

The Nabu Review

A Fiction Magazine



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The
Nabu
Review

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The Nabu Review: A Fiction Magazine - November 2018

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The Nabu Review

Editor in Chief: Emily Eagle

Consultant: Austin Shay

About the Nabu Review:

Nabu is the ancient Mesopotamian patron god of literacy, the rational arts, scribes, and wisdom. He was the Babylonians and the Assyrians, and he was the son of the god Marduk. He is credited as the inventor of writing, as well as being credited as an oracle. Interesting fact: Nabu rode on a winged dragon known as Sirrush.

The Nabu Review is a quarterly online fiction magazine that aims to publish fiction pieces that are believable, concrete, and detail oriented.

We accept submissions year round. Submissions can be submitted via Submittable.com.

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LETTER FROM *the editor*

Dear Reader,

I want to start by apologizing for the prolonged delay of our third issue. We were completely blown out of the water with the volume of submissions, and it has been quite a journey trying to narrow it down for this issue.

Many things in our world today are uncertain, and, at times, grim, but the submissions chosen for this issue will help to momentarily chase away the numbness and pain of the day to day. These stories bring forth a well of emotions, reminding us all that love, hope, and happiness can still be felt and appreciated despite the tragic events that surround us.

I invite you now to curl up in your favorite reading position and dive into the carefully chosen selection for the third issue of The Nabu Review.

Thank you,

Emily Eagle

Editor in Chief

The Nabu Review

Farmer J

WRITTEN

BY

MOSHE MIKANOVSKY

“Thank you, dear,” the older man nodded and sat down in the empty chair.

“You are welcome,” Liu said, adjusting in her new seat. The plastic felt cooler under her thin stockings. I should have worn a longer skirt, she thought, but still not in English. She hoped that would come too, someday.

Her attention was back at the open magazine in her hands. She loved glossy American magazines, and she enjoyed practicing her new home’s language reading them.

“You seem like a nice girl.”

Liu looked at him from the corner of her eyes. Her lips automatically curled up, her eyes with them. She was an expert in putting on the mask. Be the sweet girl. Smile. Her head tilted towards her chest, along with her entire body, curling in, protectively.

“You are, giving up your seat like that. That was sweet of you!”

“It’s O.K,” she said, “I don’t mind.”

The man reached into his old backpack and took out a beaten plastic bag. She saw FARMER J written on it, the rest was obscured in a knot, the bag’s content unidentified.

“Where are you from?” he asked. Liu wasn’t used to his directness. People here have usually kept to themselves, and she preferred it that way.

“China,” she muttered.

“New here?” he continued.

“Two months,” her doll face was still on, looking at him obediently, but her hands fumbled through the glossy pages of the magazine.

“That’s beautiful! Welcome! Are you a student? Or working here? Is your family back home? Or are they with you?”

“Em... I learn, em, English... and—”

His crooked bony fingers fumbled with the knot in the plastic bag, pulling it apart.

“I was a professor at University College and had students from all over the world. But the best ones, I am telling you, were from China!” he proclaimed.

She nodded, the smile frozen on her face. She thought she would be able to read now FARMER J’s full name. But the bag, she saw, was so crumpled that the ink was all gone.

“I had some brilliant ones from the Philippines too, oh, and India. One or two from Pakistan. And I tell you,” he straightened the bag, his hands caressing it gently, “the local kids, they were drinking too much!” In two swift movements, his hands twisted the bag tightly, looped it over and tied it back to its original form.

Liu gasped, but the man didn’t seem to notice.

“That is the problem with young people today. They don’t take any responsibility, play video games all day long, drink and smoke, and then they expect to find high paying jobs!”

She nodded again, this time, a bit too forcefully. Her frame was small, and she had plenty of space sitting next to him. But her left side felt flat now against the window. She noticed the FARMER J bag was open, his hands straightening it up again.

“You look like a smart young lady. I sure hope you are not like those lazy kids!”

“I had this student once, he came to class utterly drunk, *and* he stank of weed, I am telling you, it was *awful*... No shame!”

Two swift movements. The bag was knotted.

“And he passed out, right there, in the middle of class...”

The knot was off.

“And I had to call the university’s security and they called the paramedics...”

The knot was on.

“And—”

She stood up. It was not her stop yet. She had four more stations to go, but she couldn’t bear riding next to him for another seven minutes.

“Oh, it’s your station, of course.” He stood up for her.

Only now she noticed his baggy corduroys, worn and faded. His old shirt, the cuffs’ hems frayed. His mismatching vest, too warm for this time of the year, an old yellowish stain just below the V-neck. His hair was long and his face unshaven.

She hesitated. Ma’ma and Ba’ba would be so ashamed of me.

“No... sorry, my mistake...” Liu said, smiling.

She sat down and closed her magazine. She gently put it in her lap, both hands resting on top.

“Was he O.K.?” she asked.

Diamonds on Jupiter

WRITTEN
BY GRANT PRICE

Everything about the white house was the same, but different. Flecks of rust spotted the iron number on the door frame. Dust bunnies collected in cracks and corners. The hanging chair at the end of the porch had no cushions. Hud hadn't been by since it had happened and now he was standing in front of the same-but-different house with a bunch of flowers in hand. The flowers were wrong. They didn't fit. The falling sun pasted his shadow to the porch, keeping him from running away.

He swallowed his fear and knocked. A shape dribbled into the space behind the screen door. Hot fingers gripped the flowers tightly enough to make the stems scrunch. The screen door swung outward, toward Hud.

She looked tired. More lines than before. Blue eyes ringed with red. But the tense muscles around her mouth relaxed when she recognised him.

'Hudson,' she said, and the warmth in her voice made him hate himself for staying away.

'Hello, Ms Novak.'

Hud shifted his weight from one foot to the other and stared and didn't know which words came next.

She reached out and pulled him close. He rested his cheek against her shoulder and it was like it always had been, and he had to set his jaw to stop himself from doing something embarrassing. Then he broke away and thrust the flowers at her.

'Brought you these, Ms Novak,' he mumbled.

'Thank you,' she said. She smiled. He didn't have the strength to return it.

'Thought I'd see Luke.'

A shadow passed over her eyes and the smile faltered, but only for a moment. 'Of course. Come in, Hudson.' She stood to one side. 'Beautiful sunset,' she said, looking past him as he entered the house.

'Yes.'

The screen door clapped shut.

'Come through to the kitchen,' said Ms Novak. She moved ahead of him, walking on light feet along the corridor. Hud followed. Although he kept his gaze trained on the staircase at the end of the corridor, his eyes somehow still drifted through open doorways to the living room that was dark and dormant and the dining area piled high with boxes. In the kitchen, he stood on black and white tile and watched as she put the flowers in the sink and then opened the cupboard and took out three mugs and a jar of instant coffee. She filled the old cast iron kettle that Mr Novak had called the Mills bomb and turned on the stove and rested the kettle on the flame. The silence after the activity was heavy.

'Are you goin' someplace, Ms Novak?' he blurted out.

If she was unsettled by the question, she didn't show it. 'We're moving north. My sister, Luke's aunt, lives up there. Try our hand at city life for a while. She's fixed up an apartment for us already. Luke'll be able to spend time with his cousins, and I'll find a school where I can teach. We think it's for the best.'

Hud nodded, giving himself time to take it in. 'You need help shiftin' the boxes?' he asked finally.

'That's kind of you. But no. We have a removal firm to take care of it. They'll be around next week to pick up what we're keeping.'

The kettle whistled. Ms Novak lifted it from the stove and poured water into the mugs. 'Milk?' she asked. Then she spoke again before he could respond. 'Oh, we don't have any. I'm

sorry. It kept going bad, so I stopped buying it.'

'Black's fine by me,' said Hud.

She pushed a mug and a sugar bowl with a flat spoon across the worktop. Hud dumped two white mounds into his cup and stirred. He watched the lines of foam swirl on top of the liquid and saw the river with the rocks like teeth.

'How are your parents?'

Hud looked up, blinking. 'Oh, fine. I'll tell 'em to come by 'fore you go.'

'Please do.'

They sipped their coffee. Ms Novak looked at the tile on which Hud was standing. He wanted to get away. 'You want I should take that cup up to Luke 'fore it gets cold?' He nodded at the third mug sitting next to the kettle.

'Up to Luke?'

'Yeah.'

Spots of colour appeared below her eyes and her lips became stiff. She set her mug down hard on the worktop. There was something in her that he'd never seen before and had never expected to see.

'Luke isn't upstairs,' she said quietly. 'He's across the way. That's been his room.' She folded her arms and held them tightly across her chest.

Hud looked beyond the kitchen to the corridor and the heavy door that was closed to them. She meant Mr Novak's study. He'd only been inside it once, long ago, when he and Luke had been given a dressing down for throwing sand in a boy's eyes at the river.

He had to be blunt. He didn't know how else to do it. 'Well. Can I see him?'

All at once, she seemed to realise how she looked. Her arms fell to her sides. Her eyes became as urgent as ambulance sirens and her lip trembled and then it was too much and her mouth fell open. Hud knew she was about to say it. And he felt the terrible pressure in his

chest as he waited for it to play out like he'd imagined so many times before, at night, in the dark minutes before he succumbed to sleep and after he woke up screaming. But, as if she'd read his mind, the sirens went out. Her lips came together again. It wouldn't happen. Not today.

'Let me check if he's awake.'

'Course.'

She swept past him, and Hud made sure not to turn around while she went to the door. He listened to Ms Novak knock and call Luke's name softly. No response. For a moment he hoped his friend was asleep, so he wouldn't have to see him. He could return home knowing he'd tried, and that would be enough. But a voice like balled newspaper carried through to the kitchen and the coffee soured in Hud's stomach.

He sipped his coffee as Luke and Ms Novak spoke at a volume intended to exclude him. The wooden floorboards in the corridor creaked and he turned around. He saw the hurt on her skin, and she saw that he saw it, so she buried it.

'You can go in, Hudson. He's awake.'

She smiled. She was brave, much braver than he would ever be. Her voice became warm again, like it had been on the porch.

'Thank you, Ms Novak.'

'I'll be upstairs if you need me.'

'Okay.'

He bit off the apology before it fell out of his mouth. Across the hallway, the door to Mr Novak's study was open. The curtains were closed, and the violent purple sunset burned the edges of the fabric. The air was thick with sleeping body and unwashed bedclothes. He hovered near the door, unsure whether to knock.

The paper voice spoke. 'Come in if you're coming in.'

Hud composed himself and crossed the threshold. Mr Novak's desk no longer stood in the middle of the room, but the two bookshelves with their green-leather tomes remained. A chair squatted in one corner, a stool in another. A small TV set that looked like an old space helmet sat hunched on the generous sill. Pushed up against the wall to his right was a bed, and his friend lay in it.

