

# ENCOUNTERS

M A G A Z I N E

SCIENCE FICTION

ISSUE #09

FANTASY

HORROR

ZOMBIE

Preston Dennett

THE BEAST

Krista Amigone

TO ABSENT FRIENDS

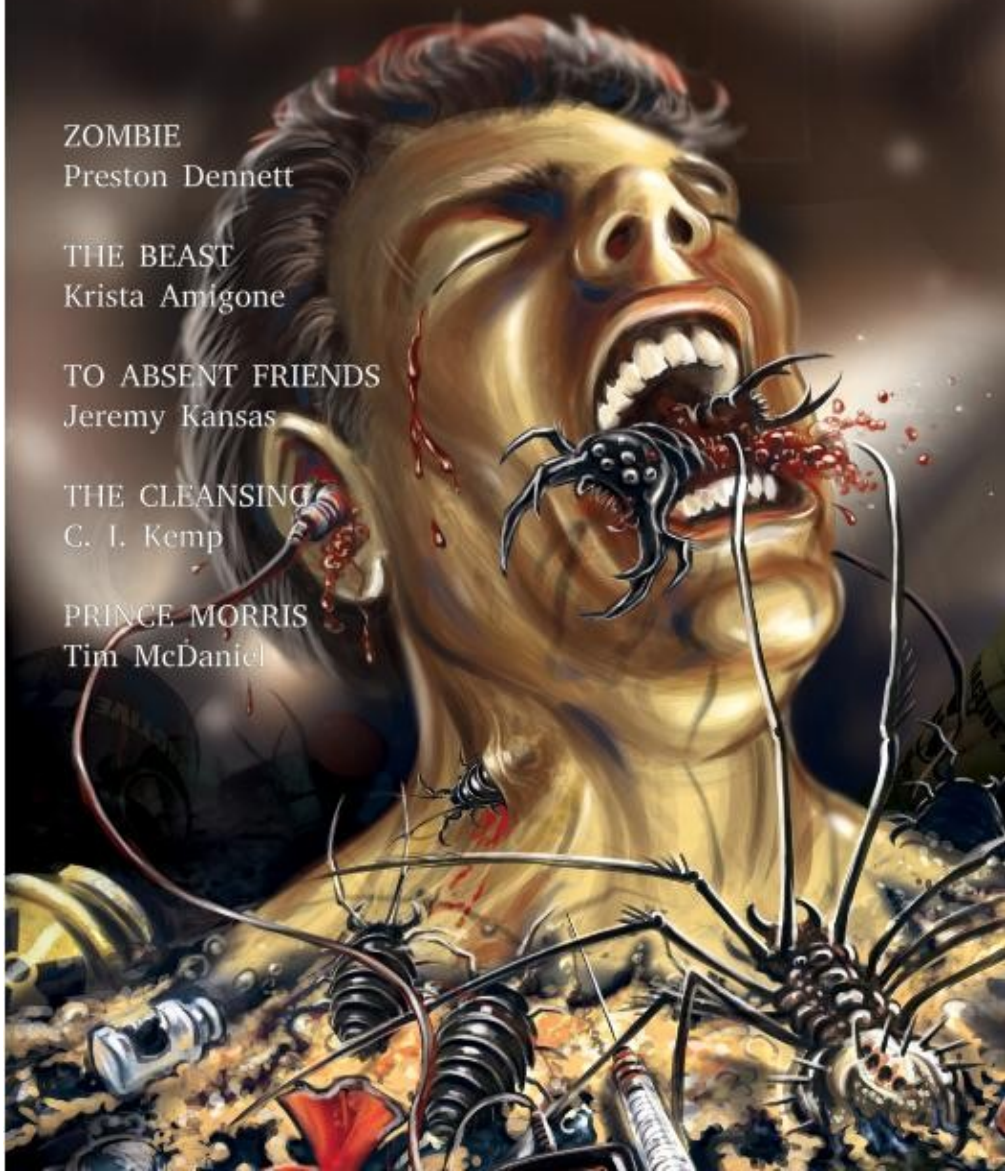
Jeremy Kansas

THE CLEANSING

C. I. Kemp

PRINCE MORRIS

Tim McDaniel



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## **ABOUT OUR COVER ARTIST**

Gary McCluskey has been working as an artist for over 20 years doing everything from book covers to comic books, magazine illustrations, rpg artwork, logo design and greeting cards. Back at the end of the last century he self published a comic called *Rayne*. We are happy to showcase his work once again.

If you're interested in finding a talented artist for an upcoming project, visit Gary at his Web site:  
*<http://garymccluskey.carbonmade.com/>*

**ENCOUNTERS MAGAZINE**  
**Volume 02    November/December 2013    Issue 09**

**Table of Contents**

ZOMBIE by Preston Dennett – Page 5  
THE BEAST by Krista Amigone – Page 29  
TO ABSENT FRIENDS by Jeremy Kansas – Page 59  
THE CLEANSING by C. I. Kemp – Page 86  
PRINCE MORRIS by Tim McDaniel – Page 101

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## **From the Editor's Desk**

We had hoped this issue would contain our first installment of our book review column, but that has been postponed until issue #10 in December.

If you are an independent author or work for a small press that specializes in science fiction, fantasy, horror or the paranormal, we would like to know what you have recently published (or are planning to publish in the near future). Hopefully, in time, we can print a list of new books from independent sources in every issue.

Once our book column is in place, we will try to review 2 to 3 books each issue. Don't expect any negative reviews - actually the column will be more of a recommendation of titles we like selected from the list we publish. We just think it is a waste of our reader's time to talk about why they shouldn't read something when we could be telling them about a book we think they would enjoy.

Guy Kenyon  
Encounters Magazine  
11/03/2013

# ZOMBIE

by Preston Dennett

“Is that it? Any other items on the agenda?”

Decker slipped him a brief smile. “Just one, sir. It’s the DL bill. Senator Farrell is asking again for your support.”

Senator Blaine Geary shook his head. “Doesn’t he ever give up? I’ve heard of persistence, but this is ridiculous.” *What would convince him that he’s not interested?*

“Tell him okay,” he said. “But only if he can provide 100 reasons why. That should do it.”

Decker laughed warmly. Geary leaned back in his chair. It was good to be finished with the list for the day. A headache had been stalking him and he was feeling out of sorts. Part of getting old, he supposed.

“Let me ask you something, Ross,” Geary said. “You already know how I feel. Do you plan to become a download when you die?”

“Well, that’s a tough one, sir. I haven’t thought about it much. Right now, probably not. But I suppose when I get to be your age, I might.”

“Yeah? Well, hopefully you’ll be wiser by then.”

Geary had nothing against downloads, just as long as they knew their place. Legally, once you’re dead, you’re dead. That was the law. Your download had no rights to your property or identity. Farrell’s bill wanted to change all that, but it would be over Geary’s dead body. Things were already tricky enough with the AIs trying to claim human rights. Throwing downloads into the mix would

only complicate matters. And this had nothing to do with how he felt about downloads.

“Well, if we’re done, I’ll get started,” said Decker.

There was a quick knock on the door and Rita came rushing in looking slightly pale, her thin black hair disheveled.

“You could have told me,” she told Geary, throwing down a sheet of paper on his desk. She looked at him accusingly.

“Told you what?”

“You tried to hide it! You’re retiring!”

“I told you, I changed my mind about that,” said Geary, looking at the sheet of paper and becoming alarmed. It was his bank statement, but the numbers were wrong. “What’s this?”

“You emptied your accounts,” said Rita. “You nearly gave me a heart-attack. You should have told me.” She saw his expression and abruptly changed her tone. “Is everything all right? Please tell me you know about this.”

Geary felt suddenly queasy. He shook his aching head. “No, I know nothing about it. How certain are you this is accurate?”

“One hundred percent. I just got off the phone with the bank. What’s going on? Oh, my God.”

“I didn’t do this.” He looked up at Decker. “Get me the FBI. It looks like I’ve been robbed.”

“I understand your account has been emptied.” Detective Mason held his tablet, shifted his eyes from it to Geary.

“Accounts. Plural.” Geary tried to calm down.

“And you didn’t do it?”

“Would you be here if I had?”

“Do you have any suspects? Anyone on your staff? Any enemies?”

“Detective, I’m very careful about the people I put around me. Nobody on my staff would ever do anything like this. I’m sure you’ll find that out when you question them. As far as enemies or suspects...” He shrugged. “I’m a senator. “I make new enemies every day. You should see some of the mail I get.”

“Yes, we will need to examine it,” said the detective, making a note on his tablet. “Well, then, let’s get started.”

After four hours of questioning, Geary had to admit that Detective Mason was thorough. Geary answered all the questions to the best of his ability. He honestly had no idea who might have taken his money. As a senator, he was an open target for all kinds of attacks. But he thought he had been protected against something like this.

Mason promised to get back to him shortly. Geary had given him a list of everybody he knew who was even remotely a suspect. A lot of his friends and employees were going to be in for some rude questioning, he realized. And none of them deserved it.

He went to bed that evening angrier than he could remember being in a long time. Whoever had done this to him would pay. He was a senator. That had to count for something.

It was times like this that he missed Vera. She had always been able to see the bright side of things. He

laughed to himself, wondering how she would have seen the positive side of being robbed of millions of dollars. But his laugh cut short when he remembered that even now, her download was living (if you could call it that) only a few hundred miles away in the Starhaven Reserve. At least, he thought grimly, it had finally stopped trying to contact him.

A few days later, Detective Mason was back. He sat down before Geary's desk, sweating in his ill-fitted suit. "Bad news, I'm afraid," he said. "We don't seem to have any leads. Everyone on your staff checks out. You were right about them. They speak very highly of you. The bank is baffled. They say it was you. They said whoever did it had full access to all your information. Clearly, this was a professional job."

"So basically, you're telling me you've made no progress at all?"

Mason was nonplussed. "We are still working on it. I just need you to answer a few more questions."

A few more questions turned out to be a repeat of the entire initial interview. Mason wanted to cover everything again in the hopes that they had missed something the first time around. However, there was little Geary could add. Nevertheless, they spent the next few hours going over every detail.

The questions went on and on, and Geary felt his headache returning with a vengeance. The door to his office opened and his secretary Barbara Huff stepped in. She looked at Geary's pained expression and stormed up



to his desk, ignoring the detective. “You still have a headache, don’t you? Admit it!”

Geary nodded.

“That’s it. I’m calling Doctor Haley. Jesus, Blaine, how you’ve managed to stay alive this long, I have no idea!” She dropped a bundle of letters on his desk and stormed out.

Mason asked a few more questions and promised to get back to Geary shortly.

As he left his office, Geary felt a wave of frustration and banged his fist on the desk. How had this happened? Who had robbed him? How had they done it? And most importantly, why did they pick him? Were they only after his money?

His head was still pounding when Barbara rushed into his office, with a breathless Doctor Haley behind her.

“Arthur,” said Geary, forcing a smile.

“Jesus, Blaine, you look like crap. You should have called me sooner.”

Geary shrugged. “It’s just stress. Not much you can do about that.”

“Barbara has filled me in about your recent financial problems. I’m very sorry. But that’s no excuse to ignore your health. What if something is seriously wrong?” He fussed around in his bag and began pulling out diagnostic instruments.

“With what, my heart, my stomach? My liver? My kidneys? They’re all artificial. I have enough artificial organs now to qualify as a download. You guys have made it so we practically live forever. Assuming you’re

rich enough to afford it. I'm not so sure that's a good thing."

"Now, now. I can see you're just angry," Haley said, looking wounded. "You said it was your head that hurt?"

"For the past week!" screeched Barbara, too loudly. "And he has refused to let me call you." She glared angrily at Geary.

Doctor Haley was already going over Geary with a couple of the small hand-held instruments. He waved each one over his body, taking readings and grunting. "Well, that's normal. That looks fine. Heart's still pumping. Your temperature is slightly elevated, but nothing alarming."

Haley held a fourth instrument and pressed it on Geary's head. After a few seconds he pulled it away and pressed a few buttons, examining the read-out. "Well, that can't be right," he said, looking up with concern. "Hold still. Let me take another reading."

He held the instrument more carefully this time, taking a longer reading. When he looked again at the read-out, he shook his head. "I think this must be broken," he said. He looked to Barbara. "May I test this on you?"

Barbara looked surprised, but she immediately agreed.

Haley took a quick reading and became even more puzzled. "Seems to be working fine."

"What's wrong?" asked Geary.

"I don't know," Haley said, looking at Geary with a strange expression. He stepped forward and pointed to the back of Geary's neck. There was a faint pink line.

"Is that a scar?"

“What?” asked Geary. “No. What are you talking about?”

“Oh, no!” said Haley, his eyes widening. “It can’t be.”

Geary was angry now. Haley had been his doctor for decades. “Arthur, I’d appreciate it if you’d tell me what you’re thinking.”

Haley shook his head, reaching for his phone. “I’m sorry, Blaine, I can’t. I need to get a second opinion on this. I need to be sure first. This is out of my area of expertise. I mean, if I’m wrong.”

“Wrong about what? Arthur, tell me now!”

Haley held up his hand and spoke into his phone. “Frank, it’s Arthur. No...good. Listen, I’m with Senator Blaine Geary in his office. I need you to get here immediately. I think I’ve got one. Yes, that’s right. Thanks.” He hung up the phone and dropped it into his pocket.

Geary stared at him pointedly.

“I’d really prefer if we could just wait,” said Haley. “Doctor Sorkin will be here shortly.”

Geary shook his head. “Not a chance. You’ve got one? One what? Tell me.”

Haley sighed shakily. “You’re not going to like it.”

“I hate it already.”

“I think you might want to be alone for this,” Haley said, tilting his head at Huff, who had been following the conversation with silent concern.

“She stays,” said Geary firmly.

Haley looked at him with pity. “I don’t know how to tell you this, but you’re not generating any brainwaves.”

Geary looked at him blankly.

Haley reluctantly continued. “I can’t be sure about this – I could be wrong – but you’re showing all the signs. Blaine, you’re...Jesus, this is hard...you’re a...zombie.”

Geary laughed dryly. “You’re joking.”

Huff put her hands to her mouth. Geary saw tears forming in her eyes.

“I wish I was. I think you’ve been robbed and murdered. I’ve heard about this, but I’ve never seen a case before. From what I understand, in these types of cases, they take the victim’s brain and replace it with a mechanical copy. Basically, they take your brain to get to your money, or to control you in some way.”

“A zombie! You can’t be serious.” He felt himself becoming slightly nauseous. His head began to spin.

“Like I said, I’ve never seen a case before,” said Haley. “I might be wrong.”

“You are,” said Geary. “You have to be.”

“I hope I am.”

But he doesn’t think so, thought Geary. He could see it in his eyes, the way Haley was looking at him. “But I feel fine,” he protested. “Other than this damn headache. Are you sure?”

Haley nodded slowly. “It’s the only explanation. Sorkin can tell us for sure. He has treated several other victims. He warned me to be on the look-out. Apparently, there’s something of a breakout going on. You must have heard something about this.”

“Yes, I’ve heard of zombies, but an epidemic? I haven’t heard that!” Geary snapped.

“It’s not the kind of thing people talk about. I’m sure you understand the kind of secrecy that something like this involves.”

A zombie! It was impossible. Someone had stolen his brain and replaced it with a mechanical brain. Which meant one thing: he was dead. Somebody had murdered him. Whoever had stolen his money had done this to him. They had stolen his brain, gotten everything they needed, and to hide their tracks had turned him into a zombie. Jesus, that meant he had been dead for the past week and not even known it! And now he was the thing he hated most: a damned download!

A damned zombie! He had heard claims that some politicians were actually zombies, but he never took them seriously. Nobody did. It wasn’t something anybody ever talked about until recently. Certainly he never thought it could happen to him!

He shuddered to think of what the public would think if they found out that their own senator was a zombie. He thought of all the people who had held his hand and shook it, having no idea that they were holding the hand of a dead man.

It still might not be true, Geary thought. Maybe Arthur had misdiagnosed him. In his mechanical heart, though, he knew it wasn’t true. He was a zombie. One of the walking dead. He wanted to cry but he was too angry.

His thoughts swirled turbulently, but finally focused on one thing: he would find whoever did this to him. He would find them, and make them pay.

“Even though you are technically dead,” said Detective Mason, “due to the nature of your job, we think it’s best if you continue to act as if everything is normal. We don’t want to arouse the suspicions of whoever did this to you that we know what they did. The good news is, in light of this new evidence, we have a much better chance of solving this case. And at least for now, you will be able to continue living a normal life.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t jump for joy,” said Geary. He knew perfectly well what would happen to him if they found who murdered him. He would no longer be able to masquerade around as an actual human being. He would lose his job, all his rights, his entire identity as a living person. Like his wife had been, he would be placed in a DL haven. He wasn’t sure he could live that way.

There was a young, attractive blond woman with a round face sitting patiently next to Mason. He had already introduced her as his associate, Valerie Clearwater.

“Valerie here is our specialist on cases like yours,” said Mason. “She will be working closely with you to help us solve this case.”

Valerie tilted her head slightly toward Geary.

“Whatever it takes to find who did this to me,” said Geary.

He didn’t want to admit it, but Geary liked Valerie. She was pretty. She smiled a lot, and she was the only person who knew he was a zombie and didn’t look at him with an expression of pity or fear. Even his own staff was

acting like he was dead, which he was, he thought bitterly. One of the walking dead. A zombie.

“I don’t understand how this could have happened,” he said. “I have no memory of anything like this.”

“You wouldn’t, now, would you?” Valerie said. “It’s a simple matter for the scums who did this to erase or alter your memory in any way they want.”

They were in a doctor’s office, a special private one for VIPs like him. Geary lay on a table while the technicians hooked up a helmet-like device.

“Is this really necessary?” he asked.

“Sorry, Mr. Geary,” said Valerie. “But I’m going to need to filter through your brain bit by bit, and I find it much easier to download a copy and work with that. This way I won’t have to bother you each time I have another question. You see, the information about who did this to you may have been erased or altered, but it’s impossible to erase everything without turning the victim into a vegetable. While I can’t recover what’s been deleted, I can identify the areas where deletions or alterations have been made. Somewhere in that head of yours is the answer to who killed you, and it’s my job to find it.”

“So this is it, then. You’re just going to work with my copy and I’m not going to see you anymore?”

“Pretty much,” said Valerie. “Until I solve your case.”

