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POETRY

Flowers on My Face

Allison Keough

It blooms on my face, red
Soft pink, purple, flower.
My flower. It blooms on my face.
A center, a deep red,
Its petals, my flower,
Spreads from cheek bone
Down to my chin, from my
Lips corner, to my ear lobe.
My flower, it is on my face.
Grows and shrinks everyday
Blooming, its petals fill and open
Blossoming with the pinks and reds.
They arch, spread open, my flower's
Petals. It is on my face.

This flower you cannot buy
Nor cover. This flower on my
face. I was born with it.
This flower, it is no mark or
Defect. It blooms and
Shrinks, wispy tendrils
Or hard, full petals.

They notice, but they "don't"
The flower, my flower, makes me
Different, but I'm not.
My flower that blooms on my face
Is nothing special. It's just
A mark that you "don't" but do
Notice. And that you say
Makes me special.

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Life During Wartime

Cecelia Ehlenbach

Dark sky alights with
falling artillery,
the whistling blow to the streets.

The sirens screeching
a desperate warning,
the city jolted from sleep.

The walls are crackling,
the air is shimmering,
heat imploding windows.

The house is burning,
you hold your sister,
two children out in the snow.

Dresden is melting,
the Frauenkirche toppled,
flames licking at dawn.

Unearthly wailing
caught in the silence
of a city now gone.

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Horror Movies

Ali Boyd

As children we would turn off the lights
hold tight to our pillows, life jackets
amid a sea of visual nightmares.
We'd sit, popcorn or chocolate forgotten,
transfixed by the gruesome images on the screen,
feeling the sound of our own heartbeats, the
pressure building in our chests until
It overflowed in a piercing discharge of sound.

Later, in the aftermath,
we'd lie alone, measuring our breaths
and trying not to call to mind
the contorted, malicious ghosts,
hoping not to see them before us
while traveling under the thin veil of sleep.
No one could help us if they whispered
into our defenseless, slumbering ears.

In the future, when we grow into our own skin
we huddle together like arctic explorers,
I bury my fears in your shoulder
when the croaking murderess
leans over the heroine's bed.
We grab for each others hands or
tease the characters. They never listen to us,
And all the plotlines are the same.

When the credits role we peel ourselves apart,
laugh at our own exaggerated cowardice
and switch off the screen.
In our minds it may be that the images boil and evaporate
beside the warmth of another body.
Your warm blood,
my cold laughter,
the familiar nightmares of the collective subconscious.

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The Imploring Candles of Yad Vashem

Pam Parker

Comfort, serenity,
shalom babayit,
peace in one's house
the gift of most candles,

But these candles speak,
no, they implore.
In silent watchfulness
center points of
a small, dark chamber.

Mirrors on the ceiling and walls
reflect their glow
one and a half million times.

The lights whisper their question.

Large pictures join
the bursting glows.
Children's faces
of hope and joy
captured when life was
a *spielplatz*,
a playground of possibilities.

Somber cello mourns as
voices list the names, ages and birthplaces
of the one and a half million children....
In Hebrew, English and Yiddish
the litany continues.
The music weeps.
The lights pulse.

The candles' entreaty reverberates.

Through the echoing plea
an order resounds,
Cry.
Cry one and a half million tears.
One for every Shlomo, Ya'akov, Naomi and Rifka
and all their sisters and brothers.

When the tears have been shed,
the refrain of the imploring candles remains:

Did God cry one and a half million tears
when these lights were extinguished?

I Stare Today at Icicles

Amanda Wolff

I stare today at Icicles—
drip—dripping in the Sun
who burns them, wills them—please—to quit
their Careful Adhesion.

Freed from their stubborn Clinging—warmed,
melt—melting fast, they Fall!
Droplets now, they mingle in the
Puddle—and learn to Crawl.

Dead Devil

Cecilia Ehlenbach

During the drive that took us
out of Hobart
over the Tamar,
and through kilometer after kilometer
of hilly farmlands,
the tour bus suddenly stopped.
The dust settled
and a ripe smell
snuck through the windows.

The driver got off,
and a few of us followed him,
and the bite in the air,
to the mottled bits of fur and flesh
on the side of the highway.
And there we circled
the torn, leaking body
of the rare Tasmanian Devil
we'd come to see,

left for a piece of road kill,
his exposed jaw grinning
under the afternoon sun.

A Future Reclaimed

Ali Boyd

I decided to take a plunge,
to follow your dreams,
so I boarded the train
with you, and the rest of our friends
and laughed like the fearless vagrant
I knew you wanted me to be.

I borrowed your marker and
scribbled a bold confession
on the off-white wall next to our seats,
I titled it
'To the mechanism of the city'
and signed it
'with love and squalor'-
because that was how we lived.