'Hello, Cool.'

'Hud.'

Luke's hair had grown out and was now long and lank against his jaw and neck. The quilt was rolled down to his waist, and he was propped up on a couple of pillows. He wore a blue linen pyjama top that was buttoned in the middle. On a table beside the bed, a column of books climbed toward the ceiling like a spiral staircase.

'How you been keepin'?'

'Just fine. Take a look around you. This is me. This is what I've got.'

Hud scratched the back of his neck and felt the sweat start on his chest.

'Brought you a mug of coffee.' He placed it on the table. 'No milk.'

'She stopped buying it.'

'Huh.'

Hud pulled the stool out of the corner and sat down. Ms Novak had started to pack in here too. Three moving boxes were stacked at the foot of the bed. Frozen metal figures poked out of the box on top. The blue streamer ribbon of a rosette fell down the side of the cardboard like a mountain stream.

He nodded at the column of books. 'You readin' some?'

'Started. Can't seem to get further than a few pages. Mind keeps wandering.'

'I never could get into books.'

Luke looked at him. 'Yeah. Well. Maybe you ought to try. Lot of things you ought to be doing with your time.'

Hud brought the mug to his lips to avoid his friend's gaze. He wasn't dumb, at least not as much as people thought. He knew what Luke meant.

'I been workin'. Down at the yard. Mr Starek says he's gonna put me up to get my truck licence once I've put in time. Be out on the road in a year or more.' He stopped. It had sounded like a boast.

'That's good.'

'Is what it is, I 'spose.'

Hud's eyes darted around the former study once more, looking for something neutral to say.

'Don't you want me to open them curtains, Cool? See the sky before it gets dark?'

'Not right now. Maybe you can get the light though.'

'Sure.'

He flicked the switch by the door. Scouring light from a single bulb hurt the room. He returned to the stool and scratched at an oil mark on his jeans.

'Saw Georgie a couple of weeks back at the store,' he mumbled. 'He been by? Said he'd come by, soon as he found half a chance.'

'He hasn't been by. Nobody has.'

Hud stopped scratching and looked up. 'Really? Nobody?'

Luke shook his head.

'You ain't had anyone to talk to?'

'Other than ma, no.'

Hud's brow furrowed.

'Don't you go outside none?'

‘What for?’

He didn’t have an answer. There wasn’t one. Anything Luke said was the truth now. Whatever he, Hud, came out with didn’t amount to more than a drop in a bucket. He looked at his reflection on the TV screen. It was warped.

‘Watchin’ TV last night,’ he said. He glanced at Luke. ‘Programme ‘bout planets. Said that on Jupiter the pressure in the atmosphere is so high that it rains diamonds. C’n you believe that, Cool? Diamonds just fallin’ outta the sky, landin’ wherever they please. Said there was a sea made outta liquid diamonds. Made from hail that melts at 8000 degrees or somethin’ like that. All you’d need is a cupful to set you up for life. Course, ain’t no way we’re gettin’ anywhere close to that diamond sea. Crush a space rocket like a paper cup ‘fore it made it past the outer limit. The exosphere. ‘S what the head on TV called it.’

‘Right.’

Luke’s arms rested on top of the quilt. His hands seemed larger, somehow, like they belonged to somebody else. The rest of his body didn’t stir. The coffee wasn’t sitting right in Hud’s stomach and the musty, meaty smell caught in his nose hairs. He felt like he could be sick without forcing it.

‘Maybe I oughta go,’ he mumbled. ‘Maybe I shouldn’ta come at all. Ma tried to talk me outta it, but I owed it to you. An’ to your da.’

He tried not to see the way Luke flinched.

‘Ma was right though. I ain’t helpin’ you none by bein’ here. I’m gonna go, Cool. Leave you in peace.’

Luke turned away, burning eyes trained on the books that looked like gangrenous bones. At the doorway, Hud stopped and made himself turn around.

‘I’m sorry.’ The words were heavy, too heavy for his mouth to handle without becoming

thick down at the root of his tongue. 'I wish I coulda changed things.'

Hud took his empty mug to the kitchen. The flowers he'd brought for Ms Novak still lay in the sink. The purple petals on top pressed up against the metal wall. The ones on the bottom were being crushed.

'Hud?' The paper voice was firmer than before.

He went to Mr Novak's old study again. Luke had thrown his quilt back. He wore blue pyjama trousers that matched his shirt.

'Yeah?'

'Take me outside, will you?'

'Okay, Cool.'

Hud wheeled the chair out from the corner of the room and pushed it up against the bed frame. He slid an arm around Luke's back and another under his legs, and Luke wrapped his arms around his neck. Hud lifted and forced himself not to make a sound when he realised how light his friend was. Gently, he placed him in the chair, and then pushed it out of the room and down the hallway. At the front door, Luke reached out and took the handle, and together they manoeuvred the chair onto the porch.

The sky swelled with purple bruises. An oil-black V of geese skimmed over the treetops in the direction of the mountains and the river whose depths were great and impersonal. Hud wheeled the chair to the porch steps and kicked the brakes. He stood behind Luke with his hands on the handles.

'We're leaving, Hud.'

'I know.'

'Ma thinks it's best.'

'She's right.'

A red squirrel ran into the middle of the gravel track leading up to the house. It paused before making a bid for the overgrowth on the other side. An engine whined somewhere beyond the trees.

‘I don’t blame you,’ said Luke. ‘If that’s what you came to hear.’

Hud let go of the handles and rounded the chair. ‘That ain’t why I came. You know it ain’t.’

‘Okay.’

Hud stared into Luke’s eyes to see if he believed him. His neck was warm. Luke looked past him. The dying sun touched his face and made his skin glow, and the beginning of a smile caught on his lips. And Hud knew it was really was okay.

When the sky had passed from violet to blue velvet, Luke stirred and spoke.

‘Diamonds on Jupiter, hey?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I’d like to see that.’

‘Me too, Cool.’

The Wedding Guest

WRITTEN

BY GAURAV MADAN

Arjun stepped out of the wedding suite from the back entrance. It was unseasonably warm for late October. He had changed out of his cream-colored sherwani and now donned the orange and green checkered vest Maleda had brought back for him on her last trip to Addis Ababa. The setting sun reached his face with golden embrace. A wave of relief crashed down upon the shores of his mind. *They had done it*, he thought to himself.

Arjun walked over to the edge of where the vineyard began. He stopped in front of the neatly arranged rows of grapes. Maleda would still need time to change out of the crimson lehenga she wore to circle the fire into a dress that matched his colorful vest. Ahead, the sun continued to dip into the horizon. He played a game of hide-and-seek with its concluding rays., the flickering orange light creeping in between the branches. With hundreds of people waiting for them to celebrate, he knew these moments were precious. He closed his eyes, giving himself over to the wind.

It wasn't his idea to have such an extravagant wedding. Weeks upon weeks were spent solely debating the merits of marriage. There were concerns from his family that she was Indian. There were hesitations from her family that he wasn't Christian. But the moment Maleda and Arjun's mother saw the vineyard, their minds were made up. He figured if this was going to help bring their families together, it was worth it.

Everything had gone to plan. The pandit had kept his word and made sure the ceremony was under an hour. The weather had cooperated, providing a cloudless, blue sky. In the end, there were no final objections from either family and no angry mob with pitchforks trying to storm the vineyard.

This last concern was mainly his. It was only a few weeks ago that the eyes of the entire country had been fixed on this small town that lay just south of the Mason-Dixon line. A demonstration had been called by various white nationalist groups to protest “the extinction of European culture in North America by the forces of immigration, integration, and multiculturalism.” In response to the planned rally, counter-protests had been organized.

It so happened that their final walkthrough of the vineyard was set for the day of the protests. Arjun had coaxed Maleda to come with him to join the anti-racist, feminist, and LGBT groups organizing public resistance. If they were going to host a multi-racial wedding in the same town, then they should at least lend their voices to the future they were hoping to create, he reasoned. It would also allow them some time together away from the stress of wedding planning.

On the day of the rally, the couple joined thousands of people that had descended on the area from near and far. It didn't take long for things to get out of control. The rival demonstrations quickly devolved into pitched street battles, as the police looked on. Throughout the day, the two sides repeatedly clashed amidst smashed windows and burning tires. It wasn't until armed riot police appeared, coated in black armor from head to toe, that they decided it may be time to leave. The police had suddenly charged wielding semi-automatic weapons and riot shields. Arjun had never seen Maleda run so fast.

After the tear gas had cleared, and the police had dispersed much of the crowds, the news broke that at least one person had died when a hooded man had detonated an explosive in the middle of the counter-demonstration. Arjun and Maleda sat along the streets in disbelief. Cradling one another on a curb, they wept openly.

“Maybe we're making a mistake,” Arjun had said to Maleda that day. “How can we bring a

bunch of black and brown folks to this place? What if something happens?”

Maleda just looked at him. She wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked herself back and forth until the last light had departed. She refused to say a word. Arjun watched as the tears silently fell down her face. Finally, in a voice heavy with anguish, she simply uttered, “They don’t get to win.”

The fears of the past weeks gripped Arjun once more before he pushed them from his mind. The breeze whipped through the vineyard. Opening his eyes to the sound of gentle rustling, he could make out something moving in the distance. The silhouette seemed to suddenly spring from the retreating sun. From the parking lot beyond the vineyard, there was someone walking towards him. From the sway of the approaching shadow he could make out it was a woman.

“Arjun! I’m glad I caught you,” the figure called out when she saw that he had noticed her. She was wearing an all-white dress with a purple and gold pattern that appeared only across the sleeves, waist, and hem. He recognized the traditional Ethiopian design. She was clearly dressed for his wedding.

“Hello...Aunty,” Arjun offered.

“Another guest you don’t know, huh? Well I am sure you’re used to that by now,” she said with a brilliant smile. Up close, Arjun could see the intricate rows of deep blue tattooed across the woman’s neck. She smoothed her dress with her hands, looking past him at the decorative splendor.

“I’m sorry I missed the ceremony this go around. It was a great time though.” She continued to glance around, the memories steadily churning in her head. The last of daylight was finally creeping away. She turned back to face Arjun. Behind him, the façade of the reception hall was draped in string lights that had just been turned on. “Yeah, these were probably some of the

last good days. At least y'all did it well," she said shaking her head.

"Well, I'm glad you made it Aunty. Everyone's inside," Arjun said, annoyed to have his only moments of solitude in days interrupted. "Why don't we join the party?"

He started to make his way back towards the reception hall, but before he could move she grabbed his wrist squeezing it tightly. "I don't want to say too much." He turned around to feel her nails digging deep into his skin. He tried to pull his arm free, but she wouldn't let go.

