, and *New York Tyrant*, among others. Recently she completed a novel, a thriller. She teaches at St. Cloud State University.

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Anca Vlasopolos

Anca Vlasopolos published the award-winning novel *The New Bedford Samurai*, the award-winning memoir *No Return Address: A Memoir of Displacement*, a collection of poems, *Penguins in a Warming World*, three poetry chapbooks, a detective novel, *Missing Members*, and over two hundred poems and short stories. She was nominated for the Pulitzer for *The New Bedford Samurai* and was nominated several times for the Pushcart Award in poetry and fiction. She is associate editor of *Corridors Magazine*.