“You sound pretty confident.”

She smiled. “I am. I have special qualifications, and yours’ is not my first case. You should consider yourself lucky, actually. They did quite a good job with you, virtually undetectable. Some other victims I’ve worked with have not been so lucky. But you look almost

perfectly normal. If I didn't know what to look for, I would never know. That's something to be happy about."

"Yeah, I'm planning to celebrate when we're through here. Is this going to hurt?" Geary asked.

"No," she said. "In fact, I can fix it so you won't remember a thing, if you'd like."

He looked at her angrily. How could she suggest such a thing? Then he saw she was joking. "No," he mumbled. "I want to remember."

She looked at him with understanding. "That will be fine."

Winter was setting in over the city of Montrose and the bedroom was cold. Valerie burrowed into her down comforter and tried to relax and stop thinking about the late Senator Blaine Geary. There was something about his case that bothered her, and she just couldn't put her finger on it.

She had questioned him endlessly. She had copied his brain and gone through it bit by bit, thought by thought. It occurred to her that she was becoming somewhat obsessed with the man, but she pushed the thought aside. She always became obsessed with her clients. It was part of her technique.

Whoever had done this must have known Geary very well. Normally when somebody created false memories, there were numerous inaccuracies that didn't match with that person's actual life. However, in Geary's case, the false memories blended in perfectly. It was a masterful job--almost undetectable. The deletions were there,



yes--but there were no clues in the false memories, other than that whoever did this to Geary must have been very close to him. Hmm, thought Valerie. That is perhaps the most significant clue of all. But everybody close to him had been cleared, which left her back at the starting line.

She had hoped to find answers by examining the deletions. While false memories can be implanted, deletions are much more difficult. It is almost impossible to completely erase a memory from a brain as memories are often divided up and stored in different places. In Geary's case, she was unable to find any evidence of what had happened to him on August 4<sup>th</sup>. Again, whoever had deleted that day must have known Geary very well.

Most of the zombie victims were famous or powerful people and Senator Geary fit that profile exactly. However, usually in these cases there were significant deletions and alterations. As a general rule, victims were attacked specifically to stop them from exerting their influence. As far as she could tell, almost nothing had been deleted from Geary except for the day of the operation. Why take over somebody's brain if they're not going to try and control him? It didn't make sense. And besides, he was an old man. Ninety-three. He had twenty more years, maybe thirty. He would probably be retiring soon.

*That's it!* She sat up in bed. That's what had been bothering her. Geary was an old man. The majority of zombies she had seen were much younger. Why would somebody turn an old man into a zombie? Why waste the time and money? Why not just finish him off?

Could it be that they were simply covering their tracks? They were hoping that nobody, not even Geary, would know he was a zombie. The problem was, it wasn't necessary to murder Geary in order to rob him. Therefore, the motive was not just money. Somebody wanted him dead. But he was an old man. What kind of threat could he pose? And to whom did he pose this threat? It had to have something to do with his policies as a senator, most likely with his controversial stance on DLs. But then why no major deletions or alterations? No doubt about it, this case was going to be a tough nut to crack. Nothing was adding up. She must have missed a vital clue. But what?

“Any luck yet?” Geary’s face gazed at her from the computer. It was a digitized image of his face, and the intelligence talking to her from the computer was a second generation copy of Geary--but nobody would have known the difference. It looked and acted just like the real Geary. Valerie had been talking to him for several weeks trying to piece together the mystery. Although she had come to know Geary quite well, she was little closer to getting the answers she needed.

“No, not yet. There is some news. The investigators have managed to trace the funds...well...to several places actually, but we think the endpoint is Brazil.”

“Hah, I used to think I’d like to retire there. Of course, that was before the DEs took over the country. And now I’m stuck here in your computer. You know, you didn’t

warn me when you copied me that I'd end up living inside a computer...without a body."

"You already have a body. You're dead anyway, remember?"

"Yeah," said Geary. "Well, so are you."

Valerie stared at the screen in shock. "You know?" she asked faintly.

"Sorry, Dr. Clearwater, I figured it out a few weeks ago. There's no way anyone could understand what it means to be a zombie, unless they've been one. And you, my dear doctor, understand what it's like. What happened to you?"

Valerie paused. Why not tell him? He was just a copy after all. They both knew he would be deleted when his case closed. And if he started causing problems, it would be a simple matter to un-tell him.

"It's not a pretty story," she said.

"I wouldn't think so."

"Do you recognize my last name?"

"Clearwater? You don't mean Nate Clearwater? The holo-star?"

"My father," said Valerie. "I was actually fifteen when it happened. It was a brain tumor. My parents were encouraged to make a copy of my brain, in case I didn't survive. When I died, they thought it would be a good idea to replace my brain with a mechanical one and keep my physical body. Of course, they also decided not to tell me."

"Jesus," Geary whispered. And he thought he had it bad being murdered, copied and stuck into this damn box. At least he had a chance to live his life.

“Oh, I knew something was different. The way they acted around me, the way they looked at me like I was some kind of monster. Well, you know what it’s like, how people are.”

Geary nodded.

“I didn’t know for years. I was taken regularly to see all kinds of doctors and nobody ever told me what was wrong with me. Well, you can’t keep something like that secret forever. You know how I found out? On the holo vid. One of those god-awful gossip shows. *Celebrity’s daughter is a zombie. Actual doctor reports obtained.* Of course nobody took it seriously. As you know, there are a lot of people out there who want to keep this zombie stuff quiet. Not that it mattered. Once the rumor was out, there was only one thing to do. Get rid of me. I put up a huge fight and threatened to go public. Eventually, I was given this job and told to keep quiet. So that’s what I’ve done.”

“So what is it? Be a good girl and you can keep your body?”

Valerie laughed. “Yeah, that’s basically it.”

“I tell you what. You get me out of this computer and into a human body and we’ll run away together. You could even pick my race.”

“I thought you hated downloads who are romantic with each other.”

“Yeah, well...things change. And I think we’d make a good couple.”

“Stop flirting. You’re not getting out. You’re a second generation copy, buddy. You’re at the bottom of the DL hierarchy. Besides, you’re way too old for me. Consider

this time you have as a bonus. Now, let's get back to your case. I have the feeling you're holding out on me. I think we both agree that whoever killed you probably worked with you and knew you well. We've gone through all your employees. Who do you think did it? You must have an opinion."

Geary's image broke into a grin. "I guess it's okay to tell you now. The real me has probably figured it out by now. At least I hope he has. If he hasn't, well...he never will."

"What are you talking about? Do you know who murdered you? Is that what you're saying?"

"No. But I think I have a pretty good idea."

"Well, who?"

"Me." Geary looked smug.

"You? I don't understand."

"Who else could it be? Process of deduction. It's not any of my staff. None of my friends would do this to me. Nobody else knows me well enough to turn me into a zombie. It had to be an inside job. Who else is left but me?"

"You're not making sense. First of all, how would you do that to yourself? It's impossible. Second of all, why? It makes no sense."

"It makes perfect sense. If you consider the possibility that I – and I mean the *original* me – that I am a brain."

Valerie laughed. "You mean like in the holovids? A human brain inside a robotic body? They don't exist. Only in the holovids. Not in real life."

"Aha, but what if they do? It would make perfect sense, don't you see? Do I have to spell it out for you? Consider

this scenario. I was an old man...a very rich old man who was about to die and despised downloads. What other option would I have if I wanted to survive, other than to become a brain? And don't tell me they don't exist. I didn't used to believe in zombies. But look at me now. If something like zombies can pass through society unnoticed--if they are as common as you seem to think they are, than why not brains? Can you imagine? That's virtual immortality. With no need to download."

"So you're saying you stole all your own money, then killed yourself and then had your brain implanted into a robotic body?" Valerie wanted to laugh, but instead, she felt a cold chill run through her. She had heard rumors that brains were real, but she never took them seriously. Few people did.

"Exactly."

"All this to avoid becoming a download?"

"All this to avoid death...to still remain a human being. That's why this is being covered up. The courts have already decided that as long as you have a brain, you're still human. If brains were known, we'd have to call them human, now, wouldn't we? And that would open up the door for downloads and artificial intelligences. This way, I set it up so I don't have to retire...I mean, while the real me retires, the zombie me continues to do my job in my place. Outlandish, maybe...but it sounds like something I would do. I think I did it."

Valerie's mouth felt dry. It was getting hard to convince herself that Geary was wrong. "Fine. Let's just speculate for a moment that your theory is valid. Think like

Geary--put yourself into his shoes--as a brain, and tell me...where is he now?"

"That's easy. If I were me, which technically I am, I would go to Brazil."

"Brazil?"

"It's the only place on Earth where DLs have near-full rights. You said yourself you traced my money there. That's where you'll find me."

Could Geary be correct? But a brain? Stories of brains on the holo vid scampered through her mind. There had been quite a bit of talk lately about them. Why hadn't she considered that possibility? Could she really rule that out? It did make a weird kind of sense.

Still, there was something else he had just said. What was it? She remembered and turned to her computer in anger. "I guess it's okay to tell you now. You said that. I guess it's okay *now*? What did you mean by that? Now?"

Geary laughed. "I should think it would be obvious. If I--a mere second generation copy figured out--quite some time ago, I might add...how long would it take the real Geary? Excuse me, this get's so confusing...I mean the zombie Geary. Well, call me sentimental, but I have sympathy for him. I wanted to make sure he had enough time to figure everything out and do what he had to do. Go ahead. If you don't believe me, call Geary yourself. I bet you'll find your zombie has already run off to find our man."

"Damn!" Valerie said, flicking off her computer. She hoped for Geary's sake that he wasn't right. Brains and zombies....for God's sake. And downloads. Already there were millions of them. Unlike normal humans, they

just kept living and living. Eventually and inevitably, they would outnumber the real humans. It was only a matter of time. Was this the future for humanity?

Geary shed most of his clothing as he walked along the beach. Brazil! He couldn't believe that he was actually there. The beach was nearly deserted as it was still early in the morning. He saw a few people walking in small groups and felt a stab of envy. They were humans. He had been a human once. Now he was a damn zombie. He only looked human.

And somewhere close by, the real Senator Geary was lurking. Geary could almost feel his presence. A series of clues had led him to this beach. Geary had to laugh at the size of the trail that he--the real him--had left. The real him must not have realized how easy it would be to follow oneself.

Brazil was definitely a haven for DLs. Most of the other groups of people were robots. Geary was surprised to see how well everybody was getting along. He saw a DL and a human kissing and felt a wave of revulsion. He wasn't used to the idea of DLs and humans co-mingling. Hypocritical thoughts for a zombie like me, he thought guiltily.

He felt a thrill of satisfaction at how easily he had been able to escape his guards. Ever since his condition had been discovered, the Secret Service stuck to him like glue. Thankfully, though, his staff--in particular, Barbara Huff--had helped him. Barbara had initially been



squeamish about his condition, but she quickly came around, and in the end, had been able to secret him away.

He wasn't sure if Barbara was aware of his ultimate plan, but he suspected she was. Either way, she had the decency not to mention it.

And then Geary saw him. It was himself, the real Geary, in a robot body. He was brain.

He had been so easy to find. No surprise, thought Geary. Great minds think alike, and in this case, exactly alike. You can make all the deletions and alterations you want, but it will never change who you really are. And the evidence of it was the robot standing in front of him.

It was himself. He knew it without a doubt. Perhaps it was because they shared the same mind, or maybe it was actual telepathy...but he felt no surprise when he saw a figure walking along the beach and recognized him. It was him. Yes, he was in a robotic body, but it was definitely him.

It was stupid, he knew. He should just be done with it. But he was mad. What good was revenge if the victim didn't know it? It spoiled the fun of it.

"Senator," Geary said.

The robot turned around and stepped back in shock. "You found me," he said, quickly recovering his composure.

"Of course," Geary replied. "Did you think I wouldn't?"

"I had hoped you wouldn't figure out it was me. I took steps."

"The deletions, you mean. Clever, but you forgot a few things. Like the fact that Barbara kept copies of everything. She told me about my plans to retire, and

how I had suddenly retracted them. She helped me figure out what actually happened.”

“She always was efficient.”

“How could you do this? You turned me into the one thing you hate the most. I’m a download, for Christ’s sake! Worse, a zombie!”

“I’m sure if you think it through, you would understand that it was the only way. After all, I am you, so it *was* you who made the decision. It was either become a brain or die.”

“I don’t remember anything about deciding to become a brain. I don’t even know about brains.”

“You wouldn’t. I deleted that part. The truth is, you planned this move for a very long time. You had every detail worked out.”

“Including me finding you?” Geary asked.

“Well, there was always that possibility, but I expected that you would not realize what happened, and that if you did, it would be too late.”

“Too late? What do you mean by that? Dead? That’s it, isn’t it? You knew that a mechanical brain can’t maintain a old body for very long. Nobody would realize I was a zombie until I was dead. Then it would be too late. That’s what you mean, isn’t it? How could you do this to me? To yourself!”

The robot trembled. “I did this for you! It was your decision. Remember, we’re the same person.”

“I’m not you. I would never do that to anybody.”

“You’re right. You’re not me. You’re just a download who still thinks he’s human when he’s not. Seeing you,

now I *know* I've made the right decision. I will never become a download."

"Too late" said Geary. He had been waiting for this for a long time. Geary pulled the nano-gun out of his pocket. Used to kill rogue robots and downloads, the aggressive nanos would quickly reduce their bodies to piles of junk. He didn't hesitate.

He watched the bullet smack against the robotic body. Trillions of nanos began pouring into it.

The robot looked at the mark on its chest, and staggered. It knew exactly what it was. Already the mark was growing as the nanos replicated themselves. "You shot me," he said. "You're a download and I'm a human! And you shot me! This is murder!"

"Technically," Geary said, "It's suicide."

"You won't get away with this." He fell to his knees.

"It seems that I have," said Geary.

The robot fell to the ground, twitching.

There I lay dying, Geary thought. That's me there on the ground. He was surprised to feel no sadness, but he could no longer identify with the man that he had become.

"Don't move!" a voice shouted.

Geary recognized the voice.

Detective Mason appeared breathless and sweaty from running. Shortly behind him were several other officers. Bringing up the rear was Valerie Clearwater. He remembered her from the hospital, when she had insisted on making a copy of him.

As they cuffed him, he wondered what was in store for him. Certainly his masquerade as a senator was over...his

pretense of being human. Having murdered a human being, he would undoubtedly be destroyed. That was the fate of all rogue robots and DLs. Why should he be any different? The fact that he had murdered himself would mean nothing, he guessed. Prejudice against downloads was too prevalent.

And that's all he was after all: just a download. And downloads had no rights. He laughed dryly. As a senator, he had fought hard against DL rights. And he certainly hadn't helped advance DL rights by murdering a human. And in the end, he had become what he dreaded most.

He had died once when he became a zombie. He had watched himself die a second time when he murdered himself. And now he would die a third time for committing that murder/suicide. And that, thought Geary, will finally be the end of me.

Valerie Clearwater lay in bed. The warm curve of Geary's new young, muscular body fit against hers perfectly. It had taken all she had to obtain them, but it was worth it. She had never realized life could be this good for a couple of zombies. And the way Geary was smiling, she knew he felt the same.

"I am so glad I didn't delete you," she said.

"Me too," he replied, snuggling against her. "Me too."

Fiction from Preston Dennett has appeared or is upcoming in *Andromeda Spaceways*, *Aurora Wolf*, *The Future Embodied Anthology* and more. He has also earned multiple honorable mentions in the Writers of the Future Contest.

# THE BEAST

## Krista Amigone

Mira preferred to watch other people having fun, but she wasn't always like this: this sitting-back-watching girl, this nodding-quietly-passing girl, this too-tired-to girl. And now she was all these things, although she wasn't before.

Summer meant going to Lost Cliff on Pierce Inlet. It wasn't something considered or debated; if a kid had any social levity, or hoped for some by next fall, going to Lost Cliff was a necessity. So when Mira and her twin sister Elizabeth picked up the rest of the girls, they never called ahead or asked for parental permission. The twins simply appeared in their father's Mercedes convertible one house at a time, and without even a honk the other girls emerged from their homes all perfectly undone with practiced natural beauty.

In black jeans and an inside-out black t-shirt, Mira felt ridiculous sitting in the vibrant fruit salad of their friends; well, really just Lizzie's friends now, although they never said it. Mira huffed in the backseat squeezed between Alice and Hannah while Belinda took shotgun.

Since her driving rights were revoked, Mira found it insulting to sit next to Lizzie; watching her not so much stop as pause at empty red-light intersections, leering as she texted at the wheel, and cringing as her sister passed from the right. Today was no exception and Mira bit the inside of her lip as Lizzie reinvented the art of driving.

Normally the others didn't notice Lizzie's ineptitude, but today was different and even with the top down, a thick silence sat amongst the girls.

Ten minutes away from their destination, Belinda unleashed her annoying voice. "I don't wanna go to the cliff."

Lizzie looked up from her texting and focused back on the road. To Mira's left and right Alice and Hannah's bodies tensed.

Having not gotten any response, Belinda tried again. "It's not like we neeeded to go there. Ya know? I mean, people will go wherever we go. Ya know? If we go to Crystal Beach then they'll go to Crystal Beach. Ya know?"

Belinda was right. Seated in the car were the most coveted and hated girls in their school. Going to Lost Cliff and making things happen at Lost Cliff propelled them to the top of the social court. But certain things even popular kids couldn't do and denying Lost Cliff was one of them. Lizzie knew this.

"We're almost there" Lizzie said, running her hand through her chestnut hair as she checked her makeup in the rearview mirror. She caught Mira's stare and rolled her eyes, *Can you believe these idiots?*

But Belinda whined on. "I'm telling you I don't wanna go."

Hannah extended her neck and croaked, "Me too, Lizzie." She immediately shrunk back into her body once she dared the words.

Infuriated by the semi-coup Lizzie pulled to the side of the forested road and turned off the engine. She sat silent and still like a predator in wait, her brow pulled down

and her gaze steady. The girls had adjusted to Lizzie's new temper over the past months but it still unnerved them, and Mira sat up prepared to wrangle her twin as much as possible.

After four cars passed them on the quiet road, Belinda broke the silence. "I just think we should try some place else this year. Ya know?"

Lizzie nodded and Belinda sighed, assuming victory. But Mira knew better.