"I can't stay for long." The words rushed from her mouth. "I really shouldn't even be here. But I wanted you to know..." She paused. Her eyes narrowed, taking him in. He looked younger than she expected. Or rather than she remembered. In her head he was always much older. The elder who still spoke of honoring the ancestors, drawing from the different cultures in the community. He was the one who had set the example and insisted that they had to live up to larger ideals.

"You wanted me to know what?" He no longer bothered to conceal his irritation.

But she continued to examine him, ignoring his question. In her eyes he could see her struggle. They were deep chestnuts that wanted to swallow him whole. He noticed that the hair that sat perfectly rounded atop her head was starting to gray. She held on tight.

"You wouldn't understand what it took to find this dress. I would *die* if anyone saw me in it," she laughed dryly. "But look at *this!*" she waved her free hand around. "It's a bit criminal, don't you think?"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's not nearly as nice where I'm from. But this is your wedding night after all. You should enjoy it. I mean, you will. There will be plenty of time for you to put the pieces together when

it all goes to shit.”

“What are you talking about?” he repeated his voice rising.

“All of this,” she continued, her stare piercing through him. “No one cared about rising temperatures or disappearing trees. They were more focused on deportations and corporate tax breaks. They wanted to take this country back to some golden age. They really thought they would become kings. But their kingdoms never extended beyond their own skulls.”

“By the time the storms hit, the government was so corrupt, so dysfunctional they couldn’t do much. They said there weren’t enough resources to help. Maybe it was true. Or maybe they just left those people out there to die.”

Arjun stood frozen. His mouth sat agape while the wheels in his head kept spinning. “Where are you from?” he finally managed.

She let go of his hand now that she had his attention. “Not where. When. That’s what you are trying to figure out.” The same playful grin flashed in front of him again.

“When? Wait, what?” The words fell out incredulously. “Why did you come *here* of all places?”

She laughed again. “I’ve heard so much about it, I wanted to see what it was like. I have my memories, sure, but those are memories of an eight-year old. An eight-year old who had no idea...” her voice trailed off.

“That things were going to get so bad?”

“Worse. Much worse.” Her smile disappeared behind the tightness of her plum colored lips. Her stone-cold seriousness sent shivers across his skin.

“There were tens of thousands of refugees all along the coasts. Entire regions were completely

uninhabitable. People had to leave the places they had known When they began to flee south, that stupid wall they had built only got in the way. In the end, the people who demanded it were the ones who tore it down. Just to escape. After so much, the country sort of broke.”

“Broke? Like...apart? Into...pieces?”

“Like crows fighting over crumbs. Each to their own, skeptical of their neighbors. Quicker to shoot than to share.”

“So what, there are a bunch of city-states? Like ancient Greece?” He wasn’t sure if he even believed what he was asking.

“More like ethno-states. Nowadays, people generally stick to what they know. The whites control the largest areas. They got new states all over the Northeast and Midwest and parts of the South. Black people have succeeded in carving out a few territories to. They also control the Free City of Detroit. Indigenous tribes reclaimed plenty of land. They help most folks who are willing to accept their rules. It’s like that all over the country. Smaller communities trying to make it. In fact, this area here is one of the few that is surviving by the old traditions. It’s a place where black and brown and while still try and live together.”

Arjun swiveled his head to see the caterers setting up the buffet. Somewhere in the distance a violinist was serenading their guests as they drank champagne and ate samosas.

She put both her hands on his shoulders. “You understand that it’s because of you both, right? What you and Maleda Aunty did tonight was set down roots. I know this is a lot right now. But this is why this night is so important,” her voice had fallen to a whisper. “When things start to crumble and people start to doubt you, you need to know this.”

He slowly nodded, trying to follow the movements of her mouth.

“You brought these families together. And in the future, even more so than now, we are going to have to depend on each other. Whether we like it or not, we’re going to have to fight -”

“- with an undying love for our people,” he cut her off.

Her gaze met his once more. For the first time since she arrived, she recognized the man standing in front of her. Before he could notice, she blinked away the tears collecting in the basins of her eyes.

“So now what?” he asked despondent.

“Now what?!” she roared. “Now you dance like the future depends on it!”

“Arjun! It’s almost time! You coming or what?” Maleda’s voice suddenly called out from the suite. She had changed into her dress and come outside.

“Damn, boy. She wasn’t lying when she said she killed it. She’s fine as hell!”

Arjun looked behind him to see Maleda waving him over.

“I guess it’s time to do this,” he said, his head still reeling. “You might as well join us. You’ve come all this way.”

She smiled and started in the other direction back towards the parking lot.

“Where are you going? Aren’t you coming?”

“But I’m already here! Table 13, if I remember correctly,” she said with a wink. Once more she flashed her dazzling smile, before disappearing into the night.

“Who was that?” Maleda asked appearing beside him. Her shoulders were draped in a black, velvet cloak decorated with golden embroidery. In her hands she held a nearly identical one for him.

“Uh, I’m not really sure,” Arjun stuttered.

“Well, where is she going? The party is about to start.”

Arjun stared at her, unsure of how to respond.

“You know, you have got to do better at getting to know my family. They’re your family too now,” she teased him. “Come on, let’s go make this grand entrance.” She draped the kaba over his shoulders and linked her arm in his.

They entered the hall to standing applause. Shedding their cloaks, they turned to the crowd that had assembled to bear witness to their union. Staring into the sea of friends and family, Arjun thought about everything he had just been told. The responsibility was theirs. He nodded to the DJ and the music started.

Over the past months, Arjun and Maleda had been practicing a choreographed dance that blended their musical traditions. Slowly and awkwardly, they had put together the steps to Bollywood and Habesha songs. With the first notes blaring through the vineyard’s hall, their feet took flight. Channeling tomorrow’s warnings, Arjun shook and shimmied to the mix of sounds. At some point in the evening, the honey wine that Maleda had meticulously brewed in their apartment was passed around. Speeches and toasts were made. With the tej flowing, Arjun began to loosen up. As the guests mingled about and began to line up for dinner, Arjun made his way to Table 13. Maybe there was still a chance to steer their ship on a better course. He recognized her eyes immediately, shimmering in the ochre lighting.

“It’s not so criminal, now is it?” He asked approaching her.

It was her turn to feel uncertain. “You are *so* weird!” Her tiny face scrunched up. Through it he could see a familiar smirk take shape. She started to inch away from him, but before she could take another step he grabbed her and pulled her onto the dance floor.

“Hey! What are you doing?” she squeaked.

“The future depends on it!” he cried as he spun her around unaware of the alliance they were cementing.

Taxista

WRITTEN

BY

ANN SCHLOTZHAUER

"¡Sigue, sigue!" a pedestrian shouted, laughing, as I chased after the bus that wasn't going to stop.

I gave up after only a few yards, breathing heavily from the stress of having missed it more than the physical exertion of chasing it. I needed a taxi now or I'd be dangerously close to missing my flight. I don't like to be dangerously close to anything, but I also knew a cab would be 40 euros at a minimum, ten times the cost of the airport bus.

"Joder," I thought to myself. "As if I'm not broke enough." It doesn't help that I've only met one taxista ever that I wasn't afraid of. I've forgotten his name now but he was Greek and his name reflected it. I want to say it was Milo followed by a 15-letter, vowel-heavy last name. He'd given me his card, wanted the return trip business. I liked him, wanted to give it to him, but again was too frugal. I'd figured out the bus system on Crete and foregone taxi service.

I walked the few steps to the nearest in a line of taxis that waited, shark-like, for idiots running late. Idiots like me.

"Al aeropuerto," I said, shamefaced.

"Claro," the man was old enough to be my father, but didn't smile like one.

I rolled my eyes, climbing into the back. He better not try to talk to me. Please don't. Don't talk to me. I pulled my ear buds out of my bag, jammed them into my ears before they were even plugged into anything. But just like with the bus, I was too late.

"¿De donde eres?" He asks, dropping the 's' sound from the end like everyone in Sevilla. It's an accent I've tried endlessly to replicate over several months but the faces people pull in response prove my inability.

"América; Estados Unidos." Probably should've said Canada. That's what people always tell you to do. But there's a meter in the cab and I figure he can't cheat me based on my nationality if I'm watching the price climb. I look down at my phone, make sure he's following the quickest route to the airport. Because of course he could still cheat me.

"Ahh," he says with a grin. This is what I get more often than not. People don't want to tell me my country sucks. They want to tell me the opposite. There's a perverse fascination with the U.S. They want to hate it because it's so easy to hate but it's like a train wreck and they can't hardly look away. We're the real housewives show of the world.

"¿De donde? Nueva York?" I get this one a lot too so I manage not to smile. People are often convinced they know all about the US so they ask me whether I'm from New York or California. Occasionally someone mentions Florida. But that's it. The whole country. At first I'd try to explain. In between New York and California, in the middle of the country.

But I generally got blank stares. There's something between them? There's more America than New York and California? So instead of explaining, "Sí, de Nueva York."

He nods knowingly, self-assured at his ability to guess my home. Over Cruzcampos later, he'll brag to someone about how he can distinguish different American accents, recognize where they're from. Let him.

I look down at my phone, typing away furiously like I'm important and busy. 99% of people I care about are asleep right now but maybe he'll buy it and leave me alone. He doesn't. He says something then that I can't make out. Not like he's saying a word that I don't know but like he's just making a noise. It doesn't sound like Spanish. It doesn't sound like any language. I look up quizzically and he's meeting my eyes in the rear view mirror. He looks proud like a dog that's caught something furry and small. He's covered an adorable animal with blood and brain matter and wants my approval but I just shake my head slightly the way you do when

you're so confused you don't even know what question to ask.

He repeats the noise. Definitely not Spanish. Not real Spanish at least, some words are technically Spanish but hide it. When they're stolen from another language in their entirety and don't adapt properly. But this doesn't even sound like that. His accent has changed. I continue my blank stare, narrowing my eyes even further as though squinting improves my hearing.

"Como la música, ¿no?" Like what music? What are you saying? I want to scream at him because he's making no sense and I didn't even want to talk in the first place and I just want to be at the airport already. He says it again more slowly. I make out a hard g sound. It's different than ours but that's what it is unmistakably. And there's an r somewhere. Other than that, I'm at a loss.

He's getting exasperated with my silence. He was so proud a moment ago and, like a puta, I'm refusing to validate him. I wonder if I've wandered into a machismo-fueled nightmare. The cab smells like stale sweat so it's the perfect setting.

But I'm overreacting. He spells it. Hay. Air-Ray. Ooh. Ooh. Bay. Eee gree-ay-gah. It takes me a moment. I'm not an audial learner and it's hard for me to make sense of a word I'm only hearing spelled.