I have ridden the train since,
and me message was cleaned away
as we both knew it would be.

We stole a few days of
adventure, defined our own freedom
from the book written by burn outs and squatters.
you showed me how to roll cigarettes,
and we interlaced fingers,
traded dreams of
A City in Flames, as if
the chaos meant you wouldn't
grow up to be
unhappy, like your Dad.

We slept in alcoves or
forgotten dusty buildings,
clustered together like a flock of birds.
but I was tired, I was dirty
and the sunset wasn't any more glorious
than it used to be.

You called me a coward
when I decided to leave,
but you went with,
hugged me goodbye at the station
in my little town and I knew
you would never call,
maybe you would smoke alone
on your porch;
exhaling those anarchist fantasies.

you called our love a flower.
I think,
it was a dandelion,
a weed.

Correspondence: Norwegian Folk Cooking

Catherine Ries

Dear Impresario,
The television told me
to live better, so, I try.
But I don't know how, because
the television didn't say.

I read that to make something tender,
it should be poached. So, I am preparing
a pot for my love. I am rubbing
it with duck fat and demi-glace.

I have not yet found a recipe
for commitment, or how to
read moods in the bite of
an apple too sour to eat.
Or how to make the quinces
hanging from the trees turn sweet.

I tried a recipe for cake
made from scripture.
I substituted the broken pieces
of your myth for manna, and
milk for wine. But it fell
when I hoped it would rise.

I heard that in Norway,
you can catch a whale
of sadness, if you cut
a potato in half, rub it
with salt, and hold it to
your forehead for the
shortest hour. I tried this once,
and it's true, but I got only
a narwhals' worth, when
I was hoping for blue.

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FICTION

Long Way Back

Emma Cotter

I peered across the aisle and out the window. The jet engines on the wings were starting up and the fasten seatbelt sign blinked on. I gripped my arm rest and sighed, ignoring for the moment that this coach seat had probably been recently occupied by some dirty Midwestern hick or mom with a puking child. I took a breath and methodically swallowed, now regretting my decision not to get gum. It was three dollars though, and not the spearmint kind I like. Why would anyone want watermelon gum (with a burst of mint!)? The flight attendant fastened herself in, and I felt the plane beneath me begin to whirl, louder and louder. Hooo, here goes. Eardrums swelling, we climbed the sky, up and up.

I'm not scared...of flying at least. I fly all the time. I'm a top divorce attorney at Brandell & Stevens in New York City, but I am frequently called away for meetings with "premier clients" in the exotic locations where they vacation or work. Sometimes they request my presence in Miami or LA. I've been there for almost ten years now, ever since I graduated. My degree is from the University of Cincinnati, which is *not* a program that should have promoted me straight to a prestigious New York City firm, but he pulled some strings. He at least did have a lot of strings. I moved to the city after school and I haven't looked back. I don't look back. Or, I didn't look back. Now he's making me.

As the plane and I adjusted to the new altitude and the seat belt light blinked off, my shoulders began to relax. I tried to push myself in to a Zen, yoga-type breath but began to

feel lightheaded, so I settled for pinning back the hairs that were creeping over my face. Tugging my Pashmina out of my bag, I wrapped it around my shoulders to block the chill. My lavender-scented pillow allowed my head to rest comfortably on the window and I stared out, trying to remember if the clouds below were cumulus nimbus or stratus, or probably another kind that it may have been nice to take the time to learn. They're big and puffy though, and almost pretty to watch pass by.

My sight pushes further and further out into the sky, thoughts of my childhood creeping into my head. I should have known that my life then was too idyllic. The point of this life in this world is not to do good, but to get by successfully. Part of me wishes I could have seen the truth then, but that wouldn't have been childhood. It seems incredible how naïve I could be, but at least I was happy. I wanted to be a social worker. I remember pronouncing to my high school friends at lunch one day that I was going to help people. That's funny to think about now. I had this idea that when people needed someone, that I would be and should be there to help them. I wanted to cure suffering; I thought it was a crushing reality. It turns out people make their own crushing realities.

I remember one perfect fall day—or at least it was that kind of day that becomes perfect in hindsight: 60 degrees, a cool crisp breeze, trying on that new fall sweater for the first time and seeing how well it went with the changing leaves. I must have been ten or so, and he and mom took me to the Smucker's farm to pick a pumpkin for Halloween. It was one of the first times I remember realizing how much I love fall. I always forget that. I don't think fall happens anymore. I haven't seen it in a while. Anyway, that day they were particularly happy.

I ran ahead of them, ready to dive head first into the sea of pumpkins.

"Beth! You're going to trip if you don't slow down!"

“But Dad, there are so many! How do I know which one is perfect?”

“Look for a shiny one.”

“Round’s good too,” Mom added.