Belinda happily listed places to choose from, and while her nasal voice tore through the air, Mira watched Lizzie tremble, a crescendo of rage that started small and ended with Mira feeling her twin's teeth chattering in her own head. Alice whimpered and Hannah put her head between her knees, both wishing away the inevitable.

"If anyone shouldn't want to go it's me!" said Lizzie, her warring yell negating the frailty of her pixie face. Belinda's list caught in her throat and she thrust herself against the inside of the passenger door. "If you didn't want to come you should've said! I suppose you think if you complain enough I'll drive you back home?"

Belinda reached out a comforting hand. "I didn't mean..."

"Well get out and walk if you don't wanna go!" She flashed a maniacal smile, "Ya know!"

"Watch your temper, Elizabeth," said Mira.

Lizzie shrugged her off and whipped around to the back seat. "What say the peanut gallery? You guys wanna turn around?"

"Whatever you do's cool with me, Lizzie," said Hannah. "Alice?"

Alice, a squeak of a girl, shrugged. “What about Mira?”  
“What about me? I can speak for myself. Elizabeth, you need to calm down.”

“Why don’t you get gone already? All of you!” Lizzie whipped back to the steering wheel and turned the ignition. “Well?” She revved the engine over and over until tearing from the roadside without checking for oncoming traffic. Lizzie had decided for them. They were going to Lost Cliff.

Lost Cliff was Mira’s favorite place in the whole world, but she couldn’t go there or anywhere else without Lizzie; a stupid rule placed on her last Halloween.

Mira remembered her first trip there, holding her daddy’s hand: the tall pine trees stood proud and imposing like a fallen royal court, purple stone bled from their overthrown feet, and the black water below swallowed any evidence of crime in its depths. All its intimidating beauty cast a spell on Mira. It was the first time in her life she realized Lizzie and her were not the same people. While Lizzie complained the whole trip that her feet hurt and that she wanted to go home, Mira was falling in love and never wanted to leave.

Time morphed the cliffs’ meaning, but never lessened Mira’s affection. Now they were the boardroom of Ronald Reagan High School, where alliances grew and broke, as well as hearts and hymens.

The Pierce Inlet was dangerous water to jump into, but that didn’t stop the kids, daring the glacial rocks below the water’s surface yearly. Most were known and avoided,



but about every four years a kid martyred themselves, paralyzed or dead as a reminder to the others to keep their eyes open; to be careful. Although the warning never sounded long. 99% of the time the kid wasn't popular, so their doom-parable evaporated in the next summer's heat.

"We're here!" Lizzie sang and the girls got out of the car, making their way to their stage. They prowled to their usual spot, a mossy covering of slate that interrupted the horseshoe shape of the rock. The sun seemed to shine a little brighter on them than on the others, presenting them like a plate of confections: all pink, and purple, and flimsy; all perky-tit, and tight-ass, and preemptively tan.

The earlier upset was forgotten as their presentation began. The girls spread out their belongings, bending from their hips to straighten their towels on the ground, letting their cutoffs ride dangerously up their thighs. Then they slipped off their tight t-shirts revealing barely-fitting bikini tops and toned bellies, to which their audience gave cat-calls and whistles. Mira just plopped down; she was too tired to care.

Mira wasn't a downer so much as a reformed exhibitionist, and unceremoniously she sat on the rock opening her book. It seemed she had been reading the same novel, the same page, the same sentence, since forever.

"Let's do this" Mira thought, looking to the page and reading: *Her belly lurched and she doubted herself...*

Just then a boy screamed off the cliff and into the water, causing a chorus of applause. Mira looked up, her book once again abandoned. She recognized the

daredevil from school.

Connor was a black boy, the only one at Reagan High, and particularly special because Lizzie slept with him. Lizzie loved someone else but she slept with Connor.

“Nice Connor!” Lizzie shouted as his head bobbed above the water and he smiled. Above him, painted halfway down the uninterrupted face of rock, graffiti from last autumn throbbed: ‘YOU SHOULD LIVE HERE.’

When the graffiti first appeared it unsettled the entire town. The local news and papers reported about it ad nauseum, even inspiring a school assembly about the sanctity of nature and people’s responsibility to honor it. It upset the adults that someone was so indulgent. It upset the kids for another reason: No living human could’ve penned it.

That side of the cliff face was unscalable up or down. Its wind-ravaged slate chipped with the smallest effort, kryptonite to climbing gear, experience, and technique. No one jumped from that side either, the pool below it more rock than water with glacial boulders piercing the surface like a monster’s claw, reaching up from the deep.

Eventually the press had more important stories to cover and the adults forgot the message altogether.

But not the kids.

YOU SHOULD LIVE HERE.

Unspoken, the kids agreed the message was penned by the Lost Cliff Beast. It was one of those stories kids believed but that adulthood made them forget.

In 1883, a pirate ship named The Black Bess hid from

the American Navy for weeks in the inlet. Unfortunately for the outlaws the waters froze early providing no fish.

“Aipaloovik!” said Puk, a newer addition to the crew. “We have upset the way of these waters. He is mad. We must atone.”

At first the others paid little heed, but as rations dwindled the ancient god’s name echoed in their empty bellies and worried minds, until Puk’s lore was law. With Puk’s instruction, they threw a young kidnapped man over the boat’s starboard side into the jagged rocks and ice face below.

The ice broke, swallowing the victim’s body and it seemed Aipaloovik was appeased as the temperatures rose. But the pirates’ relief was short lived. Three days after the young man slammed to the cloudy white surface, he resurrected as a beast.

In the dark of a chilly morning the thing crawled up the side of the ship, its bloody palms suctioning to the vessel’s wooden skin. Its body half-smashed, the thing crookedly lifted itself over the ship’s rail, petrifying the few sailors awake with its unnatural gait.

Its bones protruded through frozen skin creating disturbing angles of the thighs, tibias, shoulders, and ribs. Each of its steps was unpredictable and loud, a death knell composed of popping ligaments and grinding bones. Though ungraceful, it was wind-swift, and caught the pirates with ease, each one meeting their death one heartbeat at a time. The beast ate them alive one by one, keeping its prisoners in wait, bound with nothing more than paralyzing fear.

After the massacre, addicted to human flesh, the beast

still haunted the cliff, surviving off the flesh of the water's victims.

Over the years the legend survived from one generation to the next with subjective proof: a spontaneously extinguished camp fire, a howling voice in the trees, or best yet, a sighting. Sometimes peering through branches, or just below the water's surface, people claimed they saw the Beast looking out, waiting, hungry; its pruned skin draped in green algae, its mouth crusted with dried blood, and its belly swollen with the meat of man.

It could only be the Beast with its paranormal dexterity able to scale the rock wall and write the words that hung over the inlet.

Eventually the kids adjusted to the message, its letters now as natural to the landscape as the trees. All kids except Mira. The message was for her. She knew it.

Mira held a secret sympathy for the Beast. To her he was an innocent young man who might have led an exemplary life if fate hadn't forced him toward darker deeds. In dreams the young man implored her to find him in the woods, and together they might live unbound by social expectations.

The dreams were so vivid she often awoke pressing her lips to her pillow, her pelvis thrusting against her mattress, and crying as the sound of her alarm shattered wish with reality.

Instead of spending the fall of junior year hanging out with friends, Mira went to the cliffs and sat across from

the message. She focused on the words daily like a pious monk, believing after a certain amount of tenacity tested, of time sacrificed, she would learn the author's identity.

Occasionally a tickle landed on her tongue and she assumed the identity placed there like a candy. She sounded out, expecting the name to form outside her mind in the air but all she exhaled were monosyllabic shouts and grunts making her sound like an animal; like a beast. Come late October she still waited, ecstatically haunted by the words that howled in her mind: YOU SHOULD LIVE HERE.

"Where've you been going? Everyone's noticed!" Lizzie said.

"It's nobody's business. I'm still the queen, aren't I?"

It was a rhetorical question. Mira was born the queen, a fact common to all like marrow in bone.

Mira felt guilty blocking out Lizzie. But this was the perfect opportunity to sever some attachments with her twin. Side by side since conception, Mira feared that might always be the case. She considered this as she watched her sister in the summer sun adjust her bikini top.

"Did you see Connor jump?" Lizzie asked and Mira shrugged her shoulders. She realized, again, that she hadn't read any more of her book. *Her belly lurched and she doubted herself...*

Just then Lizzie sat taller and without looking up Mira knew why. John had arrived.

John was *that* boy, the boy that made going to school worthwhile. No American high school story is complete without one: a boy perfect from all facets. An

untouchable boy. Like Mira he was born to rule, making it jaw-dropping when he chose social death, chumming it up with Arnie junior year.

*Arnie.*

When he moved next door to John last August they became best friends, losing hours together in Arnie's basement playing video games. This should've never happened.

By the laws of high school Arnie should've been a sacrificed lamb with his fat ass, flaming acne, and crap clothes, but John's protective arm draped on him like a shield. The court still loved John and never thought of targeting him or his friend, especially since Mira hadn't given the order.

Soon Lizzie went over to flirt with Connor who happened to sit next to John. Puppy-like, Lizzie begged Connor to jump again and he proudly complied. In his heroic absence Lizzie let her hunger instruct her. "Hey, John!"

"Hey."

"Hey Lizzie!" Lizzie couldn't hear fat people and Arnie's greeting lingered. Mira wished she'd be nicer to him.

Lizzie smiled, "Whatcha reading?"

John sighed, "Romeo & Juliet'."

"You don't need to read it. I've got it on DVD. Wanna come over and watch it?"

Arnie pushed his face into Lizzie's. "Could I watch it, too? It's my favorite! Forbidden love! Willing to murder!"

Lizzie's fists clenched. "Maybe." She shimmied closer to John. "It's so nice to be back at the Cliffs, huh?"

“Actually I’m surprised you’re here, Lizzie” John finally looked up.

“Why?”

“Because of what happened. It just seems odd. And Mira ...” John looked over to Mira and their eyes locked. They stared at each other like they used to before Arnie; before last Halloween.

Lizzie’s voice flew like a rock breaking their connection, proving it fragile, “Your problems with Mira have nothing to do with me.”

“I don’t have a problem with Mira. I have a problem with you.”

Arnie laughed and Lizzie shot him a fatal stare. He returned it with a smug smile. By then Mira was there to diffuse the warring.

“Lizzie ... I need you.”

She looked up into Mira’s eyes and nodded.

“Where’re you going?” Arnie asked as they walked away.

“Please ... just leave her alone ... Arnie.”

“Whatever.”

Out of breath Mira walked her sister back to the others.

Later in the car ride back, Mira closed her eyes exhausted as Lizzie boasted of her evening’s plans with Connor. It set the girls to laughter and groans of affected disapproval. Soon their questions came wanting to know all the details from the previous times: *Was he big? Did black boys taste any different than white boys? Did you ... you know?*

“If you’re so curious why don’t you fuck him?” Mira said, and the girls giggled around her. She already knew all the un-orgasmic details.

Nightly Lizzie recapped her escapades to Mira hoping to keep their bond alive. “I think I came!”

Mira managed a smile during these confessionals because although crazy, Lizzie was still her sister. Plus Mira knew Lizzie held herself responsible for Mira’s social-purgatory. It was what caused her twin to morph from sweetheart to anger-management case in less than eight months.

Mira hoped to remedy this, but when she tried to talk to Lizzie about it her mouth failed and her breath ran short. Frustrated, Mira shrugged her shoulders, too tired to explain things even if it were possible.

The least she could do was convince Lizzie to be an obedient daughter and begged her not to sneak out like she did.

Their parents always checked their room around midnight, finding Lizzie’s bed empty. Impotent, they then looked at Mira and shook their heads; as if it was her fault; as if she forced Lizzie’s subordination. On earlier occasions she tried to defend herself, but her parents consistently turned their backs on her and walked away. The effort always left her depleted and she soon stopped trying.

“I’ll try to get back before they check.”

“Whatever.” Mira balanced her head on her chin while her book stood opened before her. *Her belly lurched and she doubted herself...*

“John mentioned you today” Lizzie said.



Mira, though slightly matured, still enjoyed pissing Lizzie off. “And how does that make you feel?” Lizzie stopped working the window latch and turned to her sister. Her face reddened and Mira laughed. “It’s odd isn’t it? We look exactly alike, our voices are exactly alike, and now you wear my perfume, and he still won’t touch you -- won’t even hang out with you. You try so hard. I never tried at all.”

Knowing her sister’s next move, Mira wisped herself off her bed where Lizzie pounced. Her voice growled, “Cunt!”

The sudden movement took Mira’s breath away. Now standing on the opposite side of the room, she watched her sister scramble, sitting back on her haunches, wiggling her ass side to side preparing to pounce.

“You need ... to control ... that temper ... Elizabeth.”

“You gave me my temper. Now get out of my room!”

“It’s ... my room ... too.”

“So!”

“So ... I’ll make a ruckus ... and Mom and Dad will ... tie you to the bed.”

Shaking off her rage with an affected sigh Lizzie stood up and straightened her clothes. “I love you, Mira.”

Mira smiled, her breath slowly returning, “I love you ... too ... Elizabeth.”

Lizzie left then and the room was peaceful. Mira lay back on her bed and opened her book. *Her belly lurched and she doubted herself ...* And Mira fell asleep.

The next day a nerd-kid named Louie Stevens, a loser

new to the cliffs, jumped smack onto a boulder sitting unseen under the dark water. There were others there that could've warned him, including the twins that were feet away, but guidance was mum.

It's not that he was ignored with malicious intent, but nerds are harder to see. They're like vapor until someone worth knowing screws the flesh and bones into them. But the event was sad. It closed Lost Cliff for the remainder of the summer.

Now Mira had to sit inside with Lizzie and watch soaps, or accompany her to the mall to help curate the date-rape uniforms she called a closet. The summer continued to bore on like this, so when school arrived the twins were grateful for it. Now seniors, they were finally the undisputed Queens of Reagan High.

Come October, reality weighed them down as college applications loomed and some smart kids received early admission to their schools. John was one of them, accepting a full-ride to the University of Washington. Arnie applied there too.

When Mira heard the news a chill ran up her spine, hinting at the hurt she chose to ignore. She didn't know where she was going but it wasn't to the University of Washington. She hadn't even applied. Lizzie did but her acceptance was a long-shot.

"We should go and light candles. Ya know?" Belinda's voice was impossible to ignore, no matter the effort.

"That's a nice idea," said Hannah. Beside her Alice squeaked as she chewed on the straw of her soda can. But Lizzie thought of other things, namely where John planned on sitting that day at lunch. Lizzie conveniently

spilt orange juice on his normal table where it remained pooled, but Lizzie's table was clean. Mira sunk with jealousy as her sister schemed.

"John! Come sit by us!" Lizzie said.

John feigned deafness but eventually Lizzie walked over, grabbed his arm, and escorted him to the seat beside hers.

Belinda assaulted his ears immediately. "We're thinking of lighting candles at Lost Cliff on Halloween. Ya know?"

John scrunched his forehead in feigned confusion. "For Louie Stevens? I didn't realize you ladies cared." He let go the ruse. "Cool. But d'you really think people'll go to the cliffs on Halloween? We go to Connor's."

"My thoughts exactly" said Mira and she and John locked eyes.

Lizzie noticed their moment and shattered it. "Has anyone thought about what they're dressing as for Halloween this year?" changing the subject with the grace of an elephant on a tightrope. John retracted his gaze and squeezed a packet of ketchup onto his burger.

As with most conversations Mira was half-invested. She couldn't buy anything as per her restrictions so she decided to do the same thing as last year and dress as the color black.

"Maybe we could do a group costume or something?" said Lizzie. The other girls agreed but John remained silent. "What d'you think John?" But John was busy getting Arnie's attention. "Over here, Arn!"

Lizzie's blood percolated.

"Move over for Arn," said John and Lizzie slid her chair over with a practiced smile. The other girls' eyes grew

large and Alice continued to chew her straw for dear life.

“Some idiot spilled O.J. at our table and didn’t bother to clean it up” said Arnie, pulling over a chair. John laughed and the girls’ saucer eyes checked in with Lizzie who steamed with aggravation.

Mira intuited her sister’s fists grinding into her thighs, suppressing the angry shake that always came. Arnie sensed her upset, too. “I just need to eat Lizzie. Then I’ll go, alright?”

Too pissed to let Arnie sit there without paying a fine, she cleared her throat, “Of course that’s fine! So Arnie, what’re you gonna be for Halloween? A tub of lard?”

The other girls chuckled out of requirement and Mira’s stomach dropped. She tried to kick Lizzie under the table but couldn’t reach. She wished she’d be nicer to him.

“Great idea Lizzie. What’re you dressing as? A used condom perhaps?” Now others in the cafeteria looked over.

“Very funny. So you can see what a used condom looks like?”

“Well, I’m looking at one right now, aren’t I?” Now other tables watched and laughed. “Don’t worry Lizzie. Me and my fat ass won’t be going anywhere this year.”

“Too busy stuffing your face with candy?” Lizzie looked to her friends for support but they were all distracted by their cell phones, none of which had service.

“No, I’m too smart to leave my house. I know what you planned last year. If it wasn’t for Mira ...” Mira sucked in her breath, shocked that Arnie brought her into the conversation.

Around her activity puckered: Hannah checked the wall

clock and left, Alice dropped her empty can under the table and scurried down to find it, and John pushed away his tray.

Lizzie stood up. "You don't know anything!"

Mira joined her. "My sister's going through a lot, Arnie. Can we all please calm down?"

Arnie flushed red and John dropped his head. God she wanted to touch him, to breathe on his neck again, to get it back to last Halloween before she messed it up.

Belinda scooped up Lizzie as she broke down into tears and the rest of the lunch room stared back slack-jawed and stupid. "She's right. Lizzie didn't cause you any harm, Arnie."

"No. But she tried" John interjected and Lizzie broke like a cracked tea cup, easily and quietly.

She looked over to Mira, "Can we please go?" Mira nodded and Belinda spoke for her, "You got it."

Lizzie decided the girls would dress as sexy lambs and on Halloween night Mira watched her put on white fishnets, a new silver silk nightie, cotton ball ears, and a tail perched perfectly on her perky ass.

"I wish I could dress up" Mira said, almost meaning it.

"Ask Mom if you can go shopping."

"Very funny."

Lizzie's eyes judged her reflection while her hands worked like restless tailors: a rip here, a tug there; never good enough.

"Fuck. Will I need a coat?" Lizzie turned and asked.