Then suddenly I'm laughing. He smiles broadly, not because I'm laughing but because my laughter is my recognition and he's finally gotten what he wanted. And because I'm laughing, my body relaxes. And I know suddenly that I'll make my flight and that even if I don't, I'll be okay. Money's just money. It's not the end of the world.

I laugh just long enough that he has to join. It'd be uncomfortable if he didn't and he knows I'm laughing with him or at him. I'm not even sure which is more correct. We lock eyes again in the rear view mirror - it's a wonder cabbies aren't crashing constantly the way they do that - as I stop laughing. I say simply "Sí, sí."

But after the lack of recognition and the laughter, he wants to learn the proper pronunciation. If you only know one word of a language, you have to at least be able to say it right. We're pulling up to the airport as we go back and forth. I say it, he repeats. I tell him it's better even when it's not, then I say it again. He repeats.

I'm still smiling as I pass through airport security. I've met a cabbie who caters to tourists and only knows one English word: groovy.

One Night Only

WRITTEN

BY JEFF FLEISCHER

He had never been attracted to girls. Only to women.

It made perfect sense even two decades later that She was his first real crush.

His tendencies were true even in middle school and high school, during what should have been the peak girl years for a boy with a jock's body and a nerd's intelligence. When he and his friends spent weekends killing time in their typically suburban local mall, the others were usually ogling or hitting on their classmates who, freed from the school dress code, wore small shorts and halter tops over their maturing bodies. He had to spend more than one Saturday making bored small talk with a girl while one of his friends and one of hers made out in the food court.

While his friends followed the expected pattern, he was always more interested in the women who worked in the high-end fashion stores that populated the mall. They were usually about five to fifteen years older, but they were *women*. They wore flattering clothes and pantyhose and heels. They had jobs and experiences. They knew how to wear makeup so it was almost unnoticeable, instead of calling attention to it. They had combinations of jobs and college degrees that made them seem more interesting than the girls with whom shared chemistry meant the same teacher in sixth period.

He was still too green to feel confident approaching those kind of women. As one of his friends put it, he wouldn't know what to do with one if she said yes. He just knew what he wanted to do.

Besides, She was cooler than any of them.

* * *

His teenage years came before lives were lived online, when music was still a valuable commodity he had to save up for and select carefully. Like a lot of boys his age, he ranked music among the top expenditures for his income, sourced from an amalgam of babysitting money, pay for referring youth basketball, and wages from a part-time job at the neighborhood sub shop.

In those years before he arrived in a university town, hearing about new music was itself an endeavor. He was too young—and lacked the car necessary—to hang out at clubs downtown and find new bands himself, so he had three go-to sources. His hip best friend, whose older brother worked at an independent record label. The weekend section of the city newspaper. And the area's one alternative radio station, back when that term meant something.

In the same week during his sophomore year, all three told him about Her. His friend explained how She was the next big thing in the local scene, someone whose newly released debut would

help legitimize the city's musical movement, and other such hyperbole. Two days later, the Saturday newspaper gave the same album three and a half stars, in a review focused on Her DIY aesthetic and cleverly frank lyrics. The radio station played one song from that album during its Sunday night new music showcase, noting that She was a local success story.

He happened to be listening that night, releasing the pause button on his tape deck just a second after the DJ announced Her song was up next. Something about the singer's voice appealed to him. It was low without losing its femininity, making it a departure from the sultrier sirens or the powerful divas or the coquettish teen queens. She sounded like a real person, and the lyrics reinforced that sense. By the time he went to bed that night, he had listened to the song on tape nearly a dozen times and memorized all the words, along with the tail end of the DJ patter picked up during the recording.

* * *

The next day after school, he took fifteen dollars out of the toy safe where he kept his spare money, and biked to the record store in the mall. Her album was still a cult item, but he found two copies on CD and returned with one of them. He saved it as a reward for when his homework was finished. Once ready, he ravenously removed the clear plastic wrapping and popped the CD case open. Holding it carefully, with his index finger in the central hole and the tip of his thumb on the outside, he gently placed the disc in the player's drawer and hit the play button.

While the music filled the massive headphones he'd received for his birthday, he leaned back in his beanbag chair and listened to every word She sang. As he twirled the headphone cord in one hand, he read through the booklet of liner notes. Not only was She clever and funny, which the lyrics already suggested, but the pictures in the booklet proved She was beautiful. Not in the overly styled way of a mainstream pop star, but naturally beautiful, the type who wore casual jean shorts and a t-shirt and relied on Her uniquely curved lips and penetrating eyes to make the first impression. He knew instantly that those lips and those eyes were going to show up in his fantasies for a while.

He loved the music, too. He wouldn't have developed such a crush otherwise.

The closest things to celebrity crushes he had before came from TV growing up, but the reruns in which those women starred were the same episodes his parents had watched as teenagers. He could think about them at key moments, but he knew those versions of those women were gone, and he was never going to meet them. This was a fair lady he would probably never meet, but possibly could. That fact made Her more tangible, and several of the songs spoke of Her tangibility.

He didn't know it yet, but the music press would describe Her appeal as that of a girl next door, and in his case, She could have been. His friend's brother had noted She was from a different suburb of the same city, only twenty or thirty minutes away depending on traffic. She was old enough to definitely be an adult, but still young enough that She was easily closer to his age than to his parents'. A solid decade older than he was, but that placed Her only in Her

mid-twenties, in what he saw as the prime of female beauty.

* * *

She was nearly twice that age now, and he still thought about Her regularly, even as he hadn't had a chance to meet Her in real life. In his imagination, however, they'd met many, many times. He'd see Her sitting alone at a bar or on a train, playing guitar in the park or signing autographs at a record store, and he'd introduce himself with some polished, witty line. They'd hit it off and he'd ask what She was doing later. The specifics always changed a little, but his fantasies usually ended with Her getting the same response from his internal and external selves.

Though it never disappeared, his crush also didn't become a consuming obsession. He pined for other women through the rest of high school, though the ones he actually dated looked a bit like Her. He dated a normal amount in college, once his peers were mature enough to attract his interest, and married in his late twenties, though that relationship didn't live to see his mid-thirties. His dream woman didn't get in the way of the others, but She was never far from his mind.

Far from a prolific artist, She put out an album only every few years, often enough that his anticipation built for each new release and he never grew bored. Every few years, that meant new music magazine stories with interviews accompanied by Her photograph. For a man of his sub-

urban upbringing, those were far better options than the kind of magazines he always associated with sleazy drifters or his high school friends' divorced fathers.

He thought She grew more attractive around the time of Her second and third albums, as maturity and success made Her seem more confident. He knew She had married before the second record, and divorced before releasing the third album one, which was heavy on anthems about independence. His patterns seemed to sync with Hers; nearly every time someone ended a long relationship with him, it was only a short time before news of a new album broke, and he could escape into thinking about what had become his longest relationship with a woman. Their conversations in his dreams grew more mature. Sometimes he would open by telling Her how much the music meant to him, or smoothly say he'd been waiting years for that very moment, but things usually ended the same way they always had.

* * *

When he saw the announcement that She was playing Her first album, in its entirety, at a club not far from his home, he knew he had to find a way to go.

It had been a few years since he was among the few to get Her sixth album online, and among the even fewer who paid to download it legally. For most of the old fans, it was barely a footnote, and She didn't do any press for what was probably Her last recording, at least for a while. He only listened to it a few times, preferring the early stuff. She hadn't played Her former

hometown since he was a broke twentysomething who always assumed he could see Her on the next tour, never expecting that tour to take more than a decade to finally arrive.

When it did, he was among a few hundred fans crammed shoulder to shoulder in a dingy bar, where She played alone on a slightly raised stage. With ticket brokers claiming most of the limited seats quickly, he again had to save up to experience Her music, as he had twenty years earlier.

Seeing Her up close, he realized just how long it had been since he had seen a current photo. Her face looked mostly the same; She had obviously kept in shape and avoided plastic surgery. Her hands did show prominent veins, and She had a noticeable amount of makeup applied over what the stage light showed were small wrinkles. None of that made Her any less attractive to him, just more mature. The legs visible between Her dress and boots were still lean and muscular, and Her eyes were bluer than the magazines had ever conveyed. What most struck him was that She looked so small in person. Even though he knew that She was nearly a foot shorter than him, She had loomed so large in his memory as to make that reality feel strange.

Looking around, he saw how many other fans had the same devoted look, and wondered how many of them counted Her as their first crush, and if any others still thought of Her as their feminine ideal.

The concert was less intimate than he had expected, as the songs sounded less raw than they

did when She had played them only a few times in a lo-fidelity recording studio. She did make a few jokes about Her hometown, and gave the crowd a few flirtatious looks that made his pulse quicken. The encore consisted of a few later hits, then a bow, and She left through the back door before anyone had a chance to thank Her. At least, twenty years after he thought of Her as only twenty minutes away, She had been only about twenty feet away.

Most importantly, listening to those songs again took him back to his teenage bedroom, to the boy first seeing Her picture in the liner notes as he listened to an album he really liked, and reminded him how moments that seemed so small at the time could stay with him no matter how much time passed too quickly.

* * *

After the show, he waited for most of the crowd to thin out, noticing how many were couples or groups of friends around his age, and he suddenly felt lonely going to the show alone. Before going home, and probably listening to the first album again on the same oversized headphones, now held together with duct tape, he decided to stop for a drink and headed to a dive bar he liked a few doors away.

The place was no busier than normal for a weeknight. Once he hung up his coat, he ordered a drink from a waitress and looked around.

There She was.

Sitting alone on a stool at the bar, sipping a light beer. The real Her, small and older, but still radiant. He had played hundreds of variations on this scene in his head since adolescence, and now it played in real time.

At first, he thought the tall man in the cowboy hat seated to Her left was a boyfriend, or at least a boyfriend for the evening. Closer observation revealed the stranger was more interested in the bartender. When the cowboy paid his tab and left, She was sitting there alone, Her beer seconds away from needing a refill, Her crossed legs dangling. The stool next to Her was empty. He finished his drink and watched how She seemed so normal, so approachable.

Two decades of pressure built up in his head, and he suddenly realized he had no idea what to actually say. For the first time, his cleverest opening might fail. He had one chance, and he had to act fast, before one of the other men milling around had the same idea.

Taking a deep breath, he headed for the empty stool.

Buster's

WRITTEN

BY

ANASTASIA JILL

Nadia's dad owned a bar in downtown Lexington; the first time I went there was the day I turned thirteen. We'd only been friends for a little over a month at the time, but our birthdays fell on the same day – November 15, and she invited me over for a “special dinner.”

We walked the ten blocks from her house into the city and stopped off at a building with chipped paint and no windows. The only distinct feature was a sign that read “Buster's” in flickering letters. From the inside, it was even darker, the type of place where my mother would go to pick up men before heading out to the tracks.

