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ISSUE TEN



# Echo

A Journal of Creative Nonfiction

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# Echo

A Journal of Creative Nonfiction

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## About Echo

A heart echo test, or an echocardiograph, is a painless test that examines the structure and function of the heart, according to the National Institution of Health. This test may involve the injection of saline or a specific dye into the patient's veins to showcase the heart.

We chose the name Echo for our creative nonfocition journal because we expect the work we publish in our monthly issues to come from the heart. In our issues, we aim to publish the best creative nonfiction that we can find.

We accept creative nonfiction submissions for Echo year round, and we would love to read some of your work!



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# The Man by the Creek

## by Douglas Moser

Kenneth had just stepped away from between Barry's legs when we saw the flashing lights of the cop car. Todd swung his wet hair out of his eyes and moved away from the picnic table. I zipped up the hood on my windbreaker and hunkered down. This shelter had been our hideout, tucked down in the woods, away from the more public picnic areas. The only way to get here was over big crooked granite steps, or the chained-off dirt road.

The first chill of autumn hung over the park, the thick woods disappearing into a low-hanging fog. Kenneth had met us on the edge of the woods, and suggested we hang out at the shelter to get out of the rain. He had a present for us. The park was empty, no picnics or hikers in the woods. Here we were, three teenagers, Barry, Todd, and me, with this old guy. How had the cops found us? Did they see the bottle? The magazines? Did they see what Kenneth was doing?

This was a bad end to a bad summer. The magic of summer had disappeared, and I found myself alone more often than not. Our steel town was disappearing, shutting down, the families gone south. The movie theatres had closed; my best friends had moved. I was 15, couldn't drive, and spent my days at home mowing the grass or delivering newspapers, not on vacation, like other kids. Todd and Barry were substitute best friends, because no one else was around. Barry was a neighbor I'd known for years; Todd was church friends of other departed friends. Best was no more.

Barry – tall, brash, kind of bossy. What he lacked in good looks he made up for in confidence. He wore his sandy blond hair in a long brush cut. Todd, goofy and charming, gulped his responses, shrugging his head and smiling. Yup. Yup. Yup. Both were already 16, tall, filling out. Barry was a whole grade ahead of me, and Todd would have been, but he'd been held back. I was the runt. My long gangly legs promised a growth spurt, but I was still 15 going on 12 going on 35. My body and life experience hadn't caught up with my reading level.

Of course we'd seen him all summer. Kenneth. He was that old guy who sunbathed naked on the big rock near the creek. A legend. Kids spied on him, whispered about him. He oiled himself up. Always alone. He was said to pull on his boner if he thought no one was looking, which he must have thought a lot. Or so they said.

Our parents forbade our swimming in the creek, which only made it more enticing. Its name, Connequenessing, we'd been told, was an Indian word for "cannot be canoed." Certainly parts of it were treacherous, with huge rocks and water spilling over them. We'd heard tales, told with ghost-story credulity, about that kid who went swimming and got caught in a whirlpool. He was sucked under, only to be found miles down the river in Beaver Falls. Sometimes his body caught right at the brink of the spillway, sometimes his eyes had been eaten by fish. The story never ceased to make us shiver.

The creek was also highly polluted from the runoff from the steel plants that dotted its shores. On bad days, we'd see silvery sparkles winking in the sunlight. Dead fish, poisoned by a random runoff. Probably another reason why our parents didn't want us to go swimming there.

But the mill had closed the year before. People were moving south for work. The woods, which usually teemed with hikers, now felt eerily quiet; the water ran clear.

We first spotted the old man by the creek earlier in the summer. Traipsing aimlessly through the woods we came to a clearing. There he was, sunning himself on a big boulder that jutted out into the swimming pond. We skittered behind some bushes, happy to watch, pointing and staring from a safe distance. Weird! An old guy like that. No clothes!

His naked body looked slick and shiny, like he'd bathed in olive oil. His skin was brown, like a broasted turkey. His clothes folded neatly on the rocks, he sprawled across a faded beach towel. He kept a stack of

reading material next to him. We whispered, giggling and shushing, speculating about what was on those pages. Porn, Barry had announced with some certainty.

A few days later, when we were sure no one was around – especially the naked guy – we challenged each other to go “skinny dipping.” The term sounded so Huck Finn, wholesome yet verboten. Normally we’d swim in our cutoffs, but the older guys always dared me, and I never backed down from a dare.

After shucking off my clothes, I tried to jump in the water quickly, embarrassed by my scrawny, hairless body. Barry and Todd were both growing into men, thatches of hair under their arms, between their legs. Their penises dangled and swung as they ran toward the water. I suffered from permanent shrinkage and hunkered low to hide myself. To make myself feel better, I catalogued their faults. Barry was prematurely dumpy with cellulite, a beer belly just waiting to happen. Todd had a constellation of acne across his back, galaxies and stars just ready to pop.

The cold water felt dangerous and tantalizing against my naked skin. A good swimmer, I reveled in the freedom. Relaxed, we envisioned the lagoon on “Gilligan’s Islands,” grass huts and hammocks and fire pits to roast wild game.

There were no whirlpools in this area, that was for sure. Whirlpools, like quicksand, were something to watch out for. They could be anywhere in these woods. We’d learned that from TV.

Down here, we couldn’t see anything, our neighborhood hidden by the trees. On the other side of the river, just more woods and the dingy town of Ellport, with its ancient roller rink, bars, and sad housing. We could just see the tips of the stacks from the tube mill, which used to belch out clouds of white smoke. They now stood cold and dormant, a reminder of what was. The river gorge once echoed with the clanging and banging of steel pipes, cargo trains and shift whistles. Robbed of our childhood soundtrack, the gentle trickle of water and the cackle of crows in the trees now felt foreign, ominous.

We splashed at gnats and dragonflies skimming across the river, told stories as we doggie-paddled. After fifteen minutes or so, we scrambled up to our clothes, quickly dried ourselves with our t-shirts, hopped into our BVDs.

Barry had stolen a pack of cigarettes from his sister. After we dried off, we huddled around a Bic, lighting our smokes and pretending we knew what we were doing. Without inhaling into my lungs, I’d learned to pass the smoke through my mouth and directly out my nose. I could imitate James Dean; I could pretend to be cool.

While we were trying to blow smoke rings, we heard a rustle in the bushes above, some cracking branches. Stamping out our cigarettes and stashing the pack beneath a rock, we sprawled on the sandy shore like nothing was happening. We were just three friends shooting the breeze down by the river. What could be more natural?

A man emerged and climbed down the steep path on the other side of the clearing. We were caught. This was an older man – at least 30 or so, and he saw us smoking. Was he watching us while we swam?

Then it hit us, and we whispered among ourselves “That’s the guy! The naked guy? No, really! Yeah! It’s him. Shut up! Here he comes!”

“Hey, boys,” he said. “My name’s Kenneth. You can call me Kenny.”

He held out his hand. I just stared, but Barry nudged me and I reached out. His palm was warm, moist; he smelled like Old Spice aftershave and Vitalis. His hair was dark, with a deep part on one side. You might think he was handsome, with a good smile, dark eyes, but there was something off. Maybe it the way he looked at me, as if I were a jellybean.

Barry strutted around with the bravura of an overweight flight attendant. He chatted – a lot – with Todd bobbing in with his “yup yup yup,” swinging his shaggy hair around. I felt cold, still damp from our swim. My teeth chattered. Could we just get out of here?

Finally I made my excuse; papers to deliver.

“Hope to see you again soon, boys,” Kenneth smiled and waved, and climbed up onto his big rock overlooking our lagoon.

With afternoons stretching on dull and pointless, we returned for a swim frequently throughout the summer. More likely than not, we had a ready and willing audience, Kenneth. Barry bossed the conversation



around the way he did his friends. Todd would go along, shrugging his shoulders with a “yup yup yup” while I tried to make myself invisible.

Kenneth insinuated himself into our daily routine, adding an undertow to our once peaceful afternoons. Even when he wasn't with us, the anticipation that he might arrive could change our innocent frolic into something dark.

He brought us magazines. *Playboys* and *Hustlers*. We'd take turns staring at them, carefully shifting our shorts to hide our evident bulges. He sprinkled compliments into the conversation, along with admiring pats.

“You swim like a fish!”

“You'd make a great politician.”

“You must have all the girls lining up.”

When he smiled, his eyes would open wide, as if they could swallow us whole, before he chomped down on us with his large white teeth. He kept a comb at the ready to sweep across his dark hair, pushing up the front just a bit, a calmed down pompadour he'd probably worn since he was a teenager. His body was short, muscular. Not nearly as tall as Todd or Barry.

“Sometimes we go skinny dipping.” Barry bragged, catching Kenneth's eye.

“Well I don't mind if you all go in the nude!” Kenneth grinned. “Why don't I stand guard?”

I minded, but didn't dare tell the others. I'd hate to be *that* guy.

So we doffed our clothes, and Kenneth watched.

And watched.

When we got out, he would grow giddy. He'd tell us about things, adult things I'd only read about. Barry would ask him sex questions, and Kenneth was ready with a shocking anecdote. He was married, but he “played around.”

More and more the stories turned to men he'd seen. Men he'd done things to. He talked about big penises, low-hanging balls, round tight asses.

He told us about this guy in Beaver Falls who liked to take it from behind. “Give it to me! Give it to me! I tell you, he'd scream up a storm.”