"It gets cold there. And you *are* just wearing a slip."

“I’m a lamb.”

“You’re a human wearing underwear.”

“Whatever. Why can’t we just go to Connor’s like we always do?”

“Because this year’s special.”

“Oh yeah. Time to honor losers.”

“Fuck you, Lizzie. Little lamb whore.”

“I hope you’re grounded forever you cold ...”

But their argument was cut off by a thunder of feet and tears crashing through their door. Their Mother didn’t do well when stressed, and lately she was always stressed. The twins stared and waited for her to speak.

“Well, don’t you look nice.” Alcohol whispered on their mother’s breath. Her eyes scanned Lizzie’s costume and then looked at Mira. “At least one of you can go have fun.”

“Mom! Lizzie’s in a nightie! Aren’t you gonna stop her?”

Their mother snorted and took another sip of her scotch. “You be careful, Elizabeth. Please.” She pointed at Mira, “And you ...”

Lizzie softly turned their mother out of the room. “Rest, Mom.” Weeping, the woman shuffled away.

Lizzie shook off the tears that threatened her, smiling at Mira. “You’re coming, right?”

Mira gave a devil smile. “Fuck, yeah.”

Lost Cliff was colder than ever. Belinda got her wish and a candle-light vigil began the festivities. Fortunately the candles were blown out by the wind and the keg arrived early, a sign from above that remembrances need only be brief.

It seemed to Mira that time traveled faster and faster year after year. She wondered on anniversaries like this if the air and sky were the same hovering above from the year before; if the same magic stood still, waiting for the earth to move back into it? Could she breathe deep enough to take in the past and find herself back in time?

This night last year she sat riding John's lap in Connor's parents' bedroom. Out in the crowded hall Lizzie's voice called out, "Has anyone seen Mira? Or John? Have you seen John?"

Mira put her mouth against John's when he came, taking in the breath he let out as he groaned, pretending to suck in his soul. Afterwards John held her and she breathed on his neck.

"So you like me after all" he said. Mira smiled and nuzzled into the cotton of his t-shirt. He dressed as the color black for Halloween like her, a happy coincidence she took as a sign; their pairing up was inevitable, preordained, needed.

"You're the only one who's ever made me come." It was a lie, but she needed to cement the win. She would pull him back into court if it was the last thing she did. It wasn't right, John hanging out with Arnie all the time. Not when Mira was queen.

John was the only fitting king and if it took a little deceit to set things right she would make that sacrifice. *It's for the school*, she thought.

John pulled her mouth to his again to start a second round. Two shades of black, grinding on a stranger's bed.

This time, before she put the condom on him, Arnie's voice complained outside their door. "John? You in

there? Not cool, dude. I feel sick.”

“Oh fuck!” Mira said.

John quickly placed his hand over Mira’s mouth and shushed her. “He’s fine,” he moaned as his other hand massaged her below.

“No.” She pushed him away. “Arnie…”

“He’s fine, Mira.”

“No! Arnie’s gonna be hazed tonight.”

“What?”

“When I found out I told them not to, and they said they wouldn’t. But the way he sounded …”

John’s eyes bore into her as he pulled his pants up. “What’re they planning?”

“I think Hannah was gonna put acid on him when he wasn’t looking. And then maybe push him in the pool, or something. I don’t know.”

“He can’t swim, Mira.”

“Really?” But she knew this. She had done her research like a good queen. Tonight decided if John and Arnie would remain protected or if Mira would target them, serving them the harsh reality their loser-dom should’ve brought weeks ago.

If she got John she wouldn’t call the hit. But if John refused her, Arnie would be sacrificed. She thought up the idea while sitting on the cliff’s edge, entranced by the message on the rock’s skin.

YOU SHOULD LIVE HERE.

The nature of the school had been disrupted and it needed to be set right. A sacrifice needed to be made and Arnie, the perpetrator of the upset, was the perfect candidate. Mira had just lured John away from Lizzie



when Arnie moved to town. He took up enough of John's attention, convincing him to stop hanging out with Mira's crowd.

She planned the entire thing, planting ideas in others' heads, and anonymously supplying the show. Her fingerprints were nowhere on it.

Alice would dance with Arnie, distract him, while Hannah placed a couple tabs on his skin. Tripping, Connor would push him into the pool. Belinda would call for help in time. He'd be pulled up, assuming someone could heft his weight.

That's where the pirates failed. They didn't respect the victim's body. It was Mira's most genius work.

But John could never know any of this. He needed to be hers. It was how it was supposed to be.

Mira followed John out of the room to Arnie who sat holding his head with tears in his eyes.

"Mira! Where have you been?" Lizzie ran to her, taking in the awkward set up of John and Arnie with suspicion.

"Lizzie, just leave me alone, alright?"

John flashed Mira a pissed glare as he guided Arnie out the front door. Lizzie caught the moment and, taking in Mira's messed hair and inside-out t-shirt, understood. "You know how much I like him, Mira. Why?"

Mira wished for once in her life Lizzie yelled at her, grew a temper and used it. Instead her sister's hurt compressed Mira, forcing the air out of her. Drowning in blame she grasped for control. "Because ... I could." And with Lizzie shocked to stone, Mira ran from the house.

By the curb John placed Arnie in the passenger seat of

his car.

“John, please let me explain!”

“You’ve done enough, Mira.”

“But it wasn’t me! Lizzie planned it!” Lying was easy when it needed to be done.

John looked over Mira’s shoulder. “Did you plan this Lizzie?”

Mira whipped around to find her sister had followed her out. “I didn’t do anything” she whimpered.

“Oh! So you didn’t make Hannah put acid on him? So he’s just faking sick for attention?” Lizzie shrugged, confused and scared. John waved her off and turned back to Arnie. Mira ran to his side. “Please John. I’m going to Lost Cliff. Would you meet me there later?”

John finished snapping Arnie’s seatbelt. “Maybe.” He flashed a look of daggers over Mira’s shoulder to Lizzie who took the cue to run back to the house.

Mira watched John drive down the street and made her way back to the house. She went to the guest room to find her coat and also found Hannah passed out.

“Hannah?”

“Hmmm?”

“Why didn’t you wait for my sign?”

“Hmmm?”

“The acid you idiot!”

“Oh.” Hannah handed her the folded sheet of tabs and, without looking at it, Mira put it in her pocket. She slipped on her jacket and purse and as shadow-like as possible, made her way to Lost Cliff.

Mira sighed with relief as she walked to her mossy spot. The wind howled, chilling her to the bone, while the

white script glowed in the moonlight.

YOU SHOULD LIVE HERE.

“I wish I did,” she said aloud.

She couldn't go home tonight. Lizzie would forgive her – she always did – but hearing her sister cry all night would be exhausting.

When she sat down something in her front jean pocket pinched her skin. She pulled out the sheet of acid and stared at it. Mira's dealer gave her ten tabs, so she was confused when ten vibrant stars stared back. Stupid, drunk Hannah never even got them on him. Mira could've kept her mouth shut, after all. But then why was Arnie acting so sick?

She suppressed a feeling she couldn't name and looked to the tabs. “Waste not, want not.” She put two on her tongue and waited for the colors to come.

“Mira?”

Mira turned and found Lizzie standing there in her modest angel costume, her chin quivering with the next generation of upset about to be born.

“Lizzie? What're you ...”

“I followed you. Is this where you've been going?”

Mira was silent.

“Why did you lie?”

“You don't get it now Lizzie, but one day you will.”

“What don't I get? I'm not stupid.”

“I had to. I really love John.”

Lizzie's eyes widened. “You don't really love John. You love power. And causing people pain. Now you're causing me pain and you love it.”

Mira opened her mouth to defend herself, but smiled

instead. Lizzie always knew Mira better than she knew herself, and she was right.

Mira turned back to the cliff. The graffiti emboldened her somehow. “Lizzie, I’m saving you a lot of pain. You’re not smart enough for him and I think you know that, too. Besides, he doesn’t do virgins.”

Lizzie let out a sorrowful heave and she padded off, leaving Mira alone with a new companion, guilt.

She tried to shake off the feeling and looked for distraction. The words didn’t even help. She then pulled a book from her purse and read: *Her belly lurched and she doubted herself...*

But Mira got no further with Lizzie’s tear-streaked face filling her mind. She dug her nails into the palms of her hand, wishing they bled. She deserved to be punished. Her body burned inside and Mira wondered if it would hurt to jump over the cliff’s edge?

Suicide always rubbed her as desperate and messy. But now guided by the cliff’s words it seemed an inspired choice. She could run off the edge staring at the words; jump towards them and with the wind at her back she guessed it might even feel like flying.

The acid hit her hard then and Mira closed her book, putting it in her back pocket and stood up. Slipping off her jacket, she walked to the cliff’s edge and looked below. If she jumped she wanted her aim to be true. Nothing would be worse than landing in the rough water on this blistering night and then having to walk shivering home, tripping her head off.

Below her the waves crashed in different colors and she watched them turn and swirl into one another. Then she

lifted her head and lost her breath.

Before Mira there stood a pirate ship. *The Black Bess*.

Rocking back and forth it took up much of the inlet with its muted colors and ripped sails. The boat creaked and crawled in a rhythmic song, a haunted hymn that hypnotized Mira. She closed her eyes and her ears picked up a gentle chuckle that vibrated all around her.

The Beast.

She needed to find him and her fascination peeked into an almost erotic thrill. She scanned the rotted deck, the decrepit crow's nest, and the broken cabin windows for the laughing inhabitant, but found none.

The laughter bounced everywhere and got closer and closer, sounding a mix of masculine and feminine. The boat continued to rock and she searched on for the laughing ghost, certain the sound came from the ship. But her belly lurched and she doubted herself.

When the Beast's hands grasped her shoulders they were almost comforting. Its head sidled next to hers. It sniffed her skin and with its chapped lips kissed the side of her cheek, causing her stomach to turn and her panties to wet all at once. The feelings intensified as he pulled her body to his, pressing her taut muscles into his full and soft flesh.

There was nowhere to run but did she want to? As she asked herself this question the Beast put its mouth next to her ear. "You should live here."

She turned to kiss him and accept his invitation.

When Mira fell over the edge her only thought was:

*This feels nothing like flying.*

Back in the present, Mira laughed thinking of her last-living irreverent thought. “A whole year has passed. Can you believe it?” she asked, more to herself than anyone. Lizzie looked over her shoulder and gave a sad smile.

“If I can have everyone’s attention!” Belinda said over the crowd. “Tonight we honor Mira Margaret Sparrow. A girl so busy helping others she never asked for help herself. Raise your cups ...”

A voice from the crowd called out, “What about Louie?”

Belinda froze. “Who? Oh yeah. Of course. To Mira!”

“And Louie!” called out the voice.

The crowd raised their cups and the drinking commenced.

Mira soon noticed John. He was alone. Lizzie noticed as well and lost Connor with a couple turns of her body through the crowd.

“Hey John.”

“Lizzie.”

“I just want to apologize. For last year.” Mira blanched and caught Lizzie’s eyes. *Taking the blame to score? Smart move, Elizabeth.*

John stopped walking and took Lizzie in. She pressed on. “I take full responsibility for my involvement in the plan. I haven’t been myself the last year, but I’m working on being better and I hope we can be friends. Arnie, too.”

John’s eyes softened and if Lizzie looked closely she could almost find a smile. He opened his mouth and Mira felt Lizzie’s heart jump with the anticipation of forgiveness. “Cool. Where’s the keg?”

“Oh.” Chest dropped, Lizzie pointed over to the evening’s idol and watched John walk away. Mira reached a hand to touch her, but Lizzie ran from the crowd toward the opposite side of the cliff.

On this less frequented side of the horseshoe the trees went right up to the edge. Mira’s hands grabbed her sister’s arm before the effort became too much and she had to let go, fearfully watching as Lizzie ran. By the time she caught up Mira was exhausted, and copied her sister’s seated posture, legs crossed inches from the precipice.

With the script now below them, Mira looked across the water to the place where she used to sit, marveling at how different something can look from the other side.

Lizzie wept and with her last ounce of energy Mira put an arm over her shoulders. Lizzie shivered, Mira forgetting her icy constitution. “Sorry. Meant ... to be ... comforting.”

Lizzie laughed. “Gotcha.”

“For ... everything.”

Lizzie rested her head on Mira’s shoulder, paying for the warmth of sisterly propinquity with the chill on her skin.

Mira looked across the water again and noticed John sat in her old seat. He sat there alone drinking his beer, and unknowingly looked at the two of them hidden in the trees, as if he waited for something. *Could he see them? Was he watching them?*

“John’s alone,” said Mira.

“So?”

“Try, again.”

“Why bother?”

“He really liked you. Before I ...”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted.”

Perhaps if she had more energy, or if she wasn’t so moved by her sister’s forgiveness, maybe Mira might have heard the tree branches snapping behind them sooner.

They stood and turned to make their way back to the party when they were both paralyzed by fear.

The Beast.

Even without the effects of the acid he was petrifying.

“Hey Arnie!” said Lizzie.

Mira wanted to shield her sister, tell her to run, but these things were against the rules; the rules never once spoken to her, but rather imprinted on her soul when she flipped from one side of the ether to the other.

Painted with green face makeup, eyes darkened around the sockets, fake blood dripped from Arnie’s mouth. The same costume as last year but his lazy ass didn’t have an excuse.

Confused by his presence and silence Lizzie tried again. “I guess now’s the perfect time. I apologize for anything that me and ... For any pain I’ve caused you.”

Arnie shook his head from side to side, his mouth pulled down in a deep grimace, and his eyes dead.

“Arnie, you’re scaring me. Can we just go back to the party together? Maybe get a soda?” Lizzie whimpered and Mira stood in front of her, knowing her shield was symbolic only.

Then Arnie stilled his head and smiled. “You got it, Lizzie! Why were you out here by yourself anyway?”



Lizzie exhaled and stepped forward into Mira, expecting to walk back to the party. But Arnie didn't move. He put his hands on Lizzie's shoulders, Mira's too, and chuckled. "You and your sister shoulda stayed away from my boyfriend." He whipped her around to face her fate. "You should live here."

When the kids were questioned by police they all claimed to have seen Lizzie jumping to her death, her arms and legs flailing so much it appeared she had four each. Some claimed she was pushed.

"Didn't you see the Beast?" Connor cried to anyone who listened. "In the trees? John, you were right across from her, you had to see?"

"I don't know what I saw" John said, dazed and unreadable.

The adults subscribed to a more rational explanation: It being the anniversary of her sister's suicide, it made regretful sense that she jumped.

When the funeral ended the twins found their way to Lost Cliff. Or rather the cliff found them. They didn't walk, float, or fly there. Lizzie's body was buried in the ground next to Mira's and then there they were, sitting with their legs crossed inches from the precipice.

"So, who wrote those words?"

Mira's chest dropped in embarrassment, "I don't know."

"You mean we're dead because of those words and no one's told you?"

"We're dead because of Arnie. But yeah, no one's been around to say."

Lizzie's eyes grew. "Maybe we're the only dead people in the world?"

"I hope you're joking."

A couple of sophomores from school walked from the parking lot and started making out against a tree. Mira and Lizzie looked at each other and smiled. The wind howled around them and they howled back into it, moaning and growling with harrowing effect. The couple detached their mouths from one another's and ran back to their car, the engine still ticking. "I told you the Beast was real!" the boy shouted.

Alone again, Lizzie sighed, "What're we gonna do about Arnie?"

"Who cares?"

"I care."

"Do you?"

Lizzie thought for a moment and shrugged her shoulders, laying back on the rock and staring up into the sky. "Ya know, this isn't that bad."

Mira smiled and picked up her book, focusing her eyes on the words again: *Her belly lurched and she doubted herself... but she couldn't fight it, she was home.*

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# TO ABSENT FRIENDS

by Jeremy Kansas

Early last September, about seven months before he used an unregistered shotgun to blow out the contents of his skull, Eddie Garcia's piece of crap hatchback rumbled up the driveway. It was the same one he'd been driving since he dropped out of UConn almost a decade before, though now the paint appeared to have contracted leprosy and the front bumper was held on by two loops of rope. I felt a strange mix of excitement and dismay at his sudden appearance.

"Yo, Moretti!" he yelled out the open window, before the car had even come to a complete stop.

I leaned my rake against the side of the house. Sarah began yanking weeds from the earth by hand with more vehemence than perhaps necessary, her eyes focused on the patch of ground before her. It was late afternoon on a Friday, still summer-warm, and Sarah and I had been fighting to clear the overgrown tangle in front of our new house. The place had been foreclosed on, abandoned for a year, and we got it cheap--or so we thought until we realized just how much work it needed.

Garcia scanned the front of the house as he staggered up the driveway toward us. While he'd never been big on the idea of presenting his best face to the world, now he looked more homeless than ever. He'd let his beard grow into a wild black tangle; his hair too, had lengthened and he kept pushing it out of his eyes; his clothes looked

slept-in and unwashed and I noticed a cigarette burn-hole in the knee of his jeans.

"How've you been?" I asked him.

"Look at this place," he said, and I wasn't sure how he meant it. The small Cape's white-turning-green vinyl siding was screaming for a good power-washing. It was on Sarah's growing list. "How've *you* been? And you, Sarah?"

She stood, perhaps because he'd addressed her directly, and brushed dirt from her hands and knees. "Eddie," she said with a frown, "are you okay?"

"Never better," he said, but now he was close enough for us to smell the beer on his breath. "Just got back from Japan the other day." Then to me: "Dude, I saw Merzbow."

"What the hell's a Merzbow?" Sarah asked. A bead of sweat trailed down her nose.

"Japanese noise music," I said. "Never mind." She stared at me, her pupils shrunk to pinhole size. Usually such a sweetheart, with a girlish giggle and an amiability that had won her the friendship of practically all our colleagues, it was always strange to see this change in her when Garcia came around.

"Look, Moretti," Garcia said. "How many months has it been since we've seen each other?"

"Probably too many," I said, thinking of how I'd recently been lamenting my lack of social contact with anyone but Sarah and our work friends. We were both in the Colinsville school system: she taught music at the middle school, I taught music at the high school next door. It's basically how we met.

"Come on, man. It's Friday and we're going on an adventure." Then he invoked the magic words: "My treat."

"Well...." I glanced at Sarah.

"Can Thomas come out to play, Mrs. M?"

She carefully plucked off her glasses and drew a hand across her forehead. Her frown seemed to deepen. "I can't stop him. He's an adult."