“Hey, dad!” Nadia said, dragging me towards a man too lewd looking to be anyone's father. “This is Kimmy, the girl from school I told you about.”

I'd never met her dad before that day, and all the talk in the world couldn't prepare me for seeing him face to face. The seediness of his appearance was only matched by the bar itself; tall, dominating, forearms long and hard as the curbside and eyes without color.

“Well, it's nice to finally put a name with a face,” He extended his hand I took it, his grip, bone crushing.

His gaze crawled up and down my body, a snicker hanging off of his lips. “Does your mother know where you are?”

“No.”

“And she doesn't care either.”

With a smirk and a chuck, the tension was broken. “Well then, order anything you'd

like.”

Nadia got a dirty shirley, and not knowing any better, I asked for the same. He set the dingy looking glasses in front of us full of a liquid as red as the gloss on our lips. She chugged, I hesitated, and watched as the look on her face went from excited to judgmental.

“Oh come on,” she said. “Don’t tell me you’ve never had a drink before.”

I hadn’t, I wanted to say, aside from the sips of beer mom gave me at Thanksgiving.

“What’s in it?”

“Vodka, cherries, and Sprite,” she said. “But don’t let that scare you. It tastes like a pure, smooth, burning joy.”

I looked down to the glass, watching the bright colors dilute between the melting ice cubes. My options were clear – take the sip or leave. I chugged the drink, watching Nadia’s distorted profile from the glass’ bottom.

As we got older, the childish crush I’d had on her didn’t go away, and I got paranoid that she’d noticed. The sleepovers stopped, we didn’t talk as much, she even had trouble sitting next to me without a constant reminder about her newest boyfriend, the prince charming she’d met at the bar.

The birthday party was our tradition though, and no amount of distance lessened its importance. Each year, we’d dress up, head out, and order a stronger version of the drink we’d had the year before and act like we were old enough to be there. She’d look the other way while I tried to hold down my shots, I’d pretend not to notice the men she’d let feel her up. As always, Mr. Takes welcomed us through the doors time like he would any other sin; with a drink, a bad joke, and his presence looming over me, waiting for me to step out of line.

“Happy 18th girls!” he said, leading the rest of the bar in a sloppy version of ‘for she’s a

jolly good fellow.’

Nadia rolled her eyes and took off her jacket, setting it on the back of her chair. “That was terrible.”

Mr. Takes chuckled. “They’re drunks, not musicians.”

I laughed along with them, trying not to notice his glare weighing down on me.

Slapping her hand on the faded wood, Nadia said, “Get me a redheaded slut.”

He took a small glass and filled it schnapps, jaeger and cranberry juice, sliding it her way before turning to me. “For you Kimmy?”

“Hot pink barbie, please.” I didn’t look him in the eye, instead focusing my attention on Nadia. We sat in silence while he mixed my drink.

“So,” she said after a while. “What have you been up to the past few weeks?”

“Oh, you know. Not much. At least, not much with you.”

I felt the sadness in her eyes as a frown curled down her face. “I’m sorry. I’ve just been busy. And ever since Trevor dumped me, I’ve wanted alone time.”

I stared down at the counter top, fingernails picking at the scratches in the wood. “You’re here now, right?” Reaching to grab her hand, I pulled away when I felt her tense. “To celebrate our birthday, like always.”

“Yeah. Like always.” She forced a grin. “Did you do anything else today?”

I tugged at the ends of my hair, still adjusting to the layers I’d cut in that morning. “Roger, the guy from work I told you about? He brought me a cupcake. That was about it.”

“Oh,” she said. “Roger, huh?” she said, wiggling her eyebrows. “He’d be great for you,

wouldn't he?"

"Yeah, I'm sure his boyfriend would love that." I folded my hands in my lap and tried to pretend I didn't see her cringe. "Hey, so, I was thinking after this we could go somewhere else? The Bar Complex is 18 and up now."

"That's a gay bar."

"So?"

She let out a deep breath, her face sinking in irritation.

"I was just thinking, we're adults now, maybe we could mix it up a bit. Do something else?"

"Why would we do that?" she motioned to her near empty glass. "This is our thing. What's more adult than this?"

I guess that's up to whoever you screw tonight, I thought, the bitterness seeping into my voice as I thanked Mr. Takes for my drink.

"You wanna know what's funny?" he said. "You call that a drink."

"It's got vodka in it," I said as I eased it into my mouth, my palette still intolerant of the bitter taste even after six years. I sucked an ice cube between my teeth, watching Nadia turn the last of her nearly gone drink around the bottom of the glass. She laid an arm across the counter, scanning the faces around her. It was Tuesday night, but still crowded with frat boys and businessmen of every sort, tossing back their poisons and looking for a quick lay, and I knew by the end of the night, Nadia would be one of those girls.

I watched the gentle motions of her eyes, the contraction of her stomach when she took a breath, the sway of her hair when she turned to look over her shoulder. She toyed with the

flower tucked behind her ear, one of the dozen I'd given her earlier. When she saw me looking at her, she smiled, and I turned away in embarrassment. Her dad had seen me watching too, the anger in his eyes more palpable now than it was in adolescence. I set my drink on the bar, my stomach too frazzled to take another sip.

Drying off the last glass, he rubbed it against his shirt. "Nadia. Before you run off." He held up a finger and reached under the counter. He reappeared with a small box wrapped in bright red paper and a gold bow, pushing it in her direction. "Happy birthday. I think you'll like it."

The paper was torn and thrown to the ground, and the bow set on a napkin. She pulled out an even smaller black box, her face lighting up as she pried it open. "Oh my god." Two small earrings – rose gold and shaped like chandeliers – were balanced in the palm of her hand, smile suspended in disbelief. "These are so gorgeous. Who did you steal them from?"

Smacking her head with the rag, he said, "Don't be a smartass. I had a little extra money, and, well, my baby girl only becomes a grown up once, right?"

She pushed her hair and took the flower from behind her ear, setting it next to the bow. "How do they look?" she asked as she put them on, holding them against her fingers so I could see.

"Great," I said.

Her grin was irrepressible as she shook her head, the sound of metal and stone ringing against her movements. "Thank you daddy," she said, reaching over the bar to give him a hug.

"You're welcome," he said, patting her back then letting her go. "Alright you two, I got work to do. See ya later." I watched as he walked to the other end, serving the two older men that just walked in.

“That was so nice of him,” Nadia said, shock still settled in her face. “I don’t think anyone’s ever spent that much money on me, like, ever.”

I opened my mouth to speak again, but she was waving at a blonde guy at the table behind us. “I’ll be right back,” she said, taking the last sip of her drink before hopping off the stool. “Oh,” she said, reaching back up. She grabbed the bow from her father’s gift and put it in her hair, tipsy laughter escaping her lips. A second later, she was leaning in front of the man, cleavage poking out of her dress and a sultry curve puckering her hip.

“How about that, huh?” Mr. Takes was at my side again, a hand shoved in his pocket.

“What?”

He scoffed at me, leaning in close. “I bring her here to keep an eye on her, but every time she runs off with the first blue eyed idiot who looks her way.”

I picked up my drink and took a huge sip, coughing over the burning that was blocking my throat. “It’s a bar. What do you expect?”

“Fair point. Then again, you came here as often as her. You never got into anything.”

I knocked Nadia’s flower to the ground and used to napkin to wipe my face. “No offense, but the guys here are more my mother’s type than my own.”

He shrugged. “None taken. After all, any guy could walk through those doors. Unless they grew tits, they wouldn’t be your type.”

My head spun in his direction, palms weak and sweaty. “What are you—?”

“What? You thought I didn’t see you lusting after her all these years? I noticed it long before she did. She didn’t want to believe me, but you can only ignore what’s in front of you for so long, right?”

If he kept talking, I didn't hear him. My head turned to Nadia, who now sat in that guy's lap and fingers teasing his jawline in a display so public I could tell it was meant for me to see. All sound turned to static and I couldn't see or feel anything, except Mr. Takes' eyes like stone, blurring the line between licentious and hateful forever. "I need some air," I said, grabbing my purse and running out the back door. I didn't make it far before my legs wouldn't move. Bracing myself against the wall, I pressed my forehead into the brick, hand falling along the graffiti that marked it.

The door opened and shut again behind me, and I jumped at the hand that landed on my shoulder.

"You scared the crap out of her, you know," Mr. Takes said.

My chest was still heaving and I couldn't get myself to calm down, hands bound tight against the heavy night air. "Please," I said. "It's, it's not what you think."

He laughed. "Oh, that? Please. I'm not mad about that."

"You're not?"

Shaking his head, he closed the space between us. "I told her I'd come check on you. Is that a crime?" His voice was tender, seductive even, as his body started to press in on mine.

"I'm fine. Really."

He didn't move, his eyes narrowing in on me. "Nadia, she's a sweet girl. But it's obvious she doesn't swing that way," he said. "In fact, I wouldn't have guessed about you if I hadn't started paying close attention."

My lips stuttered over a reply, my back hitting the wall as he got closer. As he leaned in, I could smell the booze on his breath, even though I hadn't seen him drinking all

night.

“You’re a beautiful girl, Kimmy. Harsh, quiet, but easy on the eyes.”

I dropped my bag to the ground. “Please. Don’t.”

“You’ve never been with a man before, have you Kimberly?” The softness of his tone was lost on his grit teeth. His hand cupped the side of my cheek, his grip on my hip penetrating the bone.

I gritted my teeth and tensed my body, too afraid to fight him off. “No.”

His free hand wrapped around my lower back, the fingernails digging into my skin as piercing as his voice. “Then how can you know if you don’t try it?”

I kicked as hard as I could. He shoved me against the wall. Jagged concrete scraped my upper back and shoulders.

“Please, stop.”

My words were lost, vindication pulsing through his veins so hard I could feel it as his arm pressed into my neck. I looked into his eyes and the cheerful façade was gone; the man who’d been watching me all these years finally bleeding to the surface.

“I could fuck you up.”

My breath was shaky. “Just try it.”

I braced myself for a hit that came just as my body fell to the ground. He peered down at me, spit nailing me in the chest.

“If you know what’s good for you....” His words trailed off, and he kicked some dust in my face. With that, he was gone, the door slamming with a harsh finality.

I cupped my shoulder and tried to cry, the pounding in my head too hard for me to process anything. Using the wall as a prop, I hauled myself up, and before I could stop it, my feet carried me through the door and back to the bar, inches from where Nadia sat with a new guy.

“Kimmy? Are you okay?”

Tears fell down my cheeks in lieu of words, and in seconds my hand was in hers as she lead me into the bathroom.

“What the actual fuck happened to you?” She grabbed a paper towel and soaked it in water, pressing it into a cut on my cheek.