He described a park where you could meet men on route 18. “You just drop your pants and they'll all suck you off.”

Each of his stories astounded me, sickened me, made me want to run away, made me want to ask him how it all worked. Each story opened up a vortex of questions that would suck me down if I allowed them. How would you know these other people? Is this what it's like? What does your wife say? Does she know?

Eventually he added other magazines to the mix. Magazines with men. Scrawny teenagers kneeling in front of paunchy men with pimpled asses, dungarees around their ankles. Bleary-eyed boys in stained jockstraps splayed across barrels of hay, or backs of pick-up trucks. Greasy men. Dirty men. Men who regarded each other and the camera with something akin to hatred and desire.

The same expression I'd see cross Kenneth's face when he thought we weren't looking.

Todd laughed and made fun of the men in the pictures, pointing at the erect penises, the flabby butts. Barry and I grew silent, still twisting this way and that in our shorts.

I'd known what sex was for years now. One day in elementary school, Loraine Powell had told Barry how babies were made. He interpreted it for me: “the father goes to the gas station and buys a rubber tube, then he puts his dick in it and sticks it into the mother's hole and pees in it. This is called ‘fucking’ – it's what your parents did.”

I gasped. Fucking. I was forbidden to use that word. Besides, his description made no sense. A rubber tube from the gas station? The kind that filled bike tires? Why would anyone want to do that?

Matters were soon cleared up. Barry had lifted a copy of *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* from his parents' bedroom and we completed our education. We'd pore over the pages, cementing our knowledge of the human anatomy, various sex acts, and even – although the author made it sound abominable and filthy – homosexuality.

Now, with Kenneth showing us these magazines, we could see what they'd been talking about.

“See that there? He's fucking that guy's ass.” He'd wink and glint. “Look at him take it! Ooo-wee!”

Or “Those two guys have that boy tied up and are letting him have it. The kid loves it!” He’d hoot and holler, devouring the pictures with wide, ogling eyes.

Todd laughed and pointed. Barry and I did too, the pictures looked so ludicrous. I wanted to see more, wished I could take them home to study. I didn’t dare ask.

Over the days and weeks, Kenneth told us how much he liked our company. He was always so polite, his compliments spilling out over us.

“You’re such a big boy!” “Strapping.” “Sweet.” “My that’s nice.” “Mmmm. You’re looking mighty good.”

He asked us if we’d ever tried liquor. I volunteered that I’d drunk something that tasted like scotch tape at Marc Luxemburg’s bar mitzvah. Barry leaned back, closed his eyes, and extolled the pleasures of Boone’s Strawberry Hill wine. “It tastes like tingly apple cider,” he said with some authority.

Nice,” Kenneth said. “You boys sure are sophisticated.”

One day in late August I was out mowing our yard. It was a task I hated, the way the sweat dripped from my face and the grass flew under my glasses and itched under my damp clothes.

I’d stopped to mop my face with my shirt when Barry came by and called me over. He was taking his little black dog Pugslie for a walk in the park. Did I want to come?

“Nah, I’ve got the yard and then raking.”

He pulled me closer to him. “I’m going to meet Kenny after supper. Down by the big stairs.”

“How come?” I asked.

“He said he’d show me how a blowjob works.”

I was mortified. Running back to my lawnmower, I barely waved goodbye. That evening after supper, I made certain to watch from our breakfast nook. Sure enough, at dusk I saw Barry heading down to the woods with his mutt.

The next day he called me over to his house. We climbed into the attic of his garage, which was hot and musty, but private. There, illuminated by a bare bulb dangling from the rafters, we huddled.

“I got a blowjob,” Barry said, all proud, as if he’d won the 100-yard dash or something.

“No sir!”

“Yeah – it was great!”

“Did he swallow?” I asked. This was a big question, I understood, even some of the slutty girls at school made jokes about it.

“A bit, he turned and spat out the rest,” Barry said. “I asked him what it tasted like, and he said pretzels and beer.”

I gulped. I couldn’t imagine either part of this. Barry and I had played “doctor” with some of the neighborhood kids over the years. But it was usually just dropping our shorts, pointing at each other’s peters and hooters, and giggling. The idea of taking that thing into your mouth, or letting somebody take you into his mouth – that was just disgusting.

And I squirmed in my shorts.

Barry pulled down his pants and waved his big penis around. He asked if I would grab it. I did, never wanting to be *that* guy. He asked me to take out mine, which I did, but just through the zipper.

Then he asked me to put my mouth on his. I looked at it and shook my head. He was leaking, all shiny, there under the light. He smelled yeasty.

“Kenneth said he’d do us all,” Barry said, admiring his penis. “He really wants to get a shot at Todd’s big dick.”

I put myself away and pulled up my zipper.

“He said that little cocks cum easy.”

Great. Now even Kenneth by the creek made fun of me.

It rained most of the next week. Entertainment was hard to come by. Sick of re-runs or reading, we’d play in the gutters, making boats out of sticks and leaves, like we did when we were kids.

Wednesday, after supper, I went out by myself, windbreaker zipped. By now the rain had turned to mist, but the storm drains were overflowing. Barry and Todd said they were going to stop by, so I sat on the curb,

waiting. I made a pretty impressive ship out of the bark from the dying elm. I built dams out of leaves. I'd play engineer, flooding different areas, watching the gutter fill with water. Eventually I'd break the dam and I'd watched my boat sail down the river toward the sewer, rescuing it just in time.

Barry and Todd appeared. They suggested we go down into the woods and play in the runoff, where the storm drains emptied out into brooks and streams that ran into the river on rainy days. We could make a big dam.

That's what we all pretended to believe.

We splashed our way through the back alley that led through the park.

Before we got very far, the sky rumbled, and it started pouring. We were going to run back, but Barry stopped us.

"Wait up!" he said. "Kenneth is going to meet us. He has a surprise!"

Everything told me to leave, to run back to the house. But they were staying, and there was safety in numbers.

Kenneth was waiting for us at the top of the big stone stairs. "Hey boys." He smiled and winked. "I've got something for you. But it's starting to rain something awful. Let's go over to that hidden shelter. The one below the road."

We dashed down the back road, spitting gravel from our Converse, splashing through puddles. Once safe inside the shelter, he pulled a long paper bag out of his jacket pocket to reveal a bottle of Boone's Strawberry Hill. Certain that nobody was around, we unscrewed the lid and took turns drinking capfuls of wine. It tasted sour and sweet and stung my throat when I swallowed.

Rain tap-danced on the shelter's tin roof. My hair was wet and clinging to my face and neck. I'd heard that wine made you warmer, so I drank some more, until my lips felt numb.

Barry sat on the picnic table, kicking his legs. I scrunched in next to him, Todd to my left. Barry grabbed the wine and took a swig right from the bottle.

"That's more like it!" Kenneth took the bottle and lifted it to toast.

Soon he brought out some magazines. But these were only the boy ones: grainy black and white pictures of skinny guys with ugly dark dicks, legs tangled. They looked dirty, smelly, like teenaged runaways.

Kenneth squeezed in between Barry and me, putting his arm around Barry, and handing me the bottle. As I took a swig, he encouraged me to drink more. I obliged. Maybe it would stop me from shaking. I felt his arm drape across my shoulders.

"I told them about last week," Barry said.

"You did?" Kenneth acted surprised, a big smile swiping across his face. His teeth were too big, too straight, too white. His eyes squinted, as if he meant something else. He squeezed my shoulder tighter.

His aftershave was pungent tonight, and just beneath that, I could smell something else. Musk maybe. Something moldy, dirty.

"Why don't you all take out your dicks and let me see them?"

Without another word, Barry lifted his butt off the picnic table and pulled his pants down to his knees. His cock sprouted up, ready for action. Todd took a swig from the bottle and said, "Oh well," and pulled his pants down. His cock looked huge.

Kenneth looked at me. I didn't want to be *that* guy, not now. So I yanked my pants down, just enough so my terrified penis peeked out from my hairless belly.

"Nice, nice," Kenneth said. He grabbed the bottle of wine and took a long tug. "Now you boys be sure not to be telling anybody else about this. You'll meet other guys, but this is our little secret." He winked at me. "Our thing."

He gently pushed my legs apart and took me into his mouth. I could feel my heart bursting in my chest, blood rushing in my ears. I tried to look away, the way I did when the doctor came at me with a hypodermic needle. But I had to peek. I broke out into a sweat as he moved back and forth, just a few times. I arched up off the picnic table and shuddered. There was an electric jolt, a shock from head to toe.

Kenneth smiled and backed away. He swallowed. I'd only cum for the first time last year, and didn't have much in there. But he seemed satisfied.

Todd turned away, burying his face in the magazine.

“Me next!” Barry spread his legs wider.

I zipped up, tonight’s American chop suey twisting in my gut, head spinning. I scooted away and crouched on the picnic table behind them, trying to make myself as little as possible. I could still feel water dripping off my long shag, oozing down into my shirt, sliding down my back. I shivered and turned away.

Kenneth spent more time on Barry, making humming noises and grunts and groans. I could smell his Old Spice and the other stink that now seeped into my skin. I wanted to go home and bathe. I squirmed as Barry started panting, finally firing into Kenneth’s welcoming mouth.

Kenneth pulled away from between Barry’s legs, swallowed, and wiped his mouth as if he’d had his fill of milkshake. He looked over at Todd and smiled like the wolf. Todd took a swig off the bottle and shrugged his shoulders.