I used my tee-shirt to wipe my face clear of sweat and caught a good whiff of how bad I smelled. I also noticed all the dirt caked under my nails. I excused myself to take a quick shower and change into something clean. When I reemerged from the house, Garcia was leaning on his car, smoking a cigarette and staring blankly up at the surrounding trees. Sarah gripped a rake, digging at layers of black wet leaves collected along the foundation. It seemed they hadn't so much as looked at each other while I'd been inside. I gave Sarah a quick kiss, and she whispered to me only two words:

"Please behave."

I was silent for the first few minutes of our drive and this seemed to irritate Garcia.

"We haven't seen each other in how long and you don't even want to talk about shit?"

I had been privately reminiscing about our high school days. Garcia and I, along with Stan Levesque and Leslie Packer, had spent much of our time in Packer's parents' garage, drunk or stoned or tripping balls (or various combinations of the three), playing what might best be

described as free-improv punk music. We didn't really write songs, instead used a kind of lazy anarchist philosophy to justify what was really just unstructured, drugged-out noise. Funny thing was, the Straw Dogs scored a couple gigs--which of course we'd bombed beautifully.

"Heard from Packer at all?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Nope."

"But you got his Christmas card, right?" It was the only word we ever received from him since he'd moved out to Michigan years earlier with his wife to be closer to her family. They came yearly, usually in mid-January.

"The one with his kids on the front dressed up and posed like dolls?" Garcia snorted. "Yeah, I stuck it on the fridge next to my fucking Norman Rockwell calendar."

Another moment of silence before I thought of a way to redirect the conversation: "So, Japan, huh?"

Garcia grinned behind the wheel. He drove erratically through the darkening day, accelerating too fast and stopping suddenly, riding the bumpers of any car not driving fast enough--but I knew this was his style and could not be blamed on whatever drinks he'd already had.

"Yeah, man, fucking Japan. Fucking *Merzbow*."

"Fun trip, I take it?"

He laughed. "Those people sell some freaky shit in vending machines."

"So I've heard."

"What about you, Moretti? Too busy for a vacation?"

I started to mention the trip Sarah and I had taken up to Cape Cod for a weekend of antiquing (Sarah fancied

herself a hobbyist antique dealer thanks to a few lucky eBay sales), but Garcia began chuckling.

"Man, you're scaring me."

"Why?"

"You're going down the same fucking route as Packer. Maybe worse."

"What about you?" I kicked at a collection of empty brown bottles on the floor at my feet. "Ever think you're becoming too much like Levesque?"

That shattered his grin and the conversation lagged. I let a few moments pass with only the hum of the tires on the road to fill them. When I glanced at Garcia again I saw a stranger there, someone I could no longer relate to. He lived alone, had a day job as a forklift operator in some warehouse, and by night performed as an experimental musician--the only one of our original group still seriously involved in music, unless you counted my teaching job. He used an array of contraptions he'd circuit-bent to create these shrieking, glitching soundscapes, and topped it off with a show involving Halloween masks and raw meat, with the intention, according to him, of "making the audience feel threatened." He called his project Audio Rehabilitation Program for Delusional Marionettes. Like most things with Garcia, I was never sure if he took it all seriously or if it was just a big joke.

Now in silence, Garcia brought us into Wilbraham, where he'd been renting a room in a house on West Main behind the hospital. We passed a number of defunct mills, big brick buildings with most of their windows gone, painted a sick orange color by the setting sun.

Garcia pointed out where he lived as we drove by. I don't think he saw my grimace. Maybe I'd just gotten too used to living in Colinsville, a boring little bedroom town in Connecticut's so-called Quiet Corner whose only claim to fame was some tavern where George Washington supposedly stayed once on his way to Boston.

"I think my neighbor is a crack dealer," he said with a short barking laugh.

"That's funny?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, maybe."

We took a side road after passing behind Wilbraham General and Garcia swung us into a potholed parking lot lit only by the lights from the road.

"Where's the adventure?" I asked.

"You'll see." Grinning again. "Remember: my treat."

An adventure, in Garcia-speak, meant finding a hole-in-the-wall dive we'd never heard of nor been to, getting so wasted we could barely see straight, then letting ourselves loose into the spinning night-world. Part of me doubted this night would be more than a futile attempt of two overgrown kids to recreate the past, but I told myself that maybe I deserved a break, some fun. It was easy to convince yourself of that when you hung out with Garcia. Still, Sarah's final words hung in the back of my mind like an omen. *Please behave.*

The parking lot he'd brought us to didn't look like a particularly safe place to get out of the car so, naturally, we got out of the car. Wilbraham sounds--car engines, a police siren, bass from a sound system--seemed to come from far away. The strip mall which Garcia had led us to looked deserted, every business dark and abandoned. It



was one of those areas that make you feel like the apocalypse already happened but nobody really noticed: the pervasive odor of gasoline-soaked asphalt and overflowing dumpsters, the cracked and weed-infested sidewalk, the rows of storefronts with boarded up windows and signs advertising products you haven't heard of since you were a kid.

"Eddie, I don't think there's any bars around here." The sun was gone and twilight had settled in, making everything look flat and gray. "At least none still in business."

"When have I ever given you reason to doubt my powers?"

He pointed to the corner where the two arms of the L-shaped strip mall met. The neon above the door told us we'd found the Loom City Pub, and the flickering beer logos hung in the windows assured us this was a place to get drunk.

Upon entering, the dimly lit bar renewed my faith in Garcia's uncanny ability to uncover the worst of the worst. Stained floor tiles ran the length of the narrow room, many cracked or coming loose. A few figures hunched over drinks at the small tables arranged opposite the bar, seeming to have neither the energy nor curiosity to look up at our arrival. A dank odor of alcohol and sweat hung in the air.

We took a couple stools. I leaned my arms on the bar itself, but the wood, worn smooth by ages of drinks and arms, felt strangely damp and cold in a way I found unpleasant, so I dropped my hands to my lap. The little old man behind the bar shuffled up to us.

"Welcome to Loom City, boys," he said in a raspy voice. I assumed at the time he was welcoming us to the bar. Loom City was Wilbraham's old nickname, long out of common use, from when it had been a thriving textile city, rather than the "pseudo-urban shit-hole" (Garcia's term) it had become.

"Pleasure to be here," Garcia said with a smirk.

The bartender's head was withered and bald with big ugly liver spots on top. He stared, first at Garcia, then at me. Piercing eyes with tiny pupils, dry and red-rimmed, that seemed not to blink. I couldn't hold his gaze and had to look down at my hands.

Garcia took initiative. As was our tradition, he ordered a pair of shots of the cheapest gin available--not a problem considering there seemed to be no brands of anything I recognized behind the bar. The bartender placed the shots before us without a word and that was when I noticed his hands, skin pinkish and peeling, scabbed over in spots. We toasted Stan Levesque, who died nearly eight years before when, twisted on beer and weed and coke, he flipped his car on a fast food run. His Catholic family had wanted an open casket wake and it had not been possible. We downed the liquor, and the grimace on Garcia's face surely mirrored my own--he had decided that when toasting the memory of a dead friend, it should be done with a drink we all find distasteful, and none of us (Levesque included) had ever been gin drinkers.

Garcia ordered another pair of shots and said, "And to Leslie Packer, who might as well be dead, too." He raised his cloudy shot glass.

"No, come on."

"Just drink it, Moretti."

I hesitated before meeting his shot glass with mine and drinking. By the grin on his face, I thought he might be joking, but of course this was Garcia and even Levesque, with whom he'd been closest, had often been unable to read him. Maybe it had something to do with how his eyes and mouth never seemed to be in precise agreement with each other.

"Dead friends," the bartender said. I started, hadn't realized he was still standing there, still staring at us. He shook his head. "It's sad when friends die, sadder still to be left alone, still alive."

"Hey, fuck off old man," Garcia said with a laugh. The bartender gave a slight bow and backed away.

Now that we both had the burn of liquor and memory deep in our guts, it was okay to move on to beer. The only thing the place had on tap was Loom City Ale, apparently a local brew. It was light, bitter, and a bit salty, but it would work. I reached for my wallet, feeling guilty about Garcia paying for everything when I made more money than he did, but he said, "Put that shit away. It's tough getting you to come out these days, so when I say my treat, Moretti, I fucking mean my treat."

"Hey, no offense."

"I know."

For a while then, we just sat there drinking in silence, two guys who'd known each other long enough to be able to comfortably enjoy each other's company without exchanging a single word--at least that's how it should have been, but I could feel the tangible gulf of our

diverging lives between us. As for the bartender, he spent most of his time on a stool behind the bar, staring at his feet with a vacant expression. I wondered if Garcia had insulted him, or if perhaps he was just waiting to die. The bar itself was eerily quiet--no television, no radio--and so probably without being entirely conscious of it, when Garcia finally broke the silence it was in a hushed voice as if we were in church.

"Been thinking," he said. All mirth had left his voice and I wondered how much of a head start he'd gotten on me earlier as he was already starting to sound drunk.

"About?"

"Me, you, the band, the past, the future."

"Ah," I said, trying to keep a light jokey tone, "big things."

"I'm serious."

"I was thinking about us, too," I said. "We had a lot of fun back then, didn't we?"

"Did we?" Garcia asked. "You think teenagers on shitloads of drugs are doing anything but masking their misery?"

I didn't know what to say. I was pretty sure I'd never heard him speak like that. He stared at the row of bottles behind the bar, all glowing with a vague redness from the neon hanging above that said, strangely, WELCOME BACK.

"What if its all some kind of illusion?" he said.

"What if *what* is?"

"Our memories." He waved a hand in the air. "Or maybe all of it. Everything."

"Sounds like the kind of things we used to talk about

when we were on acid."

Garcia sniffed. "Don't write it off like that. If I remember, you were always the biggest proponent of how acid helped us see through the bullshit."

"But it takes away so much," I argued. In our time we'd gone places inside our own heads other people would probably have trouble conceiving. I wondered about Garcia, because from the sound of it I got the impression that he still dabbled in the stuff. The idea of taking LSD in my present situation--thoughts of the house, of Sarah, of my school kids--was somehow terrifying to me. "It makes it very hard to live a functional life."

"Functional?" He laughed derisively. "Is that what you have? A functional life? Your pretty American cliché?"

"Sarah and I are trying to be happy."

"Happiness is a foolish goal."

I couldn't find the words then to tell him how uncomfortable I'd at times found myself in my new role, the dissonance between my past and present self leaving me feeling almost as if my life was a lie. I didn't want to admit it, but some of what he was saying resonated with me, at least on some strange level of my life-damaged psyche.

"Speaking of acid," I said, trying to turn the course of the conversation, "remember that party at the sandpits where the four of us were tripping, and everyone else there was drunk and giving us shit about not drinking?"

Garcia's grin returned. "Then the cops showed up and we were the only four that passed the sobriety tests." He chuckled. "Yeah, they told us, four guys out of our fucking minds but somehow holding it together in front of

them--"

"Out of terror, Eddie, sheer terror--"

"Yeah, terror, four guys out of their minds, terrified of the cops, told that they were safe to drive home."

He raised his beer to me. "To never getting nabbed by the cops, despite how many times we encountered them."

I met his toast and drank. By then I'd already managed to empty a few glasses. "Gotta break the seal," I said.

"If you take a piss, put it back," Garcia said, but he seemed to speak it into his beer, without humor.

You never knew just how drunk you were getting until you tried to find the bathroom. I hobbled past a pool table that looked like it hadn't seen use in years. The cracked lampshade above splashed odd web patterns of pale light across the felt. In the back corner of the bar, I passed a withered man sitting alone, wheezing, face down on the table, hand still gripping some kind of dark-hued drink. Something about him, the way he yielded absolutely to gravity or the way his clothes seemed to bunch up around his limbs, made me think he looked like a retired scarecrow.

I pushed my way into the men's room. I expected a nasty odor, but encountered instead something subtle that seemed to shift the more I tried to pin it down: the scent of an extinguished candle, or maybe asphalt after a rainstorm. At the urinal, I pissed for what felt like hours. Ghost remnants of blood stains trailed down the porcelain. (Why would I think that, I wondered, of course it was just hard water.) As I stood there, one hand on the cold wall to keep me steady, I studied the various phrases scrawled and scratched into the tiles before me, but it all

seemed to be written in a foreign language, the characters vaguely Cyrillic. Out of nowhere I thought of the time we'd all been kicked out of Red Lobster when Packer and one of the waitresses had been caught fucking in the men's room. I barked out some laughter, but it sounded too close and too lonely in the small bathroom.

After flushing, I went to the sink. I rinsed my hands, splashed water on my face. Maybe it was the weak fluorescent lighting, or maybe the alcohol in my system--or maybe some of the things Garcia had been talking about--but I noticed then the dullness of my skin, how it sagged around my eyes, and realized I'd noticed similar changes in Garcia but had managed, until then, to ignore them. We were getting older. Everything we'd been through, all our adventures, all our accomplishments and failures, had somehow led to this very moment, and all that led here was gone, slipped away irrevocably.

Something in the reflection caught my attention. Something behind me that made the hair on my arms go cold and stiff. In the part of the stall visible beneath the closed door a pair of bare feet were planted on the tile floor in front of the toilet. The realization that I had shared the bathroom with another this whole time made me shudder. I thought back, but couldn't remember anyone in the bar getting up, neither entering nor exiting the restroom, so as far as I knew this person, this barefoot person, had been in here a long time.

I turned around slowly. I stared down at the feet, shrunken and wrinkled with tufts of thick white hair at the knuckles, and strained my eyes and ears for any sign of movement or sound. Nothing: the buzzing

near-silence of fluorescent lights and the stasis of an otherwise empty bathroom. Strange that we had talked about LSD, for that was the first time I noticed that night how I was beginning to feel the same way I remembered feeling on the morning after a hard trip: detached, the world an ill fit for my mind, my thoughts foreign and disorganized like discarded dreams.

Unnerved, I exited the bathroom, and that's when I first saw the twins, sitting on either side of Garcia. The religious silence of the bar had been broken. Raucous laughter came from Garcia and the two large men seated on either side of him, as if I had somehow been gone long enough for new bonds of friendship to be formed.

"Damn, Moretti," Garcia called across the room, "I thought you died in there."

I approached the bar, waited for a moment, expecting one of the men to give up a stool beside Garcia. Neither introduced themselves, nor made any indication they intended to move, so I sat one seat to the left and nodded a wordless greeting at both men. They were twins, identical in every visible way, except for a milky film covering the left eye of the one beside me. They were probably middle-aged, but the combination of red-cheeked, boyish faces, and absolutely hairless heads made it difficult to pinpoint. They wore matching denim jackets. Both offered the same grin, thick lips parting just enough to show a flash of white, but their three good eyes held glints of something fractured and cold that I think Garcia had become too drunk to notice.

The twin beside me clapped me on the back. "We were just telling your friend here the one about the



uncircumcised Jew.” The man’s voice rasped like a lifetime smoker and his breath stunk like his diet consisted primarily of dog food. “Ever heard it?”

I grinned conspiratorially and lied. “That’s one of my favorites.”

With a greedy sparkle in his eyes and the cadence of innuendo in his voice, Garcia said, “Tom, these guys might be able to, you know, see to it that we properly celebrate our night out.”

"Properly celebrate?"

"You *know* what I mean." He gestured at his nose.

“Ah. I see.” I was aware that both twins had fixed me with their unbalanced gaze. “Since Packer left, maybe a couple of times, I’ve only--“

“C’mon, Moretti, drinking in a bar is just drinking in a bar, but this will help lead us on an adventure.”

"Well--"

“My treat.”

I had assumed he’d stopped when I did many years before, around the time I began dating Sarah--she had, you might say, saved me from my old self--but I had no actual idea of whether Garcia had still been doing coke or not. We’d gotten pretty bad there at one point. For a while after Levesque died we’d gotten worse. But the way Garcia’s lips slid into his trademark smile, the way his voice lilted just so as he spoke the magic words--it made me want to have fun, relive old times, made me almost believe I deserved to. This, I realize now, was probably the main reason Sarah disliked Garcia, and I could never quite explain to her the power of his strange charisma.

I relaxed and shrugged.

He looked from one twin to the other and said, "So how 'bout it, guys?"

The twins exchanged a glance that seemed to me to communicate nothing. The one to the right of Garcia said to him, "Alright, let's go."

As they rose from their stools, Garcia shot me a goofy smirk that I knew he meant to quell any anxiety I felt about the situation, but I was pretty sure I detected some cautious awareness in his eyes. He wasn't stupid when it came to this sort of thing, I knew that. We'd had plenty of experience. Still, I watched him follow the man out of the bar with a heavy feeling of doubt. Then I was alone with the other twin.

"They won't be long," the man said, his good eye fixed on my face. "We'll kill time until they come back. Let's have a drink."

Without waiting for me to speak, he mumbled something under his breath. The bartender, who I hadn't realized was standing right there, had maybe been standing there the whole time, poured two shots of a thick black liquid from what appeared to be an unlabeled bottle. The twin raised his shot glass with his meaty hand, then waited, watching me. Despite my reluctance, I raised my own shot glass, gave a phony grin, and clinked it against the twin's.

"To absent friends," he said.

"What is this shit?"

"Local concoction. Just drink it."

The liquor was harsh and bitter, unlike anything I'd ever tasted. It slipped down my throat like oil, chilled the entire length of my esophagus, and coiled at the bottom

of my stomach like a dead eel. I belched and tasted bile.

"Good shit, am I right?"

I nodded, sure I would vomit if I opened my mouth to reply. The twin mumbled at the bartender again, and again the old man placed two black shots before us. This time, the twin downed his without waiting to toast, but I just sat there, staring down at mine with a mix of dread and loathing. I leaned away, but still its aroma burned my nostrils.

"Bar etiquette," the twin said. "Never decline a gifted drink."

I managed to control my gorge and get it down, then sat there grimacing with my eyes closed, thinking that *this* drink, whatever it was, was the drink you use to toast dead friends, not fucking gin.

"Old buddies, out looking for trouble, eh?"

"Something like that," I said. I ordered another beer, hoped it would wash away the itchy feeling of his unrelenting stare.

"Only two of you left, though," he said with a slight shake of his head.

"I guess."

"But you're trying to be happy with your new house and your new wife and your new life. And you have some social interaction with your co-workers, so that's not so bad, right?"