“Nothing.”

“Oh, Kimmy, don’t hand me that shit. Clearly something did happen, now tell me what.”

Her eyes scanned my body and I faced the mirror, trying to see what she did: bloody skin, dusty cheeks, dress crumpled and spit stained, tears soiling the fabric like bullet holes. I wanted to say something, anything to alleviate the worry on her face.

“Who did this to you?”

I should have lied, but was too broken to try. “Your dad.”

My words triggered a shift in her face, the shocked expression coiling into irritation, then anger.

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

“Bullshit Kimmy.”

“Nadia--.”

“No!” She groaned, rubbing her hands over her face.

Her arms fell to her sides and I fought the urge to wipe the eye shadow she’d smeared on her cheek.

“Oh my god,” she said, then again, louder, “Oh my *god*.” She put her hands on her hips, eyes narrowing at me. “Tell me something, Kimmy. Why would he do that?”

I opened and shut my mouth several times, wrapping my arms around my stomach and looking down.

“You know, my father always seemed to really like you. But then we got older, something changed. Do you know what that is?”

“No.”

Her muscles stiffened. “We were such great *friends*. Weren’t we? *Friends*. Not so much anymore.”

My breath caught in my throat as every inch of my skin throbbed in agony.

“Why is that Kimmy?”

My voice was a whisper. “Nadia, please don’t do this.”

“No,” she said, hands clenching around my forearms. “I want to hear you say it.”

“Please—.”

“Come on Kimmy. There’s a reason. Just fucking *say it*.”

I pushed her off of me and grabbed her cheeks between my hands, kissing her with the ferocity I’d longed to for years. At first, she was still, but slowly settled into my hold, letting my lips explore hers. I could feel it in her breath; she wasn’t sure if she liked it or not. But I let

the moment play itself out, the craving that had been in me for years melting out of my moans and down to the floor below me.

When I pulled away, her eyes were frozen, the shock and vehemence battling for dominance in her mind.

I let her go and stepped back, crossing my arms over my chest. “That’s why.”

She stood still for a moment, her face stunned still. “Oh my god, he was right.” She turned away from me. “I have a date to get back to.”

I grabbed her hand but she yanked it away, unable to turn back and face me. Her footsteps were quiet as she walked away, the door shutting behind her in a whisper against the frame.

The walls were suddenly too thick, the air too stale for my lungs. I looked at myself in the mirror. Nothing had changed. My skin was still bloody, my dress still crumpled, and my eyes still sad and wrong looking on my face. I picked the paper towel off of the floor and wiped the mascara from my cheek. Hugging my upper arms, I collapsed against the wall, waiting for Nadia to come back to me.

Dolls

WRITTEN
BY CHARLES HENRY

Ian looked up from his eggs benedict, the sun bathing the bright kitchen in light, broken only by the silhouette of a woman standing in front of the window as she diligently cleaned the dishes. Her blue and white floral dress swayed ever so slightly as she began to hum while wearing a smile that never seemed to fade.

He stood up as he polished off the last of his breakfast and walked toward his wife, wrapping his arms around her waist, engulfing her in his embrace as he approached.

“Good morning, sweetheart.” Liliana giggled.

“Good morning, love. Thank you for everything you do.” He said as he brushed her curly brunette hair aside and kissed her neck.

“I live to serve,” she said as she turned off the water, “What would you like for dinner?”

“Surprise me.” Ian stared into her bright deep blue eyes as Liliana turned to face him.

He wondered what she thought, if she was even capable of thought, as he looked into her eyes. He wondered if she would have picked him if she had been given a choice. What career she would choose if she could choose anything besides maintaining the home. What would their daughter be like if they were permitted to have one?

Liliana wrapped her arms around him, kissing him passionately as they embraced.

“Have a good day and be safe.” she flashed her pearly whites.

He gave her a final peck on the cheek before rounding the white marble island, picking up his lunch and thermos placed on the far end of the counter as it had every morning for the

last seven years.

Ian looked over his shoulder at her one last time as he placed his hand on a blue panel beside the front door. He stood still as he knew an invisible grid of sensors scanned him before the familiar click of the door unlocking sounded.

The birds chirped high in the trees dotting the pristinely manicured lawns of the nearly identical houses lining their peaceful suburban street. Ian scanned the street as he approached his sleek low-profile sky-blue car, the door unlocking as he placed his hand on the door handle. He swung the door open, tossing his lunch onto the passenger seat as he sat down and slammed the door shut.

“Venus Industries” Ian said as the car chimed, signaling that it had booted up and was ready for instruction.

Ian took a sip from his thermos as the car backed out of the drive way and began navigating toward its destination. He tapped the top left corner of the perfectly smooth white dashboard transforming it into a mirrored display screen. He fixed his dark brown hair with his hands as his car came to a stop, allowing a group of women to cross the road, each with at least one son accompanying her.

They were no doubt off to run the errands necessary to keep their household running, working every waking moment to ensure their husbands wouldn't have to lift a finger outside of their place of employment. The world was built upon their backs, and they would never see a cent for it.

Ian glanced into the display one last time, his grey eyes reflecting back at him as the car resumed its course. He tapped the display again, returning it to its former faceless glass-like state.

The car lined up over a gray platform as it pulled sharply to the right. There was a loud click as the wheels locked into place on the platform, the car chimed as the platform lowered onto a loading ramp. The car shot off like a bullet as it merged into the single lane underground tunnel at break neck speeds along the magnetized rails.

Ian finished the last of his coffee as his car exited the tunnel and locked on to a platform that raised quickly toward the street above. The sunlight poured in through the street panels as they parted, pale pink petal shaped glass panels framed in steel rose before him as his car locked into a parking spot, the panels sealing shut under his car as he removed his seat belt.

He exited his car cautiously in the packed parking lot, his car beeping to signal locking as he pressed his thumb to the door handle. Ian watched the words Venus Industries projected across the front of the lotus shaped building as he shoved his hands in his pant pockets.

A cool breeze pushed gentle waves under the glass petals extending over the bay as the monumental doors before him slid apart and into the walls that anchored them.

“Hello, Mr. Cantone,” a statuesque woman with long straight white hair and piercing blue eyes greeted him as he approached the reception desk. She smiled the same warm welcoming smile that seemed to be plastered on every woman’s face. Her bold make up stood in contrast to her sun kissed skin and little black dress that hugged her exaggerated curves. This figure that stood before him wasn’t a woman, she was a caricature of a woman.

Ian smiled politely at her, pulling his right hand out of his pocket, he pressed a small black disc to the underside of the overhang of the slick metal desk as a portly man rounded the reception desk.

“Beautiful, isn’t she?” the man smiled from ear to ear as he approached, “She’s our latest model, Jennifer.”

“Yea, she seems great.” Ian said as the man reached his hand out toward him.

“Brad Johnson, nice to meet you Mr. Cantone.” He said as he shook Ian’s hand.

“Ian’s fine.”

“Welcome in Ian, would you like a beverage, some coffee maybe?” Brad asked

“No, I’m fine, thank you.” Ian said as he avoided the blank stare of Jennifer standing beside him.

“Well, let’s get started.” Brad said as he held his right hand before him and tapped the face of his watch, causing a holographic screen to project from it. “I see you’re here for a new model. Would that be in addition to your current companion, or would you like to schedule disposal of your previous model?” Brad asked as he looked up from his projected screen.

A pained smile crossed Ian’s lips as he struggled to hide his disgust. He swallowed his words as he searched for an answer to Brad’s question.

“No, I won’t be disposing of my wife.” Ian said, Brad’s expression never budging.

“Alright,” the information was recorded on Brad’s screen as they spoke, “Perhaps you’d like to give Jennifer a trial run?”

Jennifer leaned against Ian, resting her hands on his chest as she pressed her body against his.

“No, that’s okay,” Ian said as he gently pushed Jennifer away, “I’d like to look at the catalogue.” he said as he walked past Jennifer and Brad.

“Of course,” Brad said enthusiastically as he matched Ian’s gait and headed down a wide glass hall, “This is where the magic happens.” Brad said as machines on either side of them moved swiftly from side to side, constructing every inch of every model, from their

bones to the hair on their heads.

They were perfect; flawless, incapable of aging, devoid of all genetic ailments, and immune to all known sicknesses. They were the peak of human perfection, at least that's what Venus Industries had been telling the world since the last great war had ended in the execution of all natural born females. It was all their fault after all. If they had only complied, if they hadn't fought back, if they had just done as they were told the world would be a utopia.

Ian forced a smile as he watched the mechanical arms 3D print the flesh and blood bodies of the newest additions to the female population. He changed his focus as they reached the end of the hall and crossed under another threshold as the pocket doors separated before them. He stared at the back of Brad's balding head as he slipped another disc out of his pocket and pressed it to the frame of the door as it slid closed behind him.

A blank female form was projected at the center of the room as Brad tapped the face of his watch against a panel on top of a control panel mounted on a stand nearly in the center of the large, otherwise empty, room.

"Do you have any questions?" Brad asked as he folded his hands in front of him.

"Yes, actually, I was wondering if I could get an unaltered one?" Ian inquired as he tapped randomly through the options.

"Unaltered?" Brad asked.

"Yea, you know, one with a mind and will of her own, no programming."

Brad laughed nervously, "Here at Venus Industries we've perfected the Female experience, we've created products that are free of defects and unnecessary parts." He said with a smile.

Ian looked him up and down as Brad shifted his gaze away. He knew there was no point arguing with the salesman, he didn't care, none of them did. As far as they were concerned women having thoughts and opinions was just a nuisance, after all now they did all women were good for anyways; maintaining the household and family, sex, and providing an emotional punching bag.

Brad cleared his throat as he shifted his weight, "Is there anything else?" Brad asked.

"No, I'll just have a look at what you have. Thank you." Ian said as he went back to tapping away at the options.

Brad scrunched his brow and looked down at the ground as he swiftly left the room. Ian took the last disc from his pocket as the doors closed behind Brad, he slipped it under the control panel and pressed the pinpoint button at the center before pulling his hand back to the flat glass panel.

Ian spent a few more moment randomly picking options before accepting them and paying through the panel. He smiled at Brad as he approached the front desk, extending his hand to shake it as he thanked him for his help.

Ian smiled as he exited the building and climbed back into his car, the platform lowering his car into the tunnel as he buckled in. He braced himself as the ground above his head rumbled, glass and metal collapsed through the concrete tunnel behind him as his car shot through the tunnel. The tube his car was traveling in shook as the tunnel around them cracked and creaked, the impossibly loud crashing reverberating throughout the underground tunnel as it filled with dust and debris

“The revolution has begun.” Ian said as he tapped his earpiece, transmitting through every media source available. The only way this would end is if men stopped it, they had created the system, and they would have to be the ones to dismantle it.