Then the lights. Flashing.

“Hey you!” someone shouted. “Stop right there.”

he police lights seemed to swallow us as the cops moved in like a SWAT team.

They handcuffed Kenneth and put him in one squad car, ushered the three of us into the back of another.

I hid in the backseat as we passed our houses. I told the cop that everyone would make a field day out of this. My dad was the newspaper editor, everyone knew my name, and he had a lot of enemies. “This is going to get around!” Dad often made folks in our town mad with his editorials. Nixon and lies and Vietnam. He talked about it at supper, sometimes getting so worked up he’d pound his fist on the table.

Barry was defiant. “We were just curious,” he said. “Weren’t *you* ever curious?”

“When I was your age, I’d only go after girls, like a normal kid. Not old men.” He and his partner looked at each other, smirked, and shook their heads.

I knew there was something wrong with me, didn’t need a cop to tell me. I wanted to punch myself for being so stupid. For the way I got hard for Kenneth even though I knew it was wrong.

At the station, the three of us huddled in bulky wooden chairs behind the front desk. Todd’s mother showed up, smiling. “What did you do?” she mouthed from behind the partition that separated us from the general public. She was laughing; this must have been some silly prank. Kid stuff.

Both Barry’s parents showed up. Then Mom arrived, and to make matters worse, she brought my older sister Judy. Why her? Judy was always perfect, sensible. I’d never hear the end of it.

The cop guided us into the office in back, pulling up an extra chair so we could all sit down. He asked us what happened.

Barry, as always, took the lead, explaining that Kenneth had brought us some wine. He acted like it was no big deal. Todd just nodded, saying, “yup, yup, yup” when asked anything. I said as little as possible.

Later, our parents were brought in and talked to privately.

They released us, telling us there’d be a court hearing in a month or so. I wondered if we’d be put behind bars, sent to reform school. What were they going to do to us?

On the ride home, Judy questioned me. “Can I ask what happened? What were you doing?”

“No!” I slunk deep into the backseat of our station wagon, swearing never to tell another soul about the events of that night.

When we got home, Mom informed me that Dad wanted to see me. He was in the office.

In the back of the house, a bungalow built in the 1920s, were two bedrooms, one of which Dad had claimed as his works space, with desk and Brother typewriter.

The room smelled of rubber cement and old newspapers. Dad kept loose-leaf notebooks stuffed with clippings crammed into old barrister bookshelves that lined the walls. The wallpaper was a brown plaid, and had grown dry and brittle over the years. The family stereo was in the corner. In younger days, this is where we sang along with the Beatles, or danced to “My Fair Lady” and “Mary Poppins.”

But tonight it was Dad’s office.

I sat on the sofa bed, picking at a tuft of stuffing that had worked its way up through a rip in the arm. Dad sat in the old green office chair he’d taken when they’d remodeled the newspaper office. It creaked and groaned as he swiveled toward me. Mom closed the door quietly behind her when she left.

“Tell me what happened!” Dad’s face grew red, his veins bulged. Sometimes, when he was this mad, he’d yell in a high tenor, sending our cats tearing through the house as we ran for cover. But tonight he was quiet, seething.

I mumbled something, still tasting the bitter, stale Boone’s Farm in my mouth.

“Speak up!”

Now shuddering with tears, I tried to explain.

“Stop crying!”

I gulped for breath and started again. Eventually I got some of it out, giving him the bare basics. I was innocent. I didn’t know. My omissions were whirlpools sucking me under.

“Why did you do it?” he asked, his face now purple. “You had liquor!”

Liquor. The word sounded antique, and brought to mind stories my grandmother told me about her father the alcoholic. How he’d hide liquor around the house. How my father, as a teenager, marched up and down the street hunting in every bar, trying to find the drunken old coot.

Now it was me.

“I guess I was stupid,” I said into my chest.

“What did you say?”

“I said I guess I was stupid.”

“Then say it, say you were stupid!” he shouted now.

“Okay!” I shouted back. “I’m stupid. I’m stupid, I know that!”

His job done, he turned around, back to his typewriter.

“Go to bed. You can’t see those boys again.”

Later that week, unbeknownst to our parents, Barry, Todd, and I met up in the park. School would start in a week; summer was almost over, the night air now cool. We bundled up in our sweatshirts and sat on the swings, listening to their chains creak and groan as we twisted around, back and forth.

These very swings had held so much hidden danger when we were younger. Our parents warned of little fingers getting pinched in the rusty chains, with murmurs of tetanus and lockjaw. These fears now seemed stupid, childish. Now I knew something much more dangerous lay beyond, something lurking, menacing, waiting just beyond adolescence.

We shared stories, compared notes on who knew what, who did what. Barry had told his parents that Kenneth gave him a blowjob. He seemed so satisfied, as if it were normal; this ghost wouldn’t haunt him the rest of his life, the way it would me.

Barry’s parents showed compassion, understanding. So different from my parents’ reaction. “My Mom came up behind me when I was in the den,” Barry said. “She put her arms around me and whispered ‘You know we love you, don’t you?’”

Todd shrugged it off. “I told my Mom he gave Barry a blowjob too. She said I can’t hang out with Barry anymore. But Mom said I could see you,” he looked over. “She said ‘I like Dougie!’”

I couldn’t believe how casual they acted. The very idea that either of them could even utter “blowjob” in front of their parents mystified me. I didn’t tell them about how my Dad shouted, how my mother said nothing, just looked at me with sad, pitiful eyes. “I’m not supposed to see you now, or maybe ever.”

Twilight came early. We hung on the swings for a bit longer, finally making our way off, one by one, so we wouldn’t be caught.

Later, I told Mom what Barry’s Mom had done, how she hugged him, said they loved him. Mom blinked at me, as if it were a foreign idea.

“Why?” she asked. “Do you think Barry’s parents were *worried* about him?”

The way she said ‘worried’ told me everything I had to know. It was code, like “light in the loafers,” or “that way” – vague, oblique references that indicated that there was a deep disturbance, something we best not discuss.

An item ran in the paper a couple days later. My Dad’s paper. Who knows if he fretted over it, the way he did when my little brother’s homerun made the sports page. It was just two inches. Police blotter stuff. A man, Kenneth Bundi, 35, of Wurtemberg, had been arrested. He allegedly plied three underage youth with

alcohol and was charged with molestation.

Plied. The word meant something else. Plied with alcohol. I had to look it up.

Because we were minors, they couldn't use our names. It didn't say that we were under arrest. That we were somehow guilty of crimes much worse than underage drinking, that we were somehow complicit in the acts alluded to. There was so much I didn't know about the court system, about arrests.

I was guilty, and had no idea that this was something *done* to me, not *by* me.

If Judy read the report, if she had put two and two together, she never told me. But that's how our family handled everything. A brief skirmish, my father popping off with rage, and then silence.

A few weeks later, the assistant principal appeared at the door of drama class. He informed my teacher that he needed me. He hadn't sent a student, just stood ominously outside the door, waiting as I made the endless walk through the classroom to see him. The class broke into the standard "Oooh! He's in trouble" rumble. My reputation as a goody-two-shoes made it all that much more delectable.

I was ushered down to his office where there was an officer waiting. He had a summons for me. I was to appear in court later that week.

Couldn't this have been delivered when I was at home? Now I was sure Mrs. Wetmur, my speech and drama teacher, knew. Everyone probably knew. I was doomed. Later I learned that the other boys received their summonses at home, not so public. Was I being singled out?

\* \* \*

The courtroom was small and shabby, nothing like on Perry Mason. The judge, I guess, was a bald man in a shiny green suit. He sat behind an ordinary desk. Barry, Todd, and I were lined up on three chairs facing him, our parents in folding chairs behind us.

Two policemen came in with Kenneth shuffling between them. His hands were cuffed in front; he looked down at his shoes. He wore an ill-fitting jacket and skinny tie, no shorts or Hawaiian shirt. His usually crisp, cemented hair was ragged. He looked unshaven, shadowed at the face like President Nixon. He didn't look up at us.

I turned away, my stomach wanted to heave; I could almost smell the stench of his cologne and sweat and rot.

A man in a gray suit met him and mumbled something in his ear. Kenneth nodded and sat.

I realized we didn't have a lawyer. How could this be? Didn't we have rights? If we were to be accused of a crime, shouldn't someone other than our parents be there to defend us? We were criminals, accomplices to hateful acts, and there was no one there to save us.

The judge, reading from a paper, recounted the incident in the same casual, distant manner as the newspaper report. After he was done, he pulled down his glasses, and looked at us three boys.

"Now which one of you is our hero?" he asked. I wasn't sure what he meant, but his look was poisonous, his tone pointed, tinged with sarcasm. Others in the room shuffled, coughed, a cricket's chorus of derision. *Sick*, their silence told us, *perverted*.

Barry, oblivious to the veiled insult, raised his hand. "I'm the hero." They all knew he was the one the cops had seen Kenneth sucking off. They'd caught him wet-dicked and smirking. But it didn't seem to faze him.

"Come up here," the judge said, and Barry approached the desk as if he'd rescued us all from some dastardly plot.

"Is this right? Is this how it happened?"

"Yessir!" He was loud, formal...proud.

The judge looked over at us. Did we agree? "Yup, yup," Todd said. I squirmed and nodded, hiding behind my curly hair.

He looked over at Kenneth, who stood. "Mr. Bundi?" he asked. "How do you plead?"