"Seems okay," I said. "I think it's more complicated than that." I focused on my beer, couldn't even look at him. Had Garcia told him about me, or was he just good at reading people?

I watched him swallow two more of those black shots in

quick succession, almost horrified at his ability to do it without even the slightest twitch or wince. The taste of it was still with me, no matter how much beer I downed.

"He's sad, you know," the twin said.

"What? Who?"

"Your buddy there."

"Why would you say that?"

The twin waved his hand in the air as if it wasn't important, so I let it go. The flickering, buzzing lights above the bar were making me feel nauseous. I huddled around my Loom City Ale, trying with just my body language to convey that I had no more interest in conversation--if that was what you called this uncomfortable exchange. And for at least a few minutes it seemed to work, the twin left me alone. But of course it didn't last.

"In the mood for some barroom philosophy?"

"Not really."

"The way my brother and I see it, everything is an illusion, memories especially."

At the time, though it sounded familiar, I was unable to remember where I'd first heard that.

"We aren't equipped to understand much of anything. We try to impose our logic on an illogical universe. That's why the interpretation is always wrong. Nothing makes sense and the mind can pretend otherwise for only so long."

"Wait a minute, you said Garcia was sad. Sad in what way?"

The twin just shook his head and said, "Human relationships are little more than hands reaching out

toward each other in darkness--but who can say for sure if there's even another hand out there?"

I tried not to let myself think about the things he was saying. I shifted on my hard stool. My ass was getting sore and this guy was starting to both irritate me and make me nervous.

"You're kind of bringing me down," I said, "why don't we both just shut up for awhile and enjoy the fucking ambiance."

He pretended not to hear me. "So my girlfriend called me up the other day to tell me she shaved her pussy." He wasn't smiling at all, just staring at me with his one clear eye, and as far as I could tell he wasn't blinking either. He used the same tone of voice he'd used when relating his dark philosophy, as if this was just another aspect of that. "She said 'you know what that means?' and I said 'yeah, the fucking drain is clogged again.'"

Before I was given a chance to react the twin's pocket made a buzzing sound and he pulled out a cheap flip-phone. He mumbled a few words into it, paused to listen, then folded the phone and returned it to his pocket. He set his uneven gaze back on me.

"Guess things aren't going as smoothly as planned."

"What does that mean?"

"It means," he said, "we're going to go see some titties while we wait."

I shook my head. "I'm waiting for him here."

The twin rose and headed for the door.

"Hey!" I called after him, but he was gone. Garcia liked to go on about how he "refused the lure" of modern commodities like mp3 players and cell phones (which also

formed part of the convoluted philosophy behind his experimental music, I believe, but damned if I could figure it out), and what that meant to me now was that this man was the only connection I had to my friend.

I didn't wait for indecision to set in. I tossed some bills on the counter and raced outside in time to see the twin slip into a shadowy doorway in the opposite arm of the strip mall.

The night had gone cool and very dark. I couldn't even really see much light from the streetlights, everything only outlined in the oddly yellowish moonlight. Rising above the rear of the strip mall, I noticed the looming bulk of one of those old mills, gutted, forgotten. Something about the look of it, blind and somehow carnivorous, gave me a shudder.

"Hurry up!" the twin barked at me from the shadows.

The doorway where his voice came from had no lights, no visible sign. The alcohol in my system temporarily overcame any reservations I might have otherwise had about following a strange man into an unfamiliar place, and I passed through a tight opening into an unlit corridor. A swinging door swished shut behind me, and I stumbled forward, engulfed in total darkness. I used my hands as eyes, feeling my way forward between walls that felt smooth as polished stone and strangely cool. After a number of sharp turns in the corridor I quickly lost my sense of direction. Absolute silence accompanied me on my blind journey, and just like the bar's bathroom, the odor of something hard to pinpoint--an old space heater? an unused root cellar?--hung in the air.

Despite the general odd nature of the night up until

that point, it wasn't until then, feeling somehow lost even though there was only one way to go, that an uncomfortable tension spread throughout my chest and stomach. I began to feel like I was being herded, like cattle to a slaughter. I worried I would be robbed, or worse, and I had to be honest with myself: All I wanted to do was find Garcia and go home.

Finally, my hand came upon something solid in the passageway in front of me and I passed through another swinging door. Though still quite dark, soft blue lights hidden in the ceiling revealed the vague outlines of tables, chairs, and a stage without a pole.

The twin with the milky eye stood before me. "We saved a spot for you right up front." He took my arm and pulled me past tables where hunched figures sat and stared at the empty stage as if hypnotized--I couldn't shake the mad notion that they were all duplicates of the retired scarecrow from the bar. He led me to a pair of uncomfortable folding chairs at the foot of the stage, between a number of still, silent figures. He sat to my right, close enough to press against my arm.

Sitting in this near dark, without sound of voices or movement or even respiration, it felt as if time had stopped. I gripped the cold brass rail ringing the stage. I could barely breathe. Then the man to my left spoke.

"That you, Tom?"

His voice sounded without inflection as if he'd gotten a lot more drunk, well beyond fun-drunk, since we'd parted, but I let out a sigh at having found him.

"Fuck, Eddie, what's going on?"

He turned his face, and maybe it was too dark to tell,

but his eyes didn't seem able to focus on mine. "It's an adventure, right?"

"Is it?" I said, trying to keep the rising tension out of my voice as if controlling my words would control my emotions. I noticed the other twin sitting to his left. "Is that what this is?"

He didn't say anything for easily a full minute. "No, it can't be, there can't be any more adventures." The voice of a despondent drunk, something I'd rarely if ever heard from Garcia. "Not without them."

"Them?" The word made me feel momentarily paranoid.

"Shit, man, Stan and Les." With a strange ache I suddenly remembered that time we'd all been kicked out of the Electric Blue when Levesque had spewed vomit across the stripper's sparkling high heels. "*Our friends.*"

Out of nowhere, a spasm of white light attacked my eyes--then went dark. Amoebas of color swam across my vision, left me completely blind for a few moments. I sensed, though heard no scraping of chairs or other movement, that the twins had somehow inched closer, giving us little room for movement, certainly no path of escape. A subtle change in the atmosphere, like the chill wind and static charge riding ahead of a storm, was the only precursor to the appearance of a bone-pale woman from behind a black curtain at the far rear of the stage. No announcement and no musical accompaniment. Absolute silence. She lurched across the stage amid the intermittent strobing of that harsh light. She had the requisite long legs ending in impossibly high-heeled shoes, the big tits barely held in the small triangles of her



bikini top, but it was not dark enough to hide her thinning hair or gaunt face with its mannequin expression.

Everything felt wrong and I couldn't think straight. That acid-aftermath sensation was seeming more and more like an acid-precursor feeling, all kinds of potential and anxiety building up inside me, and I wasn't sure if I should stay or try to leave. Each time the lights flashed it took a number of seconds before my vision recovered. And each time, I had a sense, or a fear, of furtive movement taking place around us during my time of blindness. Even the stripper seemed to change place suddenly, without sound, and I grew more and more uncertain of the color and length of her hair, the tone of her skin, or the location and nature of the numerous scars and tattoos adorning her body. Every time I fixed on what I thought I saw the strobe would again flash, plunging me back behind a veil of afterimages.

When my vision cleared one last time, the stripper stood at the very edge of the stage, right in front of us, not moving. Emanating off her skin was not the cloying perfume I was at this point praying for, but again that impossible to identify odor--dust, tears. Her shallow gray gaze seemed to fall somewhere between Garcia and myself. I noticed her feet were actually bare now. They were the feet of an old man, shrunken and wrinkled with tufts of thick white hair at the knuckles.

"Jesus." I felt sick. I gripped Garcia by the arm. "We need to go."

"It's too late for that," the twin beside me said. "You're already here."

Garcia let me yank him to his unsteady feet and the twins, chuckling as if we were acting out something comic, moved apart enough to let us retreat. I pulled Garcia to the swinging door I thought we'd entered through and we found ourselves back in the complete darkness of the corridor. I dragged him through the dark faster than was probably safe, but at that point my rising panic made it difficult to control my speed.

After a few minutes of racing down the hall, I realized something was wrong. My hand felt different. Empty. Cold fingers climbed my spine.

"Eddie," I hissed.

No reply. When had I let go of his hand?

I waved my arms around in the dark, felt around on the floor, but somehow he'd disappeared. *Human relationships are little more than hands reaching out toward each other in darkness*, a voice echoed in my head. I was suddenly unsure of whether I'd even held his hand at all.

"Eddie!" Whatever the walls were made of, they absorbed my call. There was so little reverberation I shuddered at the dead sound of it and cried for him no more.

What else could I do? I went on through the twisting hallway, absolutely lost. I became certain that I'd taken the wrong door and that feel of cattle to the slaughter came back stronger than ever. My whole body felt somehow both numb and blazing with the coursing of adrenaline and my line of thinking had become a pinhole of intention that refused to muse on the situation beyond what felt absolutely necessary for survival.

I'm not sure how much I can trust my memory of that night at all, let alone those last hours. All I know for certain is that somehow, many hours later according to my watch, I stumbled back out to the parking lot and found Garcia slumped against his car, staring up at the moonlit mill. I spoke to him, shook him, and only when I shouted into his face did his eyes find mine. He still wouldn't talk, so I just helped him into the passenger seat. I don't know if he needed a new clutch or my nerves were too shot to operate the vehicle correctly, but it took some effort to get going. Once we did I drove a labyrinth of empty, unlit, and unlabeled streets for hours until suddenly, as if jerking awake from a dream, I found myself driving vaguely familiar roads, heading out of Wilbraham toward Colinsville, unable to recall exactly how I had found my way there.

We were silent most of the way home but as we neared my house Garcia suddenly spoke.

"It's sad when friends die," he said. "Sadder still to be left alone, still alive."

"Eddie?"

"I miss them so much."

A tight chill rose on my skin and it took me a moment to realize he wasn't speaking of the twins. "Me, too," I said.

"Packer was a fucking great drummer."

"Yeah."

"I miss you too, Tom."

"Jesus, Eddie."

"I'm not always--not very--I hope you're happy with Sarah."

I didn't know how to explain to him that it wasn't that simple. Besides, hadn't he been the one to tell me, earlier that night, that happiness was a foolish goal?

Instead I asked him: "What happened to us back there?"

He shook his head but said nothing.

"I lost you for a while in the dark, where did you go?"

He made a sort of whimpering sound but still said nothing. Then we reached my house as the first inkling of blue light crept up over the horizon.

"Eddie?"

"Nothing happened. Fuck off."

He got into the driver's seat without another word and sped away.

That was the last time I saw him.

I don't know if I've gotten all this down right. Hell, if memories *are* illusions (and let us at least admit that they are imperfect, unreliable things) then how can I be sure of anything I remember about that night? I drove back to that empty mall after Garcia killed himself to confirm that the bar was in fact real--and it was, or so my eyes told me--but of the strip club we ended up in I saw no sign. The old mills loomed all around, though they seemed far less sinister during the day. Still, just being that close to it all got me shaking, shaking bad, and I had to pull over and remind myself to breathe before I was able to drive safely home.

It's been eight months now, but I still wake at night, and the darkness in the bedroom is the darkness of an

endless corridor that smells of something like memories that have burnt away, and I reach out my hand, reach out into the dark, clawing and grasping, and there is nothing...but then something touches me, another hand, cold and small and delicate, and it grips me and it pulls me out of the dark and into some kind of sense. It is Sarah. I am so grateful to have her, especially at these times, have her there to cradle me and push the hair out of my face and whisper to me, to help me to believe the images haunting my sleep are only nightmares.

I sometimes wonder what happened to Garcia during those final hours when we lost each other. I wonder if he saw or experienced things he just couldn't live with, or if he was really just so lonely or miserable in the life he'd created that he decided to opt out. There is so much I'll never know, never understand. But I will move on: The house still needs so much work to make it what we want it to be, and also, Sarah's pregnant. I realize now that family life is only one of many potentially valid paths through our existence, perhaps just another escape from the meaningless incomprehensible chaos of the universe, a way to keep busy, to keep the mind occupied. I don't care. Happiness is a temporary state of mind, it can't be a goal, but I'm content with my job, I'm starting to like my house, and I love my wife. If it's all illusions, I accept them.

Jeremy Kansas lives in New England with his wife and daughter. He spends most of his free time reading and writing. He dislikes boring author bios and talking about himself in the third person. He can be found online at [jeremykansas.wordpress.com](http://jeremykansas.wordpress.com).

# THE CLEANSING

by C. I. Kemp

*Lo! Death has reared himself a throne*

*In a strange city lying alone...*

From "The City in the Sea" by Edgar Allan Poe

Gryff stood at the rim of the crater.

At the bottom lay the city. Within the city lay the consummate prize. Up close, they were multi-faceted fist-sized structures with surfaces arranged in random patterns in varying spatial dimensions. When light hit one of those surfaces, however, they radiated myriad colors in a far-reaching display of unparalleled shimmering beauty.

Was it any wonder that Terraquean crystals were the most sought-after prize in the galaxy? Why, even a few would buy Gryff passage to Homeworld where he could live out his days in comfort. He hated this orbiting mud-glob and would do anything to leave it forever. There was nothing for him here.

A lucky thief might find an unshielded dwelling. A clever one would penetrate the shields. Gryff fell into the "clever" category.

His eyes turned away from the city, towards the sea.

The waters were churning and roiling. Soon, they would penetrate the crater-city, first trickling, then rushing downward in torrents, washing away anything that wasn't shielded. Within hours, everything would be

completely submerged and would remain so until the waters receded into the soil.

Gryff wended his way downward, along the switchbacks and terraces.

In the shielded dwelling, Burrows cast a furtive peek onto the street below. He had to be careful – it would not do if a straggler or worse, a sentry, spotted him.

There was no one. The street was empty.

Burrows relaxed. He fingered the fully-charged blaster at his side. Before the sea engulfed the crater-city, he would be rid of a major thorn in his side. He relished the thought of looking into a pair of eyes as they realized that death was seconds away.

In the past, Burrows hired out such work, but today was the first day of the Cleansing. The crater-city would be deserted except for himself and his target. There would be no one to witness, no one to talk. He had arranged it so that when the body was discovered, no one could link him to the deed. It was all so safe, so perfect.

Burrows made his way to the console and changed the setting to unshielded. He sat down to wait, wearing the smile of a man secure in the knowledge that he'd left nothing to chance.

As he walked, Gryff watched for sentries who might still be patrolling, seeking to aid last-minute evacuees or to forestall those, like him, who saw the occasion as an opportunity for self-enrichment.

The crater was an oval, 240 meters deep; 16,000 from north to south, 800 from east to west. Its towering spires and glorious minarets shimmered in the dying glow of the Terraquean sunset, an effect of the light-refracting shields. Its streets were lined with multi-colored mosaics, durable enough to withstand the sea's advancing onslaught. They reflected the fading sunlight and reminded Gryff of the crystals that would soon be his.

When the Terraqueans made their pilgrimage to the Shrinecenters, they took only their most basic possessions, as demanded by the ritual known as the Cleansing. The crystals would remain behind.

He didn't have much time. He didn't need it.

Gryff was traveling light. All he carried was a rucksack and a serrated *kris* sheathed on his belt. The *kris* was long and sharp enough to gut a man to the bone. Gryff had never used it, never hoped to. He carried it solely to intimidate. Thief, he might be; thug he was not.

The trail ended and Gryff fingered the bauble dangling from his neck, a gray coin-like disc.

It was time to go to work.

The pickings had been good.

Darkness was falling and the waters had begun to flow over the far edge of the crater, and the night wind was carrying fine droplets of spray. Gryff was approaching the trail leading out of the crater-city when he saw something he hadn't noticed earlier: a dwelling which stood out in perfect clarity, not shimmering, because it was unshielded, vulnerable.



Gryff weighed his options. Another haul would delay his departure, but it would also mean the difference between a comfortable lifestyle on Homeworld and a lavish one.

It was too good an opportunity to pass up.

He ran up the front walkway and tried the portal. Luck was with him – it was unsecured.

Stepping into the dim light, he found himself in a typical Terraquean dwelling. Circular rooms which melted into one another. Alabaster walls, floors, and ceilings whose off-white surfaces were streaked with turquoise veins. The trappings were similar to Homeworld's: couches, chairs and tables with settings designed to accommodate humanoid life forms. The only difference was that there were no lighting fixtures. The walls themselves housed ambient lighting, activated via remote control or voice command.

Gryff made his way into the central foyer. Adjoining the rear wall was a circular stairwell, beneath which was an archway leading into a small anteroom. He hastened toward the archway and found what he was looking for.

Every Terraquean dwelling had an anteroom such as this which served as a miniature shrine, housing a waist-high pedestal upon which rested an array of crystals. This dwelling was no exception.

Gryff was starting to fill his rucksack when the walls began to glow with full ambient illumination.

Footsteps came from the front portal, light and tripping, together with a girl's voice calling, "Is that you?"

Gryff reached for the *kris*.

He stepped from the anteroom and found himself facing a smiling Terraquean girl. Her skin was a burnished orange, as was her long flowing hair. Her pupil-less eyes were azure blue and she wore a form-fitting tunic of the same color. By Terraquean standards, she would be considered merely attractive. By Homeworld standards, she was ravishing.

Her smile faded when she saw Gryff. “Who are you?”

“Never mind that. Who are *you*? What are you doing here?”

Her eyes fell on the *kris*, but she did not flinch. “This is my...” she spoke a Terraquean word that Gryff did not understand “...house, and I expect him here soon.”

Gryff brandished the *kris*. “Look, lady. I don’t want to hurt you, so just stand aside.”

The girl did not move as her eyes fell on the rucksack. “You’re a...” Again, she spoke a Terraquean word, one Gryff recognized.

“That’s right. Now just back off, okay?”

“Don’t move.”

Gryff turned towards this new voice and found himself facing a fellow Homeworlder, holding a blaster.

The girl smiled again, repeated the Terraquean word she’d used earlier which Gryff now interpreted to mean “sweetheart,” or “lover.”

“I’m so happy to see you,” she squealed, running towards him. “This man...”

As she reached him, the man backhanded her with a powerful blow, sending her sprawling across the room.

“Hey!” Gryff shouted.

“This doesn’t concern you,” the man spoke in a monotone.

The girl started to rise, her face a study in pain, surprise, and outrage. A dark blue liquid oozed from her lower lip. The man turned his blaster towards her.