“Something that’ll be good with a scary face drawn on.” He said as he lunged forward to tickle me. I squealed and ran away, stumbling over a particularly large one.

THIS one, is perfect.”

“Ha! Well, that was easy. Shall we get a caramel apple?”

“Yess!”

I skipped around the rest of the farm, caramel apple in hand, too lost in bliss to care about that sweater being sticky and far too happy to realize that anybody in the world wasn’t.

On the drive home, we went through downtown. I had been staring out the window and noticed that no one downtown had pumpkins. There was a group of guys on the corner with cups, but their cups were not steaming with cider.

“Hey Dad, where are their pumpkins? Are they gonna go get them too?”

“They might, I suppose. Probably not though.”

“Why not? Don’t they want to make a jack-o-lantern?”

Mom said “They might want to, dear but some people just don’t have the money to buy a pumpkin, and some people don’t have a house or a porch to put the pumpkin on.”

“Why don’t some people get houses?”

“They just don’t, Beth. They aren’t working so they don’t get money and then they can’t have a house,” he declared. “Some people just don’t get to have the same things as other people.”

Something about that fall day resonated with me all the way to my advisor's office as a college freshman when I declared a major in social work.

Ha, it's been a while since I thought of that. It's maybe been a while since I really *thought* at all. Life's been moving quickly. I get things done, I make money, I appease the wealthy and emotional. Intense reflection is not a good thing in my line of work. I think it can be distracting and tends to allow an excess of feelings. There are already enough feelings in the process—it's certainly not my job to encourage more.

That reminds me, I need to check in on work. I was really hoping this was going to be one of those flights that offered Wi-Fi. Apparently they don't have it on international flights yet. Ms. Collins was supposed to be getting in touch with me any day now. She was a little known heiress who became temporarily popular because of some faulty pretense of acting talent in the eighties and has been on a sad, slow decline ever since. She was actually my first client at the firm. I helped her with her second divorce. And two years ago, it was the settlement I won from her fourth divorce that helped me make partner. Now she was reeling from an impulsive marriage to a Texas rancher who swept her off her feet and onto his horse, but apparently only literally, because the romance was ending only ten months after it began. I'm pretty sure she was on an inadvisable combination of booze and anti-depressants, but I could still probably get her half his stock holdings in court. She has this incredibly sweet face, even at her age, that could melt the heart of even the most frigid judge and she has an uncanny ability to find men who would fall into the blundering idiot category—though a rich one, to be sure. I'm actually looking forward to getting involved in a case of hers again.

How did I get here?

The screen in the headrest in front of me is showing the map of our route. Seeing that line going from NYC to Madrid is overwhelming. *Why* am I going there? I guess I owe it to him, in some sick way. He was my father. At least he was at one point. He was my father in the pumpkin patch that day. He was my father on almost every birthday, as he handed me a neatly wrapped doll and gave me a kiss on the head. He was even my father at my high school graduation. He sat with my mother and they looked perfect and proud and real. They were my parents then. I thought they were my parents then. They looked to be anyway, and I've learned that's actually what matters.

They managed to stay together until my sophomore year of college. Apparently it had been falling apart for a while, but like a porch being eaten by termites, you don't see how bad it is until the day your foot goes straight through the floorboards.

It was the middle of the week, towards the end of the fall semester, I know because I had either been too stressed or too cold to take any of the dozens of calls from my mom that day. I finally got around to calling her back around nine, after my roommate and I had watched some silly show about people competing by dancing or something—mostly I just had needed to chill out for a minute. She answered after the first ring.

"Beth! Beth, where have you been? Bethie, I— Oh God! Bethie." I sat in the hallway stunned as I listened to my Mom crying hysterically into the phone.

"Mom? Mommy, what is it?"

"It's over, it's over. He's ...he's ...he's ...Oh God."

"Mom! I need you to talk to me, what's going on? What's over?"

Before she could answer I heard his voice boomed near the phone. "Karen! Come on, talk. Okay? Let's talk, we're adults. We're married for Christ's sake, let's just *talk* about—."

“GO! AWAY! Go back to your fucking whore, go have her fucking baby, just GO AWAY! We are not doing this anymore, we’re just not.” I heard the door slam in the background and my mom was whimpering into the phone again. “We’re just not...”

“What? Mom, what is happening? What the fuck is happening?”

“I—I’m sorry Bethie, I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have called you. I’m so so sorry. You finish your school. I’ll call you later. I’m sorry.” And then she hung up.

I only sat there shocked for a moment before I regained my legs and ran down flights and flights of stairs and straight outside. Suddenly I was in the middle of the quad and I stopped cold, looked up, and started screaming.

“WHAT THE FUCK!”

I screamed until I had stopped thinking about the screaming and was only paying attention