"Guilty," the man in the gray suit said.

"Mr. Bundi?"

Kenneth stood and replied "guilty," his voice hoarse and low.

He was ushered out. We were free to go. That was it. No pounding gavels. No recrimination from the house. We weren't cuffed or lectured. It was over, but my doubts lingered, leaving a sour pit in my stomach.

Our parents muttered goodbyes, like after a funeral, and led us out.

In the ride home, Mom and Dad were much more chipper than I expected.

"I think with all those men in the courtroom, and those three boys..." She shook her head. "Well I don't think he would have stood a chance, do you?"

"Probably not," Dad answered. "But did you notice how Barry's hand shot up when the judge asked 'Who's the hero?'"

They chuckled at the thought and looked at each other. Mom glanced back at me, but I couldn't read her look. Dad's eyes met mine in the rearview mirror. He squinted.

"I'm glad this doesn't have to go to trial," Mom said. "People like that are more to be pitied than scorned."

People like that. My mother, always polite, always generous, would never use the other words that I'd heard. Words hurled at me during gym class, in the hallway, shouted out of passing cars. These words were mean, hateful. In the movies, people like that were ridiculed, laughed at. They met ugly deaths, were righteously killed, or committed suicide. They were diseased and pathetic and deserved what they got.

These were my choices.

I ducked lower in the back of the car and promised myself I'd never tell anyone my secret. And not just about what happened with Kenneth, what I let him do. It went deeper, into the part of me that I was forever trying to hide. The part that wanted it. The part that yearned to know what it felt like. The part that said I was wrong and destined to lead a terrible life.

I stared out the window at our rusty, ugly town. Lawns were dotted with 'for sale' signs. The mill stood abandoned, its smokestacks cold. The car hummed as it crossed the bridge. I looked down at the creek snaking through the gorge below, until it disappeared into the woods.





# Escaping the Inheritance

by Carol Fair

Sitting across the rotting planks of a water-worn picnic table, Chris glowered at Bob and strained *not* to hear him. She studied his ruddy face with his pale, hooded, sky-blue eyes. His face was unmistakably and disappointingly redolent of her own. In anger, her mom would shake her head slowly and deliberately while growling in revulsion, “You look *just* like him.” She usually managed to render “just” a two-syllable word to make her point. Chris hated this actuality and longed to resemble her mother who always lingered just beyond her reach. But his widow’s peak, unruly hair and godawful teeth were all lamentably hers too. Maintaining her own teeth was a Sisyphean task. They’d crack or break. Dr. Hill would patch them up. They’d break again and Dr. Hill, again, would do the needful. Bob simply let his rot. In fact he seemed proud of these gaping holes as they were yet another signifier of his indifference to the consequences of his decisions.

She wished she could be tender or something like that. But, “This putrid son of a bitch” rolled around in her head like her moist sneakers in the dryer after an early run in the dew-kissed grass of spring. She tried to appear indifferent as he plowed along in his flat, nasal Midwestern voice which also—irritatingly—sounded like a more masculine version of her own hilljack voice. Episodically her ears grabbed onto his words and she could feel that familiar anger rearing up on its hind legs, begging for permission to lunge at him, sink its teeth into his crepe-skinned neck and suck out whatever life lingered in that wankstain’s body. She forced herself to intermittently grunt or nod, feigning interested disinterest. The task helped to keep his venomous words at bay.

She instinctively recoiled when he said “his kids,” referring to Dawn and Rick, without a modicum of consideration for her feelings. These conjoined words raked across her nerves each time he uttered them. Not only was *she* his kid, she was his *first accurst* kid. She contemplated standing up, pointing at him and then to herself, and howling “I *am* the abandoned daughter of this fucktangle of assholery” for the enjoyment of the other outdoor diners seated nearby.

To dodge the responsibility of being her father, Bob did two voluntary tours in Viet Nam. He tried to re-up a third time, but the army declined. They army knew only nutcases wanted three servings of that war and it had no interest in redeploying a self-identified lunatic. Admittedly, he signed up for the first tour before he knew she was growing in her mom’s belly, but that didn’t excuse the second and the attempted third. It was crazy-making that this ratfucker preferred to shoot and be shot at in Viet Nam than stay in Indiana and be her father and her mother’s husband.

Chris deliciously remembered travelling to Viet Nam with her physicist then-boyfriend, Dr. Devil, some twenty years ago. She was in her late 20s, a mere four years after her mom died of Melanoma. While Dr. Devil rubbed shoulders with his colleagues at a local university, Chris visited the War Remnants Museum in which the intimately personal effects of captured soldiers and downed airman were curated and displayed: their dog tags; photos of wives, lovers, kids or dogs; watches; random pocket litter from their last trip to Bangkok. She wondered what would have happened had the raasclaat been captured. What artifacts of his existence would be on display? Did he have her baby picture in his wallet on his second tour? Her mom’s picture? Looking at the assortment, she wondered how she would have felt had she seen his POW picture and an assortment of his pocket trash behind that glass? “Mollified. Probably,” she muttered out loud.

In fact, she often wished that he had died in Viet Nam for the selfish reason that her life and that of her mom would have been so much easier. Her mother would have had economic assistance and health benefits from the Veterans’ Administration. Re-marriage would have been a choice rather than compulsion. Chris would have had veterans’ educational benefits. Perhaps her mother wouldn’t have told her the repulsive truth about Bob and the bet he made that resulted in Chris’ conception. Chris would have been a slain heroes’ daughter rather than the genetic refuse of a coward who preferred waging war to loving her and protecting her from the war that life would wage against her.

Her parents divorced after Bob returned the second time from Nam. Chris was three. Soon thereafter, Bob married his high-school sweetheart, tossing her mother into economic and moral ruination, resigned to go from one fuckup's bed to another just for them to survive. While Rome City Indiana in 1967 was unforgiving of women in these circumstances, it made various exculpatory excuses for the men who invariably absconded.

As waves of rage washed over her, she stormed out of the museum. She strode up to the first sidewalk hawker she could find to buy a post-card depicting Ho Chi Minh, who oddly resembled an ornery Colonel Sanders. She scribbled on the card hastily, "Dear Bob. In Viet Nam. Wish you were still here. Chris."

She had every intention of mailing it even though she didn't have his address. But she was tenacious in her spite. From a nearby internet café, she opened Alta Vista and searched "Bristol Indiana White Pages." Finding the shitbird's whereabouts was surprisingly effortless. She scrawled out the address, headed to the nearest post office, and dispatched it before her better self could advise against it.

Motivated by those memories of 1998 Saigon and that museum, she focused upon Bob, who sat there in front of her in this northern Indiana gastronomical hellhole. She interrupted the story about his brother who tried—but failed—to kill himself with a shotgun.

"So, Bob, did you ever get that postcard I sent from Viet Nam?"

For a moment, a look of satisfying hurt drifted across Bob's face. "Yes. Yes!" he said in a rising voice. "I did. And it was an asshole thing to do."

She was relieved—even denervated—that he got it and that it stung. She nodded. "Well, I got the asshole gene from you. Along with your shitty teeth and your goddamned cancer genes. Oh. I also have a pile of shrink bills too. So, we're not quite even—are we, Bob?"

Here she was, at some old Indiana lake dive because Bob called her to proclaim that he was dying from an aggressive cancer of his esophagus. He moaned that he was in a lot of pain. He said he wanted to see her. With the cupidity she read into his words, she and her patient husband, Jeff, drove all night from Washington D.C. She cried most of the way. Tears of sadness, guilt, and a life-time of yearning.

When they reached the hospital in Elkart, he was hardly dead. And, he was still an unapologetic prick who reveled in his hurtful antics of his spent youth. She felt she had been made a fool. Played like a kazoo. As he bloviated about the tedious lives led by his unaccomplished, slothful children, she pondered the lifetime that separated them and would always separate them.

She came here, dropping everything, because he was ill, in-pain and possibly dying. How many times was she hospitalized, alone and afraid? There was the kidney infection when she was eight. Meningitis when she was fourteen. She nearly died from a sea-food allergy while driving from the Cape to New York City in college with a terrified man who loved her unrequitedly. In shock, they rushed her past gun-shot victims before she drifted out of consciousness. In her travels to Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh she had contracted cholera, typhoid, countless bouts of near-lethal dysentery. Each time she wondered whether Bob would care that his firstborn was critically ill and whether he'd learn of her death if she died? Would he mourn her? Memories fell upon her like a stampede of furious animals released from a corral. The deadening sorrow she and Jeff endured when they lost their babies. She remembered Uncle Art's calloused fingers penetrating her after he infant brother, Johnnie, died. When her stepfathers kicked and beat her. When her mom could not protect her. When an Afghan taxi driver abducted her outside of Ghom in 2001. Where. The. Fuck. Was. He?

She felt sick and dizzy. Had she ever called him during any of those troubles, would he have driven all night or bought a ticket and boarded a plane to see her? Not likely. He couldn't be bothered to attend her college graduation from the University of Chicago—a mere ninety minutes from his home. Yet she was here for him. For a second time. And he was *still* not dying.

The wretch was immortal. It was possible that this boor would deny her the simple pleasure of pissing on his grave. Yet, despite her unending furor, here they were, sitting at a rickety picnic table, on an August evening in execrable Indiana, when the oppression of the humidity was exceeded only by persistence of the tiger mosquitos biting through her clothes.