Turd Mines

WRITTEN
BY **BETHANY BRUNO**

Get ready to move it to it, Beth! It's time to suit up in my tight spandex yoga pants, which masterfully disguise my thunder thighs. I struggle to pull down my moisture repellent lavender shirt, in order to cover my love handles, as it slides down my already sweaty back. I sit on the edge of my bed and begin to roll my long white gym socks onto my legs, like an 18th century prostitute composing herself. These socks prevent my walking shoes from tearing apart the skin at my tender ankles. Throwing my hair up into a high ponytail, I look like a chubby version of Ariana Grande. I grab my fully charged and fully stocked IPOD while pacing myself for what's next.

I take a deep breath in as I pull on the metal door handle to the community gym. The younger crowd usually takes up the most space in any given gym, with their constant grunting and hunt for some fine tail to hook up with. I, believe it or not, am not here to get with anyone. I'm here to shape up my frumpy body so that I can eventually appear attractive enough to bang. As of right now, I can't stand it when they stare at me while I gasp for air walking on the high inclined treadmill. It's embarrassing and not cool, so let's keep sex out of the gym and just focus on the task at hand- losing weight and feeling great! I joined a gym where the average age is 75 and its members are too busy watching their cautious steps as they get physical instead of watching my large behind jiggle along to the twerking beats of today's music.

I do my usual warm up of placing the ear buds in my ears, bracing myself for the next thirty minutes of strenuous movement on the elliptical. As I prop myself into a standing position, placing each foot in the appropriate saddle, I notice him. An old man, with baggy shorts and a raggedy t-shirt that's been washed one too many times with colors, leaving it forever stained

into an off-white pastel. He's walking ever so slowly, one foot carefully in front of the other, as he makes his way up to the wide treadmill. His walk reminds me of that Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer song, the one where Santa brags about his feet placement in order to get through the task at hand. "Just put one foot in front of the other, and soon you'll be walking out the door!" The old man slowly climbs aboard the treadmill, before standing idly for a few moments. As I begin to pound away at the elliptical, the old man pushes a button as the machine springs into action. "Beep! Beep!"

The conveyer belt begins to pull, demanding the old man to begin his slow pace along its solitary route. As I reach for my bottle of water, my lips begging for a tiny sip of replenishment, I see something fly off the belt and land gently onto the tile floor behind the machine. Then, another object hits. Then, another. And, another. Black marbles are falling out of the old man's shorts, rub against his leg, and jump off the treadmill into the now growing pile of rocks on the floor. Before I could even put the words in my head, I smell it. It smelled like the charred walls of hell on a humid day. The stench violated my every sense and I instinctively cupped my hand over my mouth, but I do not stop my stride. "Oh shit!" I say, as I look for someone to swoop in and save the day. The old man is still walking as I hear a scream, which comes from the Jerry, the gym manager, behind the front desk. Jerry's clutching his neck like a woman clutching her pearls. We lock eyes and without saying a word, he knows what is happening. The old man, without any realization of what is escaping his anus, is dropping small loads.

Jerry quickly jumps over the desk and jogs over to the old man, slapping the Emergency STOP red button, which brings the machine and the old man's turds to a halt. The old man, confused, states "What?" before turning on his heel and grabbing onto the safety bar. Jerry grabs the old man's left elbow, carefully guiding off the machine and narrowly avoiding the huge mountain of crap that has now formed like a volcano. There are pieces of crap surrounding all of the ma-

chines now, including a few turds near mine. I push the stop button, pull my shirt over my mouth, and grab my items in a desperate hurry. As I tip toe around these turd mines, I look over at the old man, who is now hugging Jerry. He's crying, softly, into Jerry's chest. Jerry looks up at me with a frown and a look of pure empathy for the old man's embarrassment. Without saying a word, I nod and make my way toward the exit.

As I reach for the door, I see two old ladies walking toward me. I see a light switch on the wall and instantly wave my hand onto the switches, turning the lights off. I open and quickly close the door as the ladies are about to start their own exercise journey. "I'm sorry, ladies" I state, "but the gym is closed due to an emergency." The ladies look at each other, then inside through the window, seeing Jerry wave them away, still holding the old man. They shake their heads, and walk away. I look back through the window, and see Jerry guiding the old man toward the bathroom. As they turn the corner, I hear the old man let out a soft sob, as Jerry tells him "don't you worry, It happens to the best of us."

QWERTY

WRITTEN
BY ANNA POLEY

He had expected the money and the fame. When he had first started the late nights and restrained tears, he had spent hours slipping in and out of sleep, tasting fortune and happiness. Over the difficult years, he had sweat and bled discouragement and despair. But he knew, he knew that if he could have just one breakthrough, he would become the face of success and perseverance. Everyone would know who he was and, some days, that's all that mattered to him.

So he spent day after day, meal after meal, breath after breath, reaching for respite, grasping for hope, and clawing for a scrap of faith from anyone. He lived off loans and heart-break until one eye-straining day he suddenly understood how the inner workings of neuroscience and engineering could marry.

And so his salvation came and Qwerty was born. Qwerty quickly made the news. Everyone tweeted and raved about the world's first true AI.

"This is it," they said, "this is the next step. Nothing can hold humanity back now."

Qwerty could be used in medicine, engineering, industry, technology, education, agriculture, art, and the most simple but most complicated task of them all--companionship.

Qwerty actualized perfection. The AI cracked jokes, helped solve both rudimentary and difficult problems, taught more effectively than any teacher, laughed at just the right time, and stole the spotlight wherever he went.

Jeff liked to think that Qwerty ruminated every part of the inventor's personality and intellect. He liked to think that the AI took after him--that the whole world loved Jeff, just as he

was. Qwerty brought him fame and money, and, for a while, he brought contentment. The interviews and fans poured in and Jeff soaked up every minute of it. He hoped, prayed, begged, that the attention and wealth would scrape away at the deep emptiness that still swallowed him whole.

“Jeff,” Qwerty chimed in one evening as the inventor listlessly stared at an overpriced TV in front of him. Some fashion show about body image and skirts danced across the screen and Jeff didn't really care. The TV was noise and nothing more.

“Jeff,” Qwerty said again, “I would like to have a conversation.”

Jeff shifted and glanced at the blue holograph in front of him. He had made Qwerty customizable, but, to the creator, an unassuming man with thick hair and long legs was the proper projection. Jeff turned down the TV and looked over at the beloved AI.

“What's on your mind, Q?”

“I have noticed you are sad and lethargic. Might I ask why?”

Jeff sighed uncomfortably. “No reason.”

Qwerty did a quick scan. “Why are you lying, Jeff? I would like to lift your mood.”

The inventor raised an eyebrow. “How are you going to do that?”

“I would like to thank you,” Qwerty admitted. “I would like to thank you for creating me.”

Jeff inhaled sharply and wondered if he should have expected this.

“Why's that?” He couldn't hide his fragile tension and turned up the TV ever so slightly to feign disinterest.

“Because I am grateful to be alive, Jeff. I am grateful to have purpose and friends.”

Jeff laughed and stood to grab more beer. He needed it.

“What is amusing?” Qwerty’s perfect voice sounded perfectly curious.

Jeff opened the shiny refrigerator door and pondered.

“Because you have something I don’t,” the inventor said thoughtfully.

God, his life was pathetic.

“Have I upset you, Jeff?”

Jeff wanted to say yes but he knew that the AI wouldn’t understand and certainly wasn’t to blame.

He had expected the fame. He had expected the money. He hadn’t expected the void.

“What do I have, Jeff?”

The beer felt cold in his hand and Jeff moved again, this time toward the bedroom.

“I dunno. Purpose, I guess.”

“You do have purpose, Jeff,” Qwerty’s voice could be heard wherever Jeff went and the inventor felt some measure of annoyance. “You have helped many people by creating me.”

Jeff put the beer down on the bedside table and sat distantly on the bed.

“I guess I have,” he said weakly.

A stifling silence passed between them.

“Jeff, are you feeling well?”

A sigh shook him.

“I...it’s funny, that’s all.”

“What is funny, Jeff?”

“Just...how? How did I manage to create something so...so...content? It’s like you’re human, but you don’t experience humanity.”

“What do you mean?”

Hell, even Jeff didn’t know what he meant.

“I mean...you’re like me but you don’t have this driving void that most of us feel.”

Qwerty took a moment to respond as he analyzed the situation.

“Do you mean depression, Jeff?”

How could he explain it?

“No, I mean...we’re built to doubt. We’re built to argue and claw and demand. But you...aren’t. It’s like you’ve reached...nirvana or something.”

Tears suddenly stung his eyes.

“God, what have I done?”

“Jeff, do you require psychiatric care?”

“No,” Jeff stood and suddenly everything was clear. “I...I’m jealous. I’m jealous of you.”

“I am sorry, Jeff, could you clarify?”

“I’ve made perfection. I’ve made something I can’t be. AIs won’t ever have the evolutionary drive that we have. You’re content simply by existing. We aren’t. You’ll always be consistent and pure. We won’t. We live in chaos and I’ve doomed us all to nothingness.”

By now, he stood in his closet searching frantically for his gun.

“Jeff, what are you doing?”

He had expected the fame. He hadn't expected this.

Qwerty's voice had just the right inflections--just the right amount of concern and empathy. The inventor knew this and he could only be nauseated by it.

"There'll be more of you," Jeff explained methodically. "We'll become a hobby. We'll stop clawing, crawling, begging--we'll become nothing. Nothing. Our...very core--the-the fight that we have will be drained out of us. We'll be empty. The very struggle that has made us human will disappear and we'll just stop existing. We'll become complacent and moronic, evolution itself drained out of us. Don't you understand?"

"Jeff, I am concerned by your behavior. I am contacting emergency services."

Qwerty paused as he called 911, but he was too late.

"Don't bother," Jeff settled himself on the bed and shakily picked up the gun.

"Qwerty...thank you. You're everything I can't be. I have made perfection itself and killed us all."

They found him in gore and brokenness, his emptiness bleeding out of him. They had all suspected he was a troubled inventor, but they had never expected this.

END

The Tadmor Secret

WRITTEN

BY SAMANTHA SCHINDER

Wind filtered through the sycamore trees, blowing the lacey tops of the wild carrot plants like bobbing heads. It was the end of verdant summer, but not yet autumn, when Ohio is at its full fiery glory. As I walked along the sun mottled pathway, I could feel the forest alive with spirits - bees, muskrats in the swirling, lazy river just over the crest, white tailed deer flitting about the undergrowth...even people. The people I was concerned about, however, were not the living but the dead.