“Don’t move, Argella.” He then shifted his blaster towards Gryff. “Stand over by her. Now!”

Gryff wasn’t about to argue. He moved next to the girl.

“From what I can tell, you’re a couple of thieves who broke into my house.”

“How can you say that?” Argella was weeping now. “You promised we were going to go away together. You said...”

“I know what I said. Truth is I’m about to be married to the daughter of a very rich, very powerful Uplander,” the man smirked. “And a Terraquean mistress doesn’t fit in with my plans.”

A Terraquean word which Gryff recognized as the language’s most vehement curse broke from Argella’s mouth as she made ready to leap at him.

He shot her, point blank, in the chest. There was a quick *pop* from the blaster, and she crumbled to the floor.

“You son of a -” Gryff shouted in outrage.

There was another *pop* and Gryff tumbled into a pool of blackness.

Gryff awoke to the sound of sobbing. He opened his eyes and rose, wincing at the ache in his chest where the stunblast had struck him. The man was gone. Gryff

followed the sound of the girl's cries up the stairwell to a small chamber.

Argella was tapping at a keyboard, trying multiple key combinations. After each one, the console buzzed and she broke into a fresh fit of weeping. She looked up and saw Gryff.

"He's put the shields up," she cried, "and he's locked the code! We're trapped in here! We're going to die!"

Argella had good reason to fear. Once the shields were activated, they remained so until the waters receded, then deactivated automatically. While the shields were up, the air filtration units would remain off. Anyone inside the dwelling could only deactivate them via an override code, without which, they would starve or suffocate.

Gryff put his hand on her shoulder. "Take it easy. We're not going to die. I'm going to get us out of here."

Argella looked up him. "How are you going to do that?"

"Watch."

Gryff raced downstairs, half leading, half dragging the girl.

Water was beginning to seep into the streets. It was ankle-deep, and if they didn't leave now, it would be up to their necks by the time they reached the trail leading out of the city.

His *kris* had been replaced in its sheath and his ruck was lying on the floor. He retrieved it and found that it still held the crystals. A grim smile stole over his face. This was one shrewd playmate Argella had picked. By leaving the knife and the loot, he'd set the stage for an inevitable conclusion. Once the waters receded, two

bodies would be discovered. Upon viewing the weapon and the loot, the sentries would conclude that they were two thieves who got trapped in this dwelling when the shields went up and who died a slow and horrible death.

Very logical. Very clever.

“What are you going to do?” Argella shouted.

Gryff didn't answer. He reached for the disc around his neck.

“What's that?” she asked.

“My good luck charm,” he answered, squeezing it. Immediately, there was a crackling sound. The portal opened and a stream of water rushed in.

“Come on,” he shouted and pulled the girl from the now unshielded house, into water swirling around their calves.

Argella was laughing with relief. “How did you do that?”

“Something I rigged up,” he answered. “Come on, we don't have much time!”

They ran to the street, slogging through the rising water. He looked up to see the Terraquean moon at the edge of the crater, bathing the city in silvery light. Soon, that moon would be an irresistible hand, drawing the tides in their full fury down upon them.

By the time they got to the trail, the water was past their knees.

“I don't understand your people,” Gryff said as they began their upward trek. “You can make these shields, you've mastered space travel, yet you still live in these craters which get flooded every lunar cycle. You have to

evacuate to the Uplands. Why not just live in the Uplands all the time?"

"You don't understand our traditions," Argella replied. "This is all part of the Cleansing. My people have done this for generations."

"What is this 'Cleansing?'"

"Every lunar cycle, the moon passes over our cities, bringing with it the sea. The sea cleanses our soil, making it rich and fertile. So, too, do my people use this time to cleanse their souls until the next lunar cycle. We travel to the Shrinecenters, where we engage in prayer and meditation, all part of the Cleansing."

"Seems like a lot of trouble for some ancient tradition," Gryff answered. And yet, you were ready to abandon it for that guy...."

Argella winced. "Burrows. Yes, I was willing to abandon my tradition. I loved him. I was foolish." She started to sob again.

"Don't be too hard on yourself," Gryff said. "Women have been foolish that way for centuries." He paused. "Men, too, for that matter."

"Have you?"

He didn't answer, which was answer enough.

"Come on. Let's get moving." He broke into a brisk run.

The going was not easy. The upward angle of the switchbacks was severe and they could not afford to be leisurely. Thus far, they managed to outpace the mounting waters, but the fine drizzle that Gryff felt earlier had given way to fierce, pounding needles of spray. The sea had begun pouring over the rim and would soon

be rising faster than they could run. It was no longer enough to simply maintain their current punishing pace. If they weren't to be swept away by the ever-rising cascade, they would have to move even faster.

Gryff quickened his stride and Argella did likewise. In spite of the circumstances, Gryff was impressed. This lady was one fine physical specimen, not only in terms of looks, but in vigor and fitness. Their odds of survival were being sorely tested. A lesser woman might succumb to fear. A lesser woman's limbs might surrender to exhaustion and refuse to carry her further. A lesser woman might be content to cease all efforts, to give up and die rather than push herself beyond the unremitting fatigue she must be feeling. All this after the devastating blow dealt by someone she loved and whom she thought loved her.

Their eyes met and he gave her a quick grin. She smiled back, then to his amazement, ran faster, outdistancing him.

It was not until they were nearly at the top of the crater that they allowed themselves a moment of relief. The trail they'd been on was a string of Z-shaped switchbacks, angling their way upwards along stretches varying from severe to moderate. Alongside some points of the trail were a series of terraces, forming miniature peninsulas jutting outward from the walls of the crater. The terraces were grassy multi-level, stair-step configurations. Dotted along some of the terraces were stone pillars, aligned in an irregular elliptical arrangement. These served as altars before which, Argella explained, Terraqueans knelt and prayed.

They stood, panting, at the edge of one of these terraces. The churning waters below had immersed all but the tallest of structures and before long, these too would be submerged.

Gryff turned to the girl. "You ready to head out?"

"Yes."

"Forget it!"

At the sound of this new voice, they turned. Burrows had come up behind them, still holding the blaster, no longer set on "stun."

"I didn't figure on seeing you two again," Burrows said. "Good thing I decided to stick around." He leveled the blaster at Gryff and his finger began to tighten.

"Wait!" Gryff shouted. "Let me show you something." Very slowly, he reached for the ruck. Very slowly, he withdrew what was inside it and held it up in the moonlight.

At no time did the blaster waver from Gryff's head.

"Terraquean crystal," Gryff whispered, turning the gem so that it caught the moonlight and glowed with a thousand shades of resplendent color. "Do you have any idea what this is worth? What the Homeworld traders will pay for it?"

"Sure," Burrows sneered. "So what's to stop me from blasting you right here and taking it?"

"Because I've got more stashed Upland," he answered in the same tantalizing whisper. "And I'll split it with you. Hell, you'd be a fool not to take me up on it. I'm worth more to you alive than dead."

"What about the girl?"



“She doesn’t mean anything to me. Do what you like with her.”

Burrows paused, reflecting, and Gryff acted. He hurled the crystal with all his might and dove to the side.

Burrows staggered back as the missile connected, full force, with his temple. He screeched in pain and fired wildly. Before he could fire again, Gryff was upon him.

Both men tumbled to the ground, Gryff grasping Burrows’ blaster arm, twisting Burrows’ wrist. Burrows howled, but did not let go of the blaster. Gryff twisted some more and drove his knee into the other man’s groin. Burrows screeched again, his free hand finding its way around Gryff’s neck, tightening.

Gryff had his hands full, literally. One was struggling to immobilize the hand holding the blaster; the other was trying to dislodge Burrows’ stranglehold. It was a stalemate, both men fighting with the strength of desperation, neither of whom could afford to release his hold on the other.

Suddenly, Burrows lurched to the side, the blaster falling into the watery crater. Gryff looked up to see Argella standing over Burrows. As he tried to rise, she aimed another vicious kick at his temple where Gryff had hurled the crystal. Burrows spun out of her way, grabbed her leg in mid-kick and twisted it to the side. Argella gave an agonized scream and started to fall. Burrows grabbed her by the hair and made ready to hurl her over the edge.

Enraged, Gryff launched himself at Burrows, propelling him away from the dazed girl. Burrows managed to keep his footing and meet Gryff’s charge. The two men were

locked in a mutual death grip, rolling and stumbling, drenched in the spray from the onrushing sea.

“Look out!” Argella yelled.

Before Gryff could respond, something struck him in the shoulder. Waves of pain washed over him and he was aware of wetness that did not come from the torrential spray. It was red and sticky as it gushed down his chest. He stumbled backwards, out of Burrows’ grip and he saw that the other man had disengaged the *kris* from its sheath. Burrows was holding the dripping blade before him, his mouth drawn back in a manic grin as he charged.

This was the end. Gryff was too weakened to fight. He did the only thing he could. He allowed Burrows to make contact, and at that very moment, pivoted. The force of Burrows’ charge brought them to the edge of the terrace. They teetered, and Burrows, realizing what was about to happen, clasped Gryff in an inescapable death grip.

The last thing Gryff felt before losing consciousness was the momentum carrying them into the foaming waters below.

Gryff opened his eyes to the Terraquean sun and air that was dry and warm.

He tried to sit up, and immediately fell back, his shoulder throbbing.

Gritting his teeth, Gryff waited for the pain to subside before trying to rise again, this time, bracing himself with his good shoulder.

Argella was nowhere to be seen.

“Argella?” His voice came out as a dry croak.

As he got to his feet, Gryff noticed that a makeshift pressure bandage encircled his wounded shoulder – a bandage made from the same material as a familiar form-fitting tunic.

“Argella?” This time, his voice was stronger.

His eyes swept the terrace, his mind racing. Somehow, he’d survived the fall into the rising seas. Recalling Argella’s stamina in racing up the slopes, he could only conclude that she’d rescued him from the roiling waters and rigged the bandage from her own clothing. But where was she now?

Could Burrows have survived the fall as well? Had he done away with the girl?

“Argella!”

Silence.

Again, “ARGELLA!”

“I’m here.”

Gryff turned his head to see the girl emerge from behind one of the altars. His first thought was one of relief. His second was that she couldn’t have picked a better place to shred her garment. The uppermost part was torn, revealing the tops of well-rounded breasts.

He started to speak, when she put a finger to her lips. “Shh. Lie down. You need to regain your strength.”

“I’m okay,” he answered. “Listen, what I said before, about you not meaning anything to me. I was bluffing. I didn’t mean.... Well you do mean something to me.”

She smiled. “I know.”

They sat at the edge of the terrace, watching the waters below, no longer frothing, but swirling in gentle eddies. The Cleansing had begun.

“So what are you going to do?” she asked.

“About what?”

She gestured at his ruck.

He understood. This was a woman of quality and integrity. She would not be happy as the woman of a thief.

“I guess,” he said, “I’ll wait till the waters go down, then sneak back and return them.”

Her smile widened. “I knew you would. I’m glad.”

She moved her body closer to his. He leaned into hers.

Perhaps there was something for him on this orbiting mud-glob after all.

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# PRINCE MORRIS

by Tim McDaniel

His suicide attempt failed again that morning. That was no surprise; just like everyone said, Morris Sukenik was a loser, couldn't do anything right. But it meant that he had to make breakfast after all. He worked the pancake turner under the limp French toast and tried to flip it over as neatly as a cook in a diner could do it. Instead it tore down the middle. Half of it flipped, spattering hot oil onto his forearm, and the other half, soggy with milk and grease, folded itself like a dishrag.

"Oh..." Morris tried to straighten out the mess so it would cook evenly. Finally he simply pressed the turner down on it, flattening it. A minute later he slid the unrecognizable half-fried glop onto his plate.

He sat there, staring at his breakfast. He had to admit everyone was right -- he was a loser.

The gas oven had only made him a little dizzy. He'd have to call the super.

For that matter, he had been ineffectual at tying the hangman knot the day before. He'd never been a Boy Scout.

Morris had long before admitted that his life was one long string of failures and humiliations.

No syrup. Well, he would use jam. The jam in the jar had hardened and crystallized, and Morris put it back on the shelf. Well, butter would have to be enough. No butter? Morris choked down the French toast dry and

stacked the plate and the pan in the sink. The faucet was dripping again, but he had to get to work.

Walking briskly towards his bus stop, face pointed at the cracked pavement, the congealing breakfast coiled like a snake in his stomach, Morris tried not to think of the breakfasts that Saralynn used to cook, working with her marvelous flair and efficiency. But she'd left him.

"Loser," she'd said.

He couldn't even afford to eat out like he used to, as his career continued to spiral downward. From the *Times* where he'd been downsized to KVRO NewsRadio where he'd been ousted with the format change, to the *Herald* where the publisher's nephew was given his job, and now to the *Weekender* -- and all the respect that a pudgy middle-aged balding man got from the earringed and goateed staff at an "alternative" (in other words, not entirely respectable, and free every Thursday) newspaper. It pretty well matched what they paid him. Well, it was work.

"Got change?"

Morris looked up. "Huh?" Before him stood an unshaven hollow-cheeked man in Salvation Army castaways and really nice shoes, a lumpy canvas bag at his feet.

"Got change?"

"Change?"

"Yeah, some change. Change, you know?"

"Let me see what I got." Morris rummaged through his pockets. "Oh, sorry, I guess I don't have any on me. Must be in my other pants.."

The man smirked at him and turned his attention to another passerby. "Got change?"

"Sorry," Morris murmured. Maybe he could make it up to him with an interview. But no. The *Weekender* wouldn't be interested, unless the guy was a former dot-com investor, in which case it would merit a snide column next to a comic.

Then he heard the sound of wheezing brakes, and looked up. His bus.

Morris jogged the half-block to the bus stop, and was perspiring and winded. The bus began pulling out and Morris waved. The driver kept going, though he must have seen Morris.

So now he would be late for work. Again.

"**M**orris?" It was Thomas ("not Tom") Byrne, twenty-six or seven but looking nearly nineteen, and dressed the same way, with the stocking cap and the loose sweat pants and several of the standard piercings, but with an incongruous sports jacket on over his t-shirt. His editor.

Morris looked up from his desk, guilty. "Yeah, I know I was late. I missed the darn bus this morning, and then my shoe--"

"Over here for a sec."

Morris entered the cramped office after Thomas and sat in the rickety wooden chair in front of the desk. Thomas plopped himself down in his own leather chair, one leg dangling on an arm. He picked up a pencil and played with it, looking levelly at Morris.

"So, how's it going, Morris?"

This is it, thought Morris. This is where he fires me. And me with the heel broken off my shoe. Where do I go next? What's the next rung down?

"All right," he said, warily.

Thomas swung his leg down and leaned forward. "Great, that's great. 'Cause I got a killer story I want you to track down." Thomas' eyes flickered to a spot behind Morris. Morris turned but caught only a rustle and a departing shadow and a muffled snicker. He looked back at Thomas.

"A new story?" Morris asked. "Because, like I told you, I have a very reliable source who says that the assassination attempt of the Chilean diplomat was funded by a couple of local companies. I only need a few days to track down the whole story--"

"Yeah, I don't think so, Morris. I mean, Chile -- who cares? No, this story is really something else, and I need you on it," Thomas said, and now he was hardly trying to conceal his amusement. "Here are the notes. A witness called us, a Mrs. Mary Gambardella." He pushed a yellow scrap of paper across the table.

Morris scanned it, though the crack in his glasses made the words jump occasionally. "It says here that strange people have been appearing out of thin air."

Thomas leaned back. "Yeah. Pretty bizarre stuff. So track it down, and let me know what you find, huh?"

"All right, sure. But you know, the Chile story is really more newsworthy. I mean it could break nationwide, and I really think I can--"



"No delusions of grandeur, Morris. Just do the stories I give you, OK?"

Morris slipped the paper into a shirt pocket. "Sure." He stood up. Around the office doorway clustered several of his colleagues, people one would expect to see at a rave instead of a newspaper. He sidled past them, and as he left the office he heard Thomas and his friends snort like congested raccoons.

He went to his desk to get his recorder, his notepad. A goose chase. Well, it wasn't the first silly errand Thomas had sent him out on. There was that old woman who claimed that postal workers inserted obscenely suggestive notes into her mail, and that report of a UFO that turned out to be a flickering streetlight. Morris would track this story down, too, though. Because that was his assignment and because Morris was still a professional.

Even if we was a loser.

"So they just pop right out of the air?"

"That's right. Right across the street, in front of the Anderson house, except they moved to New Mexico to be near their daughter, don't ask *me* why. They only speak Spanish down there, you know. Usually around dusk." The woman took another drag on her cigarette and pulled her house dress tighter around her as if Morris had been dying for a peek. "I called the cops, they didn't do nothing. If my husband were still alive, well, he'd see that they stop it. People nowadays, who cares? Everyone just does whatever."

Morris nodded. "You said they looked strange?"

"Hah! Well, no stranger than many, I guess, with the earrings in the wrong places. But they sure do. One had his underwear over his pants, you know? That's the one in jeans. Then his friend has on a bathing suit, you know, below, and a sports jacket. And then the girl with them, she's in this ball gown. Now *I* say that's strange."

Morris interviewed several other people in the area, and discovered two surprising things. First, contrary to his expectations, Mrs. Gambardella was *not* considered to be the local kook. And second, others had seen the same three odd teenagers. The houses were crowded together in the area, huddled against one another as if for reassurance that the decaying neighborhood would survive, and the inhabitants seemed to spend a lot of time looking out of windows and watching one another.

"Damnedest thing," a retired gentlemen said to Morris from behind the protection of a rickety screen door. "Swear to God, they seemed to just suddenly be there. Didn't see no car pull up, nothing. One minute, poof, they were there! I guess it must be some kind of prank."

The retiree agreed with Mrs. Gambardella on the spot the teens appeared: the front yard of the abandoned house at the corner of 15th and Roybert. And the time -- dusk, or shortly thereafter.

He'd have to investigate. A fifty-three-year-old reporter without a regular beat or a respectable newspaper, and yeah, he would wait around till evening because he had nothing better to do. And because he would not go back to his editor empty-handed. Anyway, it would be good to be on his own for a while, away from Byrne and his snickering slackers.

The heel of his shoe was coming loose again in spite of his Crazy Glue fix, but Morris trudged twelve blocks to a dirty little cafe the old gentleman had told him about. It was all but deserted this sunny fall afternoon, the sound of coffee cups clinking loud in the quiet, but it would be a place to wait. He slid into a booth with cracked green vinyl and nursed a coffee. He usually carried a paperback in his pocket for times like this, but this morning he had forgotten it.