As verbal rubbish spewed from his toothless, twisted mouth, saliva caked on its downward-tilting corner. His face was noticeably asymmetrical. His nose was warped like someone had smashed it right and proper. But in all the photos she had studied of him, that was his nose.

For a moment, she looked away from him in shame for being there, for being conned into seeing this jackass so incapable of the slightest remorse. If only this prick had died Viet Nam, she thought. That was a story she could understand and, equally important, could explain to others. He always came up in background investigations and polygraph interrogations for her security clearances. CIA shrinks, who still thought Freud mattered, would impugn her morality and integrity because he abandoned her. How could she explain who this man was to these government bureaucrats? It was too much emotional labor. Yet she had to. Repeatedly.

She looked down at her plate that arrived during one of one of his cloying reveries. She pushed her food around with her fork as if it was that tiny sand pit and miniature rake their couples' counsellor had on her coffee table. Eating was impossible. If she started, she would eat it all. Then she'd excuse herself to purge. The desire to devour those fries and barbecue pork ribs perdured. She knew what they would feel like coming up, the comfort of wrapping her arms around her stomach in this practiced exorcism of rancor at others and herself. The self-flagellation accompanied by the self-induced heaves were a soothing ritual she learned early in childhood. Later, she could drink some water with baking soda stirred in to neutralize the acid and mitigate any damage she had inflicted upon her genetically compromised esophagus and doomed teeth. She had been diagnosed a few months earlier with Barret's esophagus which tended to become Bob's cancer. Meditating upon this most salient inheritance from Bob, she reminded herself that she could not binge and purge. Drawing her nose and lips into a snarl, she poured water over her meal to make it less appealing. She sighed, relaxed her shoulders and looked right into his face, resigned to let her resentment sit with her.

Bob would not shut up.

She glanced towards Jeff, who had tuned out. Mouthwatering, she glanced at her plate. Why was she here? What did she think would come from this? An apology for a lifetime of neglect? A feeble recognition of that neglect? The questions stung. Where was he when her stepfathers' beat her, or her uncle thrust his trigger finger into her girlish flesh to pluck her innocence like a blackberry from a pie? He had given her nothing worth having. She felt trapped, smothered, unable to breathe. Needing to bolt, she looked around furtively at her husband, the waitress, the table behind Bob, where a large woman, with voluminous arms draped about her pot belly, sprawled out and wide like the desert she traversed in that Afghan's taxi speeding away from Ghom.

The woman's purple veins bulged out and over her thick legs which strained her polyester shorts. Her friend, sporting a colorful maxi dress, held a yappy chihuahua on her own capacious lap, making the tiny dog appear even more diminutive. She concentrated on the chihuahua, those veiny legs and flaccid arms, the swirls of hues on the endless muumuu. She saw a milkshake at the chihuahua's table. Was it vanilla, she wondered? She glimpsed once more, furtively, at the water-logged food.

Then Bob said the thing she could not unhear. He called his granddaughter a pig. She hadn't paid attention to how he ended up there in his interminable account. She thought maybe she misunderstood. Her voice piqued as she asked him to repeat himself. "What did you just say?" elongating the vowels as they fell out of her mouth.

He gathered himself defensively, sat upright and looked her defiantly, square in her eyes and said "She's a goddamn pig. Ashley is a pig. Her mom is a pig. She's a fucking pig, like her whore mom."

Sublimating her wrath, she retorted in her NPR voice, "Bob, just how old is this ostensible pig?" wondering if he knew what "ostensible" meant. "She's fourteen," Bob snorted, almost gleefully. "But she's always been a pig."

"And just why is she a 'goddamned pig'?" she asked with contempt-dredged curiosity. She slapped hard at a mosquito biting through her clothes. She glanced down with cathartic satisfaction at the blood spatter on her dress and palm. Again, with increased adamancy, Bob told her "Her mother is a pig. She's a pig, too."

Inhaling and crossing her arms over her empty stomach, she leaned back and slowly repeated her question in a lowered voice while glowering, "Why, Bob, do you call your teenaged granddaughter a pig, a god-damned pig?"

He opined that "she's a little slut, who got kicked out of school for asking boys to show her their dicks."

Horrified, she recognized the child's actions intimately as the behavior of an abused child, overwhelmed by her precocious inclinations and desires. Chris' wife-murdering uncle had abused her since she was a toddler. Her first memories were of him turning her over the back of the couch in her stepfather's basement, sliding

aside her underwear and thrusting his rough, oil-stained fingers inside her tiny body. And, having been touched like that, her body had desires that were beyond the control of her five-year-old self. Uncle Art told her that he loved her more than anyone else. In a house bereft of affection or attention, her young self welcomed his affection. Later, upon understanding how fucked up it was, the feelings of guilt, filth, shame and self-loathing settled into her bones like a Chicago fog in winter. It was then that she discovered the calm that came after eating an entire box of Raisin Bran with whole milk, then thrusting her face over the toilet, calling herself names as she summoned the contents of her stomach into the commode. With each hurl, she felt the self-hatred leave her along with the contents of her gut. It wasn't the eating that soothed her: it was the purging. With each expulsion, she felt better, until she collapsed on the cold bathroom floor and felt her sweat evaporate.

She sat back and looked at him from the side of her eyes. Then at the food. She wanted so badly to do what had comforted her for so long. She meditated upon Bob's cancer and the extensive surgery that required a reorganization of his upper thorax after they removed most of his cancerous esophagus. The surgeon moved his stomach where his esophagus had been. She cut him from the front and back to rearrange his lungs, upon which his truncated stomach now rested. He could not breathe as easily as before with that stomach upon his lungs. Eating was a chore. For months, a tube sent nutrients directly to his upper bowl. Considering this, she again resolved that he, this useless sonofabastard, would not bring her to her knees, face plunged into a toilet, puking up her loathing for him, herself or anyone else while courting his cancer.

She turned, and returning his defiance in measure, stared right into his face and sneered whether it had occurred to him that perhaps "that the little girl is a pig because someone abused her?"

Bob replied guilelessly "Of course she was abused! Her mother is shacking up with a goddamned pedophile!"

The churn of indignation felt like a typhoon. It was too much. Ashley, the "pig" was his granddaughter. His son's daughter.

She had to get out of there. She explained that it had been a long drive from DC to Indiana and that she had to go. She asked for the bill and paid it. She didn't want him paying for their dinner. After he left, she sat there with her husband, grappling with what just happened. She felt wrong inside like someone had pithed her.

That night, sleep was elusive. In their motel bed, she kept replaying his words and re-seeing his twisted, saliva-crusted mouth. She sat up beside her snoring husband, and cradled her unease, trying to pin it down.

In the darkness, cut by a streetlamp, she stroked the velvety ear of her dog, Budreaux. They had brought all three dogs with them, and at this moment, it was Boudreaux who sought comfort, while Vega and Saffy slept at the foot of the bed. Rubbing Budreaux's soft ear pacified them both. He nestled his Janus-faced head into her lap, turned over, and stretched his hind legs out and up, revealing his snow-white chest and belly to indicate that he wanted a tummy rub. She leaned over to stroke his strong undercarriage and thought how much she loved him.

As Budreaux rolled over and fell asleep, the puzzle floated back. At first, it was hazy but slowly came into focus with glaring obviousness. When she was a kid fending off her uncle, step-monsters, and an indifferent mother; she rehearsed the consoling canard that if her father only knew about this shitstorm, he would save her. Maybe he would've beaten her uncle or even killed him in a fit to restore his hillybilly honor? When her step-fathers consecutively rained hell upon her, she imagined her father as a kind man who, moved by her pain and his remorse for not rescuing her earlier, would drape himself around her like a warm coat and lead her away from a life that was killing her.

She had come to know Bob somewhat over the intervening decades. The first time she met Bob, she was thirteen. They met at the Walgreen's restaurant in the Glenbrook Mall, in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. Her mother promised her that she could meet him when she turned thirteen, *if* she could locate him. Her mother worked all day. From their home in Huntertown, the Allen County Library in downtown Ft. Wayne was no more than 12 miles. The bulk of the distance was on the peri-rural highway, Lima Rd. So, one summer day, after her mom left for work, she hopped on her bike and made the journey. It was easy: a friendless loner, she spent most of the Huntertown summers on her bike traveling through farmlands. The library had phone books for the entire state. It took her no time to find Bob. She Xeroxed the page with his name, address, and phone number. When October came, she presented her mother with the finding she had kept secret since July. Her mom was peeved

but kept up her end of the bargain. Chris remembered dialing his number, waiting for him to answer and explaining who she was. He didn't seem terribly enthusiastic. He was about thirty years old then and he seemed mostly uncertain. Nonetheless, he agreed to meet her.

At the mall, her closest friend, Holly waited as they met. Holly was more reliable than either Heather or Carmel, with whom she had once planned to escape her unbearable life. She waited for them both underneath the streetlamp on Apollo Road for an hour before she concluded they had chickened out. But Holly was made of tougher stuff. How many times had she and Holly plotted to hop a boxcar and go wherever it took them? She and Holly had spent hours under the railroad bridge in Hometown noting train schedules for their getaway. That was why Holly was there that day.

Holly watched from a distance in the magazine isle in the adjacent drug store, while she and Bob sat at a table visible to mall shoppers. Bob brought his wife, who sported expensive Jordache jeans. She longed for Bob to ask whether she was okay, was she loved, did her stepfather treat her well? He asked her little other than unimaginative queries about school and questions, riddled with aversion, about why she kept pet rats, a snake and a ferret as pets. She didn't bother explaining the intelligence of rats or that her ferret had a more noticeable sense of curiosity than he had or that the snake was more affectionate than he seemed.