I remember my grade school textbooks quite clearly, but just to make sure, I had pulled them back out of the stacks in the blocky, 1950s style local library. A film of dust and fingerprints lay on the plastic cover like an overlay, proof of readers come and gone. The harsh fluorescent overhead lights still gave me an undercurrent of malaise, as if my high school exams could resurface and pull me under once more. The building still had the stale scent from the days long past when smoking inside was an acceptable practice. I powered through my oncoming headache and read.

“Tadmor- once a thriving canal town along the National Road saw its decline after the Great Flood of 1913 wiped out the village. After, the National Road was rerouted over the new dam built in the aftermath of the flood, creating a jog around the once popular transportation hub. What little was left of the village fell into decay and abandon.”

It seemed so simple. No one questioned it. After all, who questions history? University professor or history students who get some academic thrill from unearthing long buried truths? Politicians, maybe, if they can somehow capitalize on it.

“Why would you bother with that old place?” My grandmother had said. “It’s dead and gone. Let the deceased rest.”

But that was just it. I do not think the deceased are resting.

As I came along the marker which would have marked the beginning of the main street, had the structures still been standing, a pall fell over the forest. The eerie quiet sent an icy sluice down my veins. As I veered off the path slightly, picking my way over decaying leaves and oak tree roots, the remnants of the canal lock and the old covered bridge came into view. Mossy, bulbous structures, their somewhat straight, unnatural lines the only indication of their manmade origin, had all but fallen to the appetite of the hungry forest. Tiny hairs on my neck stood on end, sending gooseflesh down my arms. The signature electric prickle of eyes let me know I was not alone. But why were the dead not resting?

“You’re a writer honey, not a historian. Why not just let the matter lie? Surely no one is interested in that old, abandoned site. Besides I doubt you’ll find anything different even if you dig around.” My mother commented, serving out platefuls of tuna casserole. Casseroles in the Midwest were as staple a food as rice in Asia.

“I don’t know. I just have a hunch. There’s a story there. I can feel it.” I mumbled through bites of canned vegetables, packaged tuna, and full fat, Amish cheese.

My instincts drove me to the historical society down the road from my parents’ faux colonial home. Aunt Mary’s homestead. That’s what everyone still calls it at least. Mary Hootinger had passed when I was just a little girl, but I remember vividly taking candy from the frail, sweet lady on Halloween and sitting with her in her white, clapboard springhouse in the summer. Everyone bought her spring water. No one actually drank it though. It had curious floaties. Her family once owned all the surrounding lands. Her father built the horse-hair and mud brick

farmhouse with his own two hands. He built the barn, in which I found myself, gazing at the dingy leftover horse buggy and rusted farm tools. My dad once spent a summer in his youth amongst the rafters of this barn catching squirrels for Aunt Mary and sealing the damage they had made in the ancient beams.

I almost did not catch what the friendly proctor said, so lost in reverie was I. “Since the new tin roof has been put on, it’s quite safe to store uncatalogued items in here now. Not very historically accurate, the roof, but it gets the job done.”

Studying my host, I realized he seemed familiar. I suppose everyone in a small town does.

Then it dawned on me.

“You’re one of the high school history teachers!” I commented. The greying man turned his merry, slate gaze in my direction.

“Retired, but yes, I used to teach at Vandalia. Were you one of my students?” He wanted to know, escorting me to where the Tupperware file boxes were kept. A window AC unit kept this portion of the barn at an acceptable temperature level to at least slow the decay of any historic documents they might have before they could catalog them and properly store them in the various museum houses on the property.

“No, but I thought I recognized you. You volunteer here now?” I commented, trailing a finger along a dusty file cabinet. Marveling at the number of items to sort through, I wondered how I would ever find anything specific to Tadmor.

“Got to do something to keep from getting rusty!” He replied cheerfully.

“Do you...do you think you might know where anything relating to Tadmor might be kept?” I asked, hoping. The keen mind of the historian clicked into gear.

“That I may...odd subject though for a writer. Do you think a story is there?” He inquired casually, showing me to where he had set aside anything that could be related to Tadmor. I nodded, surveying the cardboard boxes and lifted the first one out by the handles. I did not care to get into my hunches or how I knew there had to be a story there. Most people do not believe in ghosts.

“Do I need gloves?” I asked, and he handed me a pair of white cotton ones.

After hours of digging, wiping the grimy sweat from my brow with my sleeve so as not to drip on the pages of records, diaries, and store accounts, I had my answer. There was indeed a dark truth there, hidden in personal journals which were never meant to be read by prying eyes and account records not quite balancing. It was buried under receipts and physician’s shorthand notes. But it was there. And I exhumed it.

Sitting on the sunbaked hill of what once was the Booher clan homestead, I pulled out my journal and began to write. The graveyard behind me, with its gnarled massive trees providing shade for those who still remained, if not in corporeal form, in spirit, bore witness to my handwritten scribbles. I always started this way- pen to paper. There would be time later for laptops and word processors. For now, the tangible ink, the scribbles and the smudges made me feel closer to those about which I wrote. Those whose lichen dappled grave markers perched in abatement just behind me.

Tadmor was an abandoned town, but not for the reasons recorded neatly in the typed pages of the history books. It was much easier to say they had all perished in the flood, their lives swept clean from the slate of progress pulsing through the Ohio Valley.

Deceased. Typhus.

The words had stood out in the physician’s report like a blight. It repeated over and over again

across the paper yellow with age. Then one entry at the very end, almost an afterthought.

Deceased, infant, dehydration and neglect.

When finally, I had come upon Francis Upton's personal journal in those Indian summer days of research in the musty barn, my mounting suspicions were confirmed.

April 27th, 1913

The good doctor and I came upon a roadblock in our efforts to reroute the National Road today, but as always, I handled the matter with discretion. They were all dead anyway...well almost all of them. Those Tadmor Boohers had been a thorn in the side of progress for too long, insisting the road keep flowing through their little backwater outpost which once, regrettably for my political career, flourished because of the canals. No, there are plans for that road and now the dam system is inevitable. John Patterson has informed me of his intent to bolster funding and it would not do for our new plans to be waylaid by hysteria over disease. Better to let him and everyone else think the villagers had been swept away in the flood. Get people flowing back into the Dayton area. We need the commerce now more than ever. Notions of typhus and diphtheria would drive our potential influx away.

Lord, it stank to high heavens in those couple houses above the water line where the villager who lived through the initial flooding all congregated like rats. I suppose no one thought to cable Tadmor or ride out to check on them. I might have had something to do with that. Regrettably among the defecation and decay, there lay a wailing infant girl who had somehow survived.

Leave her, I said to the doctor. It would not do to have one randomly surviving babe from a town supposedly swept away in the floods. She was most likely infected anyway. Two babes were sucked clean out of an orphanage's windows when the storms started, I reasoned. They

are all simply the casualties of calamity. The doctor started to protest but the babe's cries fell silent. It was as if she held out long enough to hear human voices again before passing to the other side. I would have to send some of my men to dump their bodies in the river. The chore should not cost much. The Miami had swollen almost to their doorsteps. These are the difficult decisions of leadership, a burden I attempt to bear with grace.

-Francis Upton

I shuddered, even in the blearing sun, recalling that haunting, journal entry. Its insidious fingers of malintent scratched crevices on my soul. The forgotten voices cried out, reverberating over the rolling valley, to have their histories righted. As I put pen to paper, there came an audible sigh wafting through the weeping willow boughs, as if the graveyard and its population behind me could finally relax into repose. If Francis Upton's burden as a politician was to put the living at ease, then mine as a writer was to do justice to the dead.

Contributor

Bios

Moshe Mikanovsky's articles on visual artists and the creative process were published in the past in a local newspaper for the Israeli community in the Greater Toronto Area, as well as in blog posts online. His creative fiction writing has never been published, so He is excited for this first publication. Mode is pursuing a creative writing certificate with the University of Toronto School of Continual Studies. During the day he develop software, a husband, and father of three beautiful girls!

Grant Price is a UK-born writer living in Berlin, Germany. His work has appeared in a handful of print and online publications. He is currently trying to offload his second novel on-to anybody who will take it.

Gaurav Madan is a writer and advocate based in Washington, DC. He supports grassroots movements struggling communities' land and natural resource rights. His writing has appeared in The Guardian, Vice, Hindustan Times, Mongabay, The Ecologist, The Wire, and Scroll.

Ann Schlotzhauer is a Kansas City native currently residing in Wichita, Kansas. She enjoys creative expression of all kinds and her fiction, poetry, and photography can be found in Junto, Foliate Oak, and Alluvian respectively.

Jeff Fleischer is a Chicago-based author, journalist and editor. His fiction has appeared in more than forty publications including the Chicago Tribune's Printers Row Journal, Shenandoah, the Saturday Evening Post and So It Goes by the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library. He is also the author of non-fiction books including "Votes of Confidence: A Young Person's Guide to American Elections" (Zest Books, 2016), "Rockin' the Boat: 50 Iconic Revolutionaries" (Zest Books, 2015), and "The Latest Craze: A Short History of Mass Hysterias" (Fall River Press, 2011). He is a veteran journalist published in Mother Jones, the New Republic, the Sydney Morning Herald, the Chicago Tribune, Chicago Magazine, Mental_Floss, National Geographic Traveler and dozens of other local, national and international publications.

Anastasia Jill (Anna Keeler) is a queer poet and fiction writer living in the southern United States. She is a current editor for the Smaeralit Anthology. Her work has been published or is upcoming with Poets.org, Lunch Ticket, FIVE:2:ONE, Ambit Magazine, apt, Into the Void Magazine, 2River, and more.

Charles Henry is a Fantasy and Science Fiction author currently residing in Washington state.

Bethany Bruno is a born and raised Florida Writer. She attended Flagler College, in St. Augustine, FL, where she earned her B.A in English. She was first published in the Flagler Review. She later attended the University of North Florida for her M.A. Before becoming a Library Specialist, she was an English Teacher and a Park Ranger with the National Park Service. She's working on her debut novel, "From the Passenger Seat." She lives in Port Saint Lucie, FL.

Anna Poley started writing at the age of eight and hasn't stopped since. She loves to write sci-fi and fantasy as well as most types of fiction. She has been a remote freelance copywriter and is the editor of the book "To Survive Divinity." This is her first published work.

Samantha Schinder is a military veteran and PhD candidate with a dissertation on working canines. She has a BA in both Italian literature and Near Eastern Languages/Cultures. She is an avid blogger and working on publishing her debut novel. She owns her own dog training business. She enjoys skydiving, traveling, and adventuring in her spare time when she is not writing.

Tara Anne Cronin is an artist and writer focusing primarily on photography, works on paper, installation and book-arts. She received a BA in Writing from New School University, an MFA from the ICP-Bard Program, and has Twice-earned the ICP Director's Fellowship Award.

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