The coffee was weak, and Morris suspected the cream in it had gone bad some time last week.

On his own. It was the pattern of his life, at least since Saralynn had left. They'd never had children, and with his job troubles, Morris couldn't really blame her for leaving. Like she'd said, he was a loser. Still, he missed her. At first he had attempted to fill the old house with pets, but the goldfish had somehow leaped out of its bowl, the cat ran away, and the dog got hit by a cement truck. The driver hadn't stopped.

He'd thrown himself in front of a similar truck once; he'd hoped it was the same one, in fact. But the damn thing had incredible brakes. Just his luck.

The waitress was giving him surly glances, so Morris ordered an early dinner. He ate what he could of it, then left a tip as apology and headed back to 15th and Roybert.

Three loud popping noises, and suddenly there they were -- just as Mrs. Gambardella had described them: a boy in underwear over jeans, another with a red bathing

suit and a green-checked sports jacket, and a girl in a yellow and ivory ball gown, like the ones in 30's musicals. There was nothing there on the corner, and then there were the smirking teenagers, just like that.

The three swayed for a moment, giggling, and Morris moved closer, drawn despite the clenching of his gut.

The kids moved off down the street, and Morris followed them for several blocks; the trio made no attempts to hide their movements. In fact, they drew attention to themselves with their loud, vulgar teen laughter, their strange clothes. They didn't even pause to look for oncoming cars before crossing streets; once the girl was almost hit by a honking bakery van, and all she did was look at it with a slightly confused smile as it brushed her gown.

The three finally halted at a bus stop in front of a laundromat. Morris stepped up to the bus stop, too, close enough to eavesdrop; he conspicuously looked at his watch, then down the road. He needn't have acted; the kids seemed to not even notice his presence.

"Are they there, Dodge?" That was the one with his underpants on over his jeans. Morris noticed that his hair glistened with oil and that his teeth were a white not normally seen outside of toothpaste ads.

The boy in the bathing suit and green and brown checked sports jacket answered. "No. They can't be here. That man is too old."

"And no woman or girl," pointed out the girl, "so they can't meet."

"The date must be wrong again," Dodge said.

"We know it's in April," said the first boy. "So let's return tomorrow local time."

"We're here now," said the girl. "We could do something else..." She rolled her eyes suggestively.

"No explosions, Toyota. That's not fun."

"Take a resident back with us?" said the girl.

"No, let's just go."

"OK."

With that, the three turned and began to retrace their steps, giggling and tripping each other along the way. Morris pretended to be fed up with waiting for the bus, and followed them.

When the three reached the house on the corner of 15th and Roybert once again, they huddled. Then, they were just gone.

Morris hesitantly approached the spot they'd been standing in; he saw nothing but crabgrass, gray and black in the light of the corner streetlamp.

"They're at it again, I see." Mrs. Gambardella was standing in her open door. "Damn kids. See if I even bother to call the cops this time. You find anything out about them?"

Morris could only shake his head.

"Oh, jeez-us. Some reporter." Mrs. Gambardella slammed her door shut.

"**M**orris! So how'd it go yesterday, bud?" Mr. Byrne was standing over his desk, several of his followers sniggering behind him. "Any great leads?"

"I can't really say yet. I'm going back tonight."

Mr. Byrne took a step back, as if amazed. "Why? The mystery too deep?" He lowered his voice. "Tell me, are aliens involved? Or do we have a Bermuda Triangle visiting the town?"

"There are a few things I need to check out before I can write it up."

Mr Byrne stroked his chin. "HmMMM. Yes, well, we'd better not jump the gun on something this big. We gotta cover all our bases. OK, Morris, take one more day. Bring us back a real one, ace!"

The followers drifted away, and Mr. Byrne made to follow, but stopped just long enough for a harsh whisper.

"No more than one day, Sukenik. We do have some real stories to cover, even you. And I don't appreciate you making me look like a fool, either. One more time, and you're out, old-timer. Got that?"

Morris nodded, but he was thinking about something else.

He'd just realized that he hadn't tried to commit suicide that morning.

That afternoon Morris was back in place, shuffling his feet, waiting for the appearance of the teenagers.

"You call the cops, or what?" Mrs. Gambardella was again standing in her doorway, speaking around the cigarette.

"Ah, no, Mrs. Gambardella. I wouldn't really know what to tell them."

"Heck, I don't either." She looked up the street, down the street. "Well, watch it. Kids--you never know." She went back inside, closing the screen door behind her.

"Thanks, Mrs. Gambardella."

The kids would be arriving any minute now, if they kept to their schedule. Morris steeled himself. He might not know who these kids were, or where they came from, or what they planned. But he knew that he stood between them and normalcy. It was time to take his stand, make his mark. Time to push the world, instead of letting it push him.

*Pop! PopPop!* And there they were, dressed the same. Morris staggered back a step, and when the three took off down the sidewalk he had to hurry to catch up.

"Ah, excuse me.." It was hard to speak around the lump filling his throat. The kids continued on, unaware of him.

"Excuse me!" To his surprise, Morris had grabbed the sleeve of one of them -- the one in the sports jacket. The boy turned around, apparently equally surprised, and his friends stopped with him. Morris wondered what he had let himself in for. But there was no stopping now.

"What are you doing?"

"We're just walking. We want to meet someone."

"Who? I mean, I know you don't belong here." The youths gave him blank looks. Morris gathered his courage and let it out. "I demand to know what you're doing here, and where you're from!" Towards the end of that sentence his voice squeaked.

Morris expected evasions, or anger, or fear.

But the kids laughed.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because I'm a reporter. I have to find these things out."  
The kids just looked at him.

Morris looked at the nearest boy, a slightly-built youth with an earring hanging from his chin and large gray eyes. "So, what's your name? What are you doing here?"

"I'm Ford Explorer. And may I introduce my good friends, Dodge Dart" (the other boy) "and Toyota Celica. But what we want here is not your business."

"Not my-- Dodge *Dart*--" Morris sputtered.

The youths turned away, and Morris grabbed Explorer's sleeve. "Wait! I need an explanation! Or -- I'll call the police!"

"The police!" That started them laughing again.

Suddenly Morris was angry. These were *kids* laughing at him this time -- just kids, like the ones that stretched over two seats on the bus, or whose sullen slouching forced him to cross the street. His fist clenched.

His anger frightened him; at the same time he reveled in it. For the first time in years, he felt his muscles tensing, felt his potential for violence. Morris felt that he commanded power. Electricity ran in his arteries. Without realizing he was doing so, he actually raised a fist.

Explorer cringed, bringing his hands up to protect his face. Dart and Celica nervously stepped away.

The anger dissipated, blew away on a breeze, leaving Morris red-faced and wondering, breathing hard, with a raised fist. He exulted. "Afraid? Boy, you don't know what I could do if I were mad enough!" Morris had no clue either, but best not mention that. "Now talk!" It was kind of fun playing a tough guy.



Explorer seemed unable to say a word. It was Celica who stepped forward.

"We'll talk! Just, please, don't--"

Morris turned away from Explorer, who almost collapsed. What kind of teenagers were these, to be terrified of a pudgy middle-aged balding man? He turned to Celica. "Well?"

"It's just a joke," she said. "On a friend of ours. That's all. It's nothing serious!"

"A 'friend'? I saw you -- arrive. How did you come to have a friend here?"

"He's not *here*. He's back home -- in another universe."

"The universe?"

"Another' universe, yeah. It's kind of like a future of this one."

"Mostly," said Dart.

"Right," Morris said without certainty or agreement. "Now if he's back where you guys came from, then how can--"

"We came to stop his parents from meeting." That was Dart again.

"But if his parents don't meet, then your friend--"

"Won't even be born. Yeah, that's the plan. It's not very original, we know, but this guy's been pretty--"

"So you're going to *kill* him?"

Dart was aghast. "Not *kill* him! Just prevent his birth!"

Morris shook his head. "What's the difference?"

"Phhhhhh!" Dart blew his hair off his forehead.

"He doesn't die if we just stop his birth," said Celica. "He'll still be alive in other tracks."

"Other tracks? You mean, like, he'll live in your memories, something like that?"

"Nah!" Celica said, laughing at him.

"It works like this, old man," said Dart. "He doesn't get born in this world. But he did in ours; that's how we know him. And he gets born in the tracks, the worlds, that we didn't come to, to play our joke."

Morris thought for a moment. "You're saying that there are other worlds, where different things happen?"

Explorer said, "Now he gets it!" and turned away, throwing up his hands.

"Yeah," Dart said. "There are like trillions and trillions of tracks, each one a little different. In some our friend isn't born yet, and in some he's already an old man."

"And in some your friend is never born, and in others he isn't."

"Right! And everything else. In some, you're dead. In some, you're a rock star. Every possibility happens."

Morris surprised himself by smiling. He was having a conversation with teenagers from another world, and he was almost comfortable. Maybe that was what fear and anger, and a healthy death wish, did to you -- finally you just overloaded, and on the other side you didn't particularly worry about your fate.

"OK. So different things happen in the other worlds. I don't know about the rock star stuff, though. People don't scream when I show my face."

"They do, though, in some tracks," Explorer said, turning back to him. "In some, you're the richest guy in the world, married to six of the most beautiful women, and people cry when you stub your toe."

"Oh, I don't think so."

"And there's all these worlds where you're a king, or a philosopher, or a movie star, and everyone is waiting to hear your words and begging for your attention. After you leave a room they stare at the closed door."

"No. Anyway, I really doubt that you've researched my other lives, to know all this."

"Yeah, it has to be that way. Everything that is possible happens somewhere."

"Some things just wouldn't happen. Like Arnold Schwarzenegger being elected governor of California, or Woody Allen pin-ups. Just impossible."

The teens looked at each other. They grinned the way teenagers do, then nodded.

"What?"

"Come on, old man," said Dart. "We'll show you." The three started back toward the place they had appeared, and Morris had to jog to keep up.

"Show me? Show me what?"

They just smiled at him. They reached the corner.

"Now what?"

Celica seemed to be murmuring something to herself, her eyes unfocused.

"Some other lives," Dart said.

Celica stopped mumbling. "Let's go, she said."

"Hey," Morris said, trying to regain control. "Now just wait a minute here." Why wouldn't these kids just go back to being scared of him? But they seemed to have forgotten their fear, and were caught up in this new game. Whatever that game was, Morris didn't want to be a part of it.

Then he blinked, though he was sure he hadn't closed his eyes --

-- and he was standing in a hallway, bordered on either side by rows of lockers. A school. Kids swirled around him, slamming locker doors and good-naturedly shoving each other.

"This is when you were sixteen," said Celica. "Your old school."

The older Morris staggered and gaped. "How -- hey, can these kids see us? Is this like the ghost of Christmas present?"

"Of course they can see us," Dart said. "We're here, aren't we?"

"But they're not reacting! We just pop in, and they --"

"In other realities, they react," said Celica. "But we chose this one because in this one they just ignore us. Look. Here you come now."

"Me?"

Walking down the hall, dodging the bigger kids, flinching at loud noises, glasses too large on a pimpled face -- yes, it was the young Morris.

"It's October 17," said Celica. "Was that a special day for you?"

"No day at school was all that special," said Morris. He watched himself go to a locker. Watched himself try several times to get the combination right before it finally popped open. "A miserable parade of days getting pushed around by the jocks and ignored by the teachers. It was hell."

"But October 17 was the day you planned to ask Bridget Meyers out on a date."

"Bridget Meyers?" The name was familiar -- Morris found it even conjured up a ghostly face. A girl, a classmate, far too beautiful and popular to go out with someone like Morris. And yet, yes -- there had been a time, a day, when he had convinced himself that she liked him, and had determined to ask her out. Fortunately, he had recovered his senses before actually humiliating himself.

"Hey," he said. "We just met, for Chrissakes. How can you know all this about me?"

"We got links in the brain," Dart said, tapping the side of his head. "Just need to ask a question, then the network --"

"Here she comes," said Explorer.

And there she was. She didn't match the version in Morris' memory -- too skinny, too *young*. He looked over at his younger self. That young person had noticed Bridget, too, and was gazing doe-eyed at her as she approached. The teenaged boy closed his locker and stepped out in the middle of the hallway.

"Oh, God, kid, don't --" Morris breathed.

Bridget stopped in front of the young Morris.

"Hey, Morris."

"Hi, Bridget. I, um, I mean, if I. or if you..."

*Shut up, kid, just shut up now, and you might still escape,* Morris thought.

Bridget laughed. "What, Morris?"

"I mean, if you wanted to, if you weren't too busy, maybe some time we could, the two of us I mean, like go to a movie or something, some time. If you aren't too busy."

The older Morris closed his eyes. The little fool had done it.

"Yeah, Morris, OK. That might be fun. Let me give you my phone number, OK?"

Morris opened his eyes. She didn't seem to be joking. She was actually writing down something for the boy. For him.

"That didn't happen," he whispered.

"It did for you, here," said Celica.

Morris watched his younger self accept the paper from Bridget, and walk off down the hall with a new stride.

"Wow," he said. "I never imagined she could say yes."

"I found a nice place," said Explorer. There was another blink.

They were in a restaurant. A really nice place, with quiet lighting and whispering waiters. Morris was conscious of his clothes. If he had known he was coming to a place like this --

Then he saw himself. Not a younger version, this time. The other Morris looked about the same age he was. But otherwise, how different!

This Morris had put on a little more weight, and was dressed in a suit that bespoke great taste and improbable amounts of money. He was sitting at the head of a table not far away, taking his ease with a glass of wine, surrounded by buxom women and simpering men.

"Who is he?" Morris whispered to the teenagers.

He spoke too loudly, and a sweaty man at a table nearby answered. "Who is that? You don't know? That's Morris Sukenik, that's who."

"Huh?"

The man leaned towards Morris. "Yeah, Morris Sukenik. He's the guy that can get things done for you. Need someone to get talked to, some senator to do a favor, some guy's leg broken --"

"Like a godfather?"

"Exactly. I've been trying to get him to notice me for weeks. He thinks I crossed him, you know? Only I never did. It's a big misunderstanding. I figure if I can just talk to him for a second, I could clear everything up."

"So why don't you just go talk to him?"

The man looked over at godfather Morris. "You just don't walk up to a guy like that. You got to just wait to be noticed. Morris Sukenik, he always plays it cool. You cause any kind of scene -- poof."

Morris nodded. He'd never been feared in his life.

"Let's up the scale," said Dart.

Another blink.

They were in a crowd, a jostling mass of humanity of all shapes and colors and ages, standing in the hot sun alongside a street. People waved posters and banners, schoolkids in uniforms stood in rows, and cameras were everywhere.

"Where are we now?" Morris asked.

Before he could be answered, a roar swept along the street. "Here he comes! He's coming! He's coming!" Morris craned his neck with the rest of the crowd.

An open convertible crept along the street. A man in back was waving to the crowd, the sleeve of his spotless white robe slipping down his arm.

"Hey, that's me!" said Morris. "My God -- am I the *Pope*?"

"Let's look at one more," said Celica.

Blink.

Morris and his young companions were standing behind some filmy curtains. He turned to Dart, and opened his mouth; the young man put a finger to his lips, then gestured with his eyes.

Morris looked in that direction. Through the curtain, he could see a seated figure; Morris was standing somewhat behind and to the side of the figure, so he couldn't see the person's face.

"Bring the next supplicant forth," the figure said. Morris was not surprised to hear his own voice.

"Come forth!" another person, invisible to Morris in his present location, called out. He heard a creaking sound.

The unseen figure spoke again. "Bow before his beloved majesty, Morris, Protector of the People, Emperor of the World."

Morris turned to Dart. Emperor of the *world*? he mouthed. And then, like that, there was another blink. Morris and the kids were standing on a sidewalk in front of a house, and streetlights were burning in the early evening.

"Darn kids!" Morris looked up. There was Mrs. Gambardella, standing in her doorway. She withdrew into her house and the screen door banged shut.

Morris breathed. "Emperor of the World," he said.

"Did you enjoy your trip?" Explorer asked him.

Morris nodded. "I guess so. It's a lot to think about. Godfather, Pope, King. My goodness."

"Goodbye, Morris."

"Bye. Take care. Good luck with your thing."



Morris watched the kids walk away, intent on their errand, then slowly made his way back to the bus stop.

His bus was pulling away as he arrived.

The next wasn't due for an hour and a half.

Morris smiled.

"Morris!"

Thomas Byrne called from his office, his feet up on the desk.

Morris once again examined the hot dog he'd prepared for his lunch. He'd placed it in a clear plastic sandwich bag, but it had gotten squished in the briefcase on the way to work, and was now a gooey red and brown mass of soggy bun.

"Mr Byrne." Morris put the sandwich down on his desk, and slowly made his way to the editor's office, wiping his hands on his pants.

"Morris," Byrne said, smiling, as Morris came in the room, "I was wondering about that story you've been working on for, what, two days now? Any progress?"

"Yes, actually." Morris, uninvited, sat in the chair before the desk and leaned back. "I found some teenagers on a lark through alternate universes, and they informed me that there are places in which I am worshipped and adored. A prince among men."

"Huh?"

"Conversely, it must follow that in a multitude of realities you, Tommy, wipe dog turds from my shoes."

Byrne brought his feet down and sat up. "Look here, Morris--"

"Don't worry about it, Tommy," Morris said, leaning back farther to put his own feet up on the desk. "Or go screw yourself. I don't care. I've got to get busy on the story on who really funded the assassination attempt of the Chilean diplomat."

He tilted back too far, and the chair fell back. Morris cracked his head painfully on the floor.

But he stood up and headed back to his desk, bruised but unbowed -- Prince Morris.

Tim McDaniel has taught English in Thailand and in several Seattle-area colleges and universities, and now teaches English as a Second Language at Green River Community College. He has sold over 40 stories -- mostly comedic -- to a large number of SF, fantasy, and horror magazines, including *F&SF*, *Daily SF*, and *Asimov's*. Two collections of his short stories, *They Laughed at Me in Vienna and Other Stories* and *Dungeons and Dental Plans and Other Stories*, are available at [www.AnthologyBuilder.com](http://www.AnthologyBuilder.com).

**We hope you enjoyed this issue of Encounters. We'll have more great new fiction for you in issue #10 scheduled for release on December 20, 2013.**