The next time they met, she was 23. She had just buried her mother, who died at 45. He callously told her, while she still stood on the concrete steps outside his house, "You weren't born out of love. You were born out of a bet."

Her stomach twisted and roiled, not because of the cruelty of it, but because of the confirmation of a truth. Her mother had told her, from the time she was six, that Bob and two other men made a bet to get her into bed. She hadn't known what it meant until she grew older. But as she came to understand the words and implications of the posited scenario, the more unbelievable it was. By the time her mother was dying, she was in full revolt. She had outright called her mother a liar and, in a fit of anger over her mother's failure to protect her from the men in their lives, yelled at her to never repeat that nonsense again. When her mother died, she had come to fully reject this foundational truth, which more than anything, explained her mother's own pain and animus towards Chris who had committed the crime of being born alive. Now, Bob stated this truism with cavalier flare as if he were explaining some unfortunate turn of events at the Kendallville racetrack.

She returned to her rented car and drove back to Chicago, in silence, with her stupefied boyfriend, without speaking for the three-hour drive. She never felt less worthy of living than she did then.

By now, she was a grown woman approaching middle-age. She had met him about a dozen times over the past decade and had made infrequent efforts at small talk on the phone. She had come to terms with the fact that he was about seventeen when he knocked up her mom. And watching her own brothers grow up and become men gave her some degree of insight about the time it takes for a man's brain to mature. Even though he was only thirty when she first came back to his life, he was now an old man. It was clear who and what he was: a selfish, unrepentant churl who reveled in his own youthful fuckery. Still, she could not find it within herself to write him off, delete his information from her phone, and block his number as her brother, whose own father was another participant in that ignominious bet, and her husband repeatedly advised.

On this trip, she realized that she still hoped—just as she always had—that there would be some point at which he would understand just how calloused he had been to her and her mother and do something to make it right. While she didn't know what that would take, she still harbored some sliver of hope that he wasn't just an unreconstructed cunt of no redemptive potential.

But back at the hotel, it was clear that she had seen the bottom of his soul and there was no reason to look further. Hearing him call his first granddaughter a pig, she understood for the first time that he never would have saved her. Had he observed her antipathy and truculence, he would have bellowed that her suffering was her own fault or that of her mother. Maybe he would've seen her precocious sexual interests and described her as a pig; inherited from her mother, whom he would have denounced as a pig as well, without an iota of irony. He would have embraced no obligation to intervene in the smallest of ways to protect her. He would accept no responsibility for any of it.

She and Ashley, in Bob's universe, were pigs by birth rather than by survival. He could give no fewer fucks about either of them if he had to at gun point.

In the morning, she and Jeff left for home. Boudreaux wailed while Vega slunk off to the back of the minivan and fell asleep, snuggled up against Saffy. Jeff, sensing her silence, knew she was marinating something. As they reached West Virginia, she said “Jeff, I’m going to report this to child protective services. No one called them when I needed them. I’m not going to let this girl hang out to dry. What do you think?” Having said the words aloud, a strange calm settled about her.

Jeff told her that he thought she should, but she should understand that any chances of a rapprochement with Bob would be impossible. “But”, Jeff said wryly “that would be a positive externality of doing the right thing.”

She smiled at him and said, “Two nerd flares for that one.”

For much of the drive back home, her cellphone had no reception. It irked her that Afghanistan has a better cellular network than the United States. She kept looking at her phone and counting bars. Finally, having reached Maryland, she phoned Bob.

“Bob, I’m sorry for scrambling last night. I was in Bangladesh last month visiting refugees from Myanmar and I have to give a talk on the situation at the Atlantic Council tomorrow. I didn’t want to get home too late.” There was silence. She almost wondered if the call dropped.

Trying to sound nonchalant, she continued “Anyway I was thinking about your granddaughter. What’s her name again? Ashley, right? But what’s her mom’s name?” Writing down their names, she furthered “And um...where do they live? Near you and Rick, right?”

In exasperation, he blurted out “Rome City.” Then he paused. “Hey! Why you asking this stuff?” Bob asked suspiciously, omitting the stative verb, which annoyed her.

She remained silent. She didn’t want to lie, but she didn’t want to tell him either. He was nervous. He knew her because he knew himself. Though he didn’t raise her, she was like him in some ways: stubborn, resolved and once she took a decision, she acted.

“Chris, what the hell are you doing?” he hollered.

The silence bugged him, which pleased her. The power to hurt was now in her hands. As he grew anxious, she told him flatly, “I’m calling CPS to report the situation with Ashley. No one called CPS when I was abused. That girl deserves a chance. And frankly, you or your son should’ve done this. Ages ago. What the actual fuck is wrong with you people?”

Desperately, he warned her “Don’t you dare. If you do...”

She hung up before he could complete the threat. She Googled child protective services for Rome City, Indiana. She told the operator all that she knew and hung up. She had no idea what, if anything, would come of this. But at least she tried to give that little girl the chance which no one tried to give her. Bob kept calling. She declined to answer. For another day he called her mobile and then their home phone. And then he stopped calling.

She understood that she had been chasing a chimera all along. Bob would never have saved her. It wasn’t, to his mind, his responsibility. And with that cruel epiphany, she neither needed nor wanted to see him again. She deleted and then blocked his number on her phone.

A year passed, then two. She wondered if Bob had died. But she was at peace. Even if he was dead, she didn’t care. For all intents and purposes, he died that day when he called that little, broken girl a pig.

She never learned what came of Ashley and she was too timorous to speculate. Indiana was death row for women and girls like them. It’s why Chris bolted as soon as possible. College, graduate school, and then all of Asia were destinations on her escape route. Would Ashley get away? What life would she make for herself and would she one day seethe at her father’s and grandfather’s indifference to her suffering as Chris did for so long?

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Sitting on the porch enjoying the still warm sun of early October, she sipped an Old Fashioned. Budreaux, now older and calmer, foisted his snout into her armpit as she scratched his ears. With an easy smile, she gazed down at Saffy and Vega who slept with an angelic, senescent calm beneath her feet.

Bob's cruelty and callousness, which once felt like quicksand around her legs, had finally set her free. She hoped that Ashley too would seek such freedom and somehow, against the odds, find it.

# The House of Men

## by Chris Jansen

“It’s so great having you with us, Chris. You’ll be on the buddy system for the first two weeks. That means you have to be accompanied when you’re outside the building, but,” she looks over at a gray hoodie walking past us, “Connor will show you where to go!”

The hoodie stops and its owner pulls one corner aside to stare at me suspiciously. He’s a slim, gangsta-looking dude with double diamond stud earrings and an indecipherable swirl of black ink on his dark brown neck. He pops his hoodie back into position, far out over his face, then nods in my general direction and starts walking toward the exit. I follow.

We walk out the back door of this ‘Day Hospital.’ If I didn’t know I was in rehab I’d think I was just leaving the Tate Center and walking up to the quad on the UGA campus. There are people hanging around with backpacks and notebooks and water bottles. I notice most of them also carry a blue folder like mine, but a few have yellow folders. Unlike the zombie squadrons on C2, these people resemble ordinary human beings. Almost. There’s always...something, but at least no one is walking around covered in vomit and drugs or sitting on a makeshift bed crying into a cup.

We begin walking up a hill so steep it feels like scaling a wall, toward what appears to be a run-down apartment complex.

“What’s your D.O.C.?” asks the hoodie.

“My what?”

“Your drug of choice.” Oh. “D.O.C.” must be rehab-speak. I don’t know the language in this new country.

“Opiates mainly. Dope. It was fentanyl at the end.” I want to impress him with my addictions. Hey, I’m no pussy alcoholic. “How about yours?”

“Oxy, lotta Oxy. Weed, crack.”

I wonder what crack is like. I feel sad that I never did crack. I feel ashamed that I never did crack.

“Who’s your case manager?” asks the hoodie.

His questions are blunt and suspicious. It sounds like he’s interrogating me, sizing me up, and even though we are walking together like friends, this dude is thugged-out and more than a little scary looking.

I glance at the cover of my folder. “Case manager. It says here: XXXX?”

The tough-guy voice in the hoodie is gone, replaced by sudden gasps of choking laughter.

“Hahahaha, oh Lawd, hahaha, you fucked dude.”

Great. I just got here and I’m already in trouble.

“Why is that?”

“She the biggest bitch in here. For real man. Don’t fuck with her, she a bitch.” The hoodie breaks up in laughter again.

Connor takes me into the apartment complex lobby, which has a bulletin board with cut-out phrases just like the paper flowerpot on Detox. “Easy does it.” “Just for today.” Next to this are the RULES.

Men’s Resedence RULES:

- 1) Beds must be “made” every morning.
- 2) “You” must be out of the resedence by 7.
- 3) No “romanticizing” past “drug” use.
- 4) TV’s “off” by 10.

Apparently there are no RULES enforcing grammar or spelling, but whatever.

Connor pauses at a desk with a large notebook open on top, like the kind you sign at a funeral home. “You have to sign IN and sign OUT. Even if you just walk out, like just walk outside to see if it’s cold outside, you



got to sign OUT and sign back IN when you get back in.”

“You sit in there.” He indicates a small office like an apartment manager would have. “Emanuel will get you straight.”

He walks away down the hall, shaking his hooded head and emitting spasms of laughter. “Hahahaha. He got XXXX for his case manager. Haaaaahaha”

I’m sitting on yet another worn-out, too-small couch and waiting for something, only now in this cramped office rather than Admissions. There’s a small desk and computer opposite me and one of those miniature basketball goals on the wall. I start to think about the computer and wonder how long this Emanuel person will take to get here. What I could do is, I could get behind that desk real quick and try to sign in to my email. It’s been over a week since I went missing from the poetry reading and my friends must not know where I am since no one has gotten in touch with me. I’m running through the odds of success in my head the way I used to calculate the odds I would get caught stealing drugs. If I did get caught I could say the computer was making a weird noise and I was just trying to fix it. Less than a minute. That’s all it would take to sign in to Facebook messenger and contact Ingrid.

I’m staring at the back of the computer monitor trying to come up with other plausible scenarios when I sense something behind me. An ominous presence. I slowly, casually, look over my shoulder, and there has appeared, as if by miracle, an enormous African-American man standing in the doorway. I’m so glad I didn’t decide to go for it on the computer.

This man is a giant. His cannonball of a head must weigh 80 pounds alone. He reminds me of old photos of the African dictator Idi Amin as he looks down at me and raises a hand to casually stroke his chest through the open chasm of his sweated-through pink dress shirt. I notice there’s a toothpick perched in the corner of his mouth and his chunky silver watch band is stretched so thin by his enormous wrist that it looks like it will pop off at any second. I’m scared to give his shoes a reading. Some things you’d rather not know.

He stares at me. Doesn’t move from the doorway, doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t have to.

“Chrees Jaaaay,” says the menacing figure finally, in a distinctive West African accent. He’s an actual African African-American! Maybe he is Idi Amin, all these years hiding out from INTERPOL in a suburban Atlanta mental hospital.

“Hi,” I manage to squeak at him, a mouse before a man.

The black giant drops his elbow from where he’s been leaning in the doorway and moves to shake my hand, which disappears into the massive cavern of his fist.

“Welcome to the res-eee-dence. My name is Emanuel.” He smiles perversely at me. “I am the manager here.”

He takes his time getting over behind the desk, then stands there for a minute and looks between me and his computer with a hint of...suspicion? Finally he sits down and pulls out a plastic bag from somewhere, with what I recognize as the things that were confiscated from me on that first fateful night. My “valuables.” Most valuable of all being my beat up cellphone in its case stained brown with dried drug residue and black dirt clogged under the plastic like a long gross dirty fingernail.

Emanuel opens a safe and shows me.

“We keep your tings in here, huh? You get them back when you leave.”

Okay, sure. Can I leave now?

He throws the bag with my stuff—wallet, keys, a few loose dollars and change—into the safe. He pauses at my phone, picks it up slowly by the corner and holds it away from him, like he’s holding up a used tampon for examination in the light.

“Thees is,” he turns it over slowly, “...deesgusting. You drop in toxic waste dump?”

I shrug. What do you want from me, man, I’m a drug addict. We aren’t really known for our tidiness.

Emanuel goes over the RULES with me, the same ones I saw on the bulletin board in the lobby. He adds, “You clean your room and make your bed every day, huh? You make eet military style.”

“I’ve never been in the military,” I say apologetically. He looks at me like I’m the dumbest human being he’s ever encountered in his life.

“Just tuck eet in, huh?”

Why didn't he say that the first time? I hate this place already with all its dumb misspelled RULES and bureaucratic nonsense.

"I'm gonna take you to your room now, huh?"

Once again I'm being led somewhere. As Emanuel and I and my suitcase roll down the narrow hallway, I wonder what monsters are waiting for me behind these doors. We pause at the very last door at the end of hallway.

"Theees will be your place, huh? Apartment 3."

His leg of an arm throws the door open.

Inside it looks like a crummy student-ghetto apartment back in Athens. The TV is blasting a baseball game and there's a familiar figure stretched out on the couch.

"Junkie Face!" cries Jonah, leaping to his feet. "You made it!"

"You know dees guy?" asks Emanuel, cocking his tank head at Jonah.

"My bro from Detox," I say.

"So-rry to hear that," he says, and turns to go back down the hall.

Jonah mutes the TV and rushes over to me. He wraps me in a brief, hard man-hug and grabs my arm to show me around his kingdom.

"C'mon man. You'll be in here," he says, opening the door to a small bedroom.

Inside there are two beds wedged into a space that is even smaller than my room on Detox. I'm already worried about whoever is in that other bed being stuck with me as a new roommate. I don't want to take up space, so I just heave my suitcase onto the bed.

"Sheets are in here," Jonah says as he bounces around, throwing doors and cabinets open like an excited real estate agent. "See this safe in the closet? You should keep your stuff in there. Emanuel will give you a key. Damn, is that suitcase really full of books? Jesus. Okay, so this dryer isn't worth a shit. Help yourself to anything in the kitchen. The Bird used to work at Quiznos so he makes awesome sandwiches."

"Wait, did you say 'the Bird'?"

From one of the back bedrooms I hear a loud Caaaaaawww like a crow watching a field.

"His name's Jack but he thinks he's a bird."

"CAAAAWWWW!" I hear the disembodied voice from the bedroom again.

"So we'll have a house meeting in a couple minutes, and it's mandatory attendance, you can't even be a minute late or you'll get in trouble. It's cool though. The guys here are nice. We help each other. We don't clique up."

I interpret this as meaning nobody helps you and they definitely clique up.

I throw the rest of my stuff in my room. The only thing I can tell about my new roommate is that he has two clocks on his nightstand facing toward the head of his bed and that he must use, or have used, the aluminum walker in the corner.

"Your roommate is at his doctor's appointment. He's okay. Older guy. Then there's Gary. He's kind of a dick but he doesn't mean anything by it." Oh here we go, already someone to watch out for.

Despite Jonah's assurances I know how this goes. If Ridgemont is a prison, then Detox was protective custody, like where they send the cops and the pedophiles, and this new place is the general population, where you have to show no weakness and no mercy and be ready to fight at any second or have your life made miserable. "Accidental" bumps, pushes, money stolen, food taken—I know exactly how this place is going to be. It's going to be like the world only smaller.

"You seen your wife yet?" asks Jonah.

"Just at that bullshit meeting with Jessica."

"It'll get better," he says. "Visiting day is Sunday afternoon. My mom is coming!"

Just then there's an ear-splitting CRACK on the living room window. My knees buckle in shock and I think we've been shot at from the ridge. I look up and see there's a man's maniacal grinning face at the window, pushed up against the glass, with a large rock in one hand and his pale pink cock in the other.

"Eeeee-aaahhhhh!" he laughs, does a few tugs toward the window like a monkey in the zoo and runs away.

“Don’t mind him. That’s Baz. Ernest T. Baz. He’s crazy. Listen, my mom is gonna hook us up with some snacks. Let me know what you want.” I don’t know what to say. I’m still thinking about the crazy guy with the rock. I guess it’s still a mental hospital after all.

Done with the tour, Jonah hangs his arm over my shoulder and surveys the tiny living room like he’s looking out over a vast empire. “I’m glad—I’m just really glad you made it up the hill, Junkie Face,” he says and turns quickly, too quickly, headed back to the couch and the baseball game. I’m left standing there, thinking that as he turned away I had glimpsed what looked like, but couldn’t have been, tears in his eyes.

It’s exactly 4:25 PM and I’m in the men’s residence meeting room on the other side of the hall from Emanuel’s office, sitting in one of the (seemingly omnipresent) faded-orange chairs that are packed along all four walls of the room. Opposite me there is a long banner with the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous listed on it. Obviously white at one time, it’s now gray with dust that looks to be an inch thick. I imagine all the dust mites caked on that thing, the ghosts of ten thousand junkies. Just looking at it makes my lungs burn.

I watch the clock on the wall the same way I did in school, watch the hands passing slowly through the grimy clock face, itself yellowed by all the time it’s kept. I’m here early because I still have some un-evidenced instinct that if I get started early I can finish early and get out of here. I notice that as they reduce my Suboxone I’m becoming more tired and more miserable, like feeling the flu come on.

Guys start to filter in and I size up each one as potential friend or enemy. As the clock counts down to 4:30 several guys run in together, including Jonah, followed by a kid with a thick black Mohawk shaved perfectly into his pale skull. He looks exactly like Travis Bickle from the movie *Taxi Driver*, but he also has a boyishness about him. I notice people here either look much older or much younger than they really are. The last one to beat the clock is Baz, the crazy guy with the rock, and he plops down into the empty seat next to me.

The guys all look slightly off. A young kid throwing a football up and down with butter-smooth burn scars wrapping around his arms; a guy with withered, tiny legs and a square chest that make him resemble a vending machine; guys who look beat up, with bad clothes, needing a haircut, beards overgrown. Nobody looks like they have it all together except the guy sitting directly opposite me. He is youthful but not a kid, maybe thirty-five, marine’s jarhead and a sniper’s sharp eyes, crew cut getting long but definitely under there; no tattoos, no burns, no fidgeting, no weird mannerisms. I immediately size him up as ex-military, probably a PTSD case. Out of all these misfits he looks normal. More than normal. He looks like a leader. He looks like a lieutenant.

As the second hand ticks down, the room gets deathly quiet and every guy raises his hands in the air like soldiers surrendering. The Lieutenant looks left and right and starts to count down: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1...

**BAM BAM BAM**

14 pairs of hands slap the wooden armrests of their chairs in unison and the Lieutenant begins to read from his folder. “Gentlemen! This is the afternoon meeting of the Men’s Recovery Residence. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss issues that affect this community. All rules must be strictly adhered to. If you have any questions you may pose them to myself, Dominic J., president of the community, or to my vice-president, Max P.” The Lieutenant nods at the solemn Asian guy beside him who raises a pen slowly in acknowledgment. “Or if both of us are unavailable, you may bring your concerns to the Bird.”

“Caaaaawww!” calls the mohawk kid next to Jonah, while flapping his arms a bit.

“The first order of business is check-in. Mr. Vice President?”

With military efficiency the Asian guy whips a clipboard out from behind his back and begins to call the roll in a low voice like he’s pronouncing death sentences.

“Adam F.”

A football is produced and passed to the corresponding man.

”Adam F. here. I’m on-buddy. No concerns, no liabilities. 23 days clean, pass.”

“Steven D.”

The football flies across the room to a spectral gray figure with a patchy beard.

“Steven D. On buddy. No concerns, no liabilities. 20 days clean, pass.”

The impassive gaze fixes on me. “Chris J.?”

I don't know what any of this shit means and it seems like everybody here knows exactly what to do, like they have all been here for ten thousand years before me.

"I...guys, I just got here. I'm sorry..." Oof. The football lands hard in my lap and I fumble it on the floor. *Goddammit.* I hate my lack of athletic skill. I hate these guys even more for not being able to talk without passing a goddamn ball around. I suspect I'm not going to fit in here and everything I see confirms it.

As I'm still floundering, Jonah leaps out of his chair, places the ball back in my lap, and kneels in front of me holding up a laminated paper.

"It's okay, Junkie Face. Here's what we're doing. 'On buddy' just means you're on the buddy system, which you will be for two weeks. 'Concerns' is anything bothering you. 'Liabilities' means if you break a rule, like walking alone while you're 'on-buddy', you have to tell on yourself in here. And we all have to say how many clean days we have. You are what, like three days behind me? So you have six days clean then."

Six days clean. Sort of clean. I'm still on one tiny precious Suboxone seed per day. But wait—this 'liabilities' thing. You mean I have to tell on myself? Like confess my sins? And what about that 'on-buddy' shit? Two **weeks**? I only agreed to a few days here and then we're supposed to "re-evaluate" as gauzy-blouse Jessica said. I hate to break it to these guys but I'm not going to be around long.

"Chris J. On-buddy..." I go through the checklist the way Jonah shows me, just like all the rest of the brain-dead idiots. I hate this place already.

"Collin C.?" calls the mask.

The kid with the burn arms holds his hands up and I awkwardly flip the ball toward him.

As the ball continues its way around I want to become invisible. I don't want to have to catch—drop—that stupid ball anymore! I feel like someone is about to hurl it at me at any second. While I'm worried about the ball, something heavy slides onto my right foot. I look down and see the toe of a weathered black work boot is resting squarely on my own. I look up slowly, as if I'm not bothered at all.

It's the crazy guy, Baz, sitting next to me. He has just stepped his foot on top of mine and he's looking at me with a crazy leering grin, as if daring me to react.

I stare back at him and consider my options. I think about moving my foot. I think about snatching my chair up and beating him to death with it. But I don't do either. What I do is stare back at him, unblinking, while I form my finger and thumb into the shape of a gun, point it between his crazy eyes and pull the trigger while whispering 'pow.' His grin crumbles and he snatches his foot back like a naughty child. I feel certain he realizes he's met someone even crazier and more desperate than he is.

When they are done with the roll call and the football has gone around to everyone, Lieutenant Dominic raises his hands again and every hand on every junkie immediately snaps to attention. He counts off "5, 4, 3, 2, 1..."

BAM!

as all the hands slam down in unison. Meeting adjourned. But before anyone can get up, there is a total eclipse. Emanuel's hulking figure has emerged from his office and is now standing in the door like a black hole sun. All the guys are silent. There's no horseplay. The football is no longer being tossed in the air. Even crazy Baz looks as clear-eyed as a deacon.

Lt. Dominic motions toward the ominous figure. "Guys, Emanuel needs to talk to us."

I look up at Emanuel, at the toothpick rolling in the corner of his giant maw.

"Leessen to me, brothers," he says. "You have been doing"—he raises that meaty hand and wags it back and forth—"pretty good. Lately."

Emanuel always speaks slowly, divulging each word as a gift that we better damn well be glad to receive. "But, you know, dee addict mind"—he taps at his massive turret-head—"eet always want to take the eee-sssy way." The toothpick rolls as he pauses. "There not gonna be an eeesy way, brothers. Only eeesy day is yesterday, huh?" Jesus, is this rehab or the Navy Seals? It's confirmed now: I'm going to hate this place even more than Detox.

"One more ting. We got a new guy here today. Make sure Chrees J. get settled in, okay?" The guys nod their acknowledgment but I'm sure this is the kiss of death.

Emanuel steps forward and stands directly above me, enveloping me completely in his massive shadow.

He reaches into his back pocket and pulls something out.

He looks down at me gravely and slides open a fat boxcutter knife.

“Geeve me your arm,” he demands.

What the fuck? Is this some kind of African initiation ritual?

I lift my arm meekly. What choice do I have?

“You are one of us now, brother,” he says and lays the knife aside my wrist. “We take off thees Gucci bracelet, huh?”

Deftly, the hulking giant slices the plastic ID band from my arm. I’ve been wearing it so long I’ve forgotten about it. It just seems like a part of my body. But I realize it marks me as an inpatient, a fugitive from Detox, a sick person.

As Emanuel collects the remains of my bracelet in his gargantuan paw, the solid gray cloud of misery lifts just for a moment and I’m immensely grateful for this little act of kindness.



# Enby Late Starter

## by Nick Olson

The enby, or nonbinary, label is a new one for me, but my coming to it feels natural, effortless, like if anything it was an inevitability. I see now the days I spent as a teen, watching Velvet Goldmine and Rocky Horror, listening to glam rock and wanting to dress like the characters I'd seen, with those lipstick-kissed elbow gloves, those satin-draped frames, wanting it but not quite allowing the thought to surface consciously, more just letting it brew beneath sing-along verses like "when you walk in, all the fairy boys are pale and nervous," and all the call and response identity affirmations, things like "don't dream it, be it," and the fact that I could never be quite fulfilled wearing my face like I did then, monitoring and adjusting clothing, posture, and mannerisms for acceptable levels of masculinity.

I didn't come really alive in my skin until I saw my face painted in the mirror, the makeup my girlfriend had applied for me—when I looked and saw that I was beautiful for the first time ever. It was as if in that moment all pretense fell away. I could hardly believe that I ever tried to be anything other than what I am. Than myself.

We're planning on shopping together soon, and I'll buy all the clothes I've always wanted to wear, try for something memorable, maybe even gorgeous. It's times like these when I get hard on myself for taking so long to get to this point, when I wonder why the wait. And then I remind myself that the thing about being a late starter is that you've at least started. You've begun.

# Contributor's Notes

**Douglas Moser** is an award-winning director, writer, and occasional artist living in Northford, Connecticut. He made his opera debut directing Paula Kimper's "Patience & Sarah" at Lincoln Center, later revived off-Broadway to rave reviews. His adaptation of "A Christmas Carol," which he also directed, won the Connecticut Critics' Circle Award at the venerable Westport Country Playhouse. Most recently he directed the acclaimed one-woman show "Spinning" at the Long Wharf Theatre.

Moser has extensive experience in New York and in regional theaters. He is the author of *Kitty Boy*, a YA novel about a bullied but budding artist who transcribes his dead cat's tales of the Kingdom of Cats. *Kitty Boy* is the first standalone novel of a projected trilogy. The work was originally developed at the Yale Summer Writers' Workshop, and later at the Westport Writers Workshop, under the guidance of Alison Dickens.

He currently teaches playwriting at the Westport Writers Workshop.

**C. Christine Fair** is a provost's distinguished associate professor within the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. She studies political and military events of South Asia and travels extensively throughout Asia and the Middle East where she causes trouble in multiple languages. Her most recent book is *In Their Own Words: Understanding the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* (OUP 2019). Her scholarly website is [ChristineFair.net](http://ChristineFair.net). She blogs at <https://shortbustoparadise.wordpress.com/>. She tweets at @CChristineFair. Her creative pieces have appeared in *The Bark*, *The Dime Review*, *The New Reader Magazine*, *Clementine Unbound*, *Awakenings*, *Fifty Word Stories*, *Sonder Midwest*, *The Drabble*, *Better than Starbucks*. I have forthcoming pieces in *Badlands Literary Journal*, *Black Horse Magazine*, and *Bluntly Magazine*.

**Chris Jansen** is a recovering heroin addict. He lives in Athens, Georgia, where he teaches boxing and cares for a disinterested guinea pig named Poozybear

**Nick Olson** is a writer from Chicago now living in North Carolina. He was a finalist for Glimmer Train's Very Short Fiction Award, his work was included in *America's Emerging Writers: An Anthology of Fiction*, and he's been published in *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Hobart*, *decomp*, and other fine places. Read more at [nicksfics.com](http://nicksfics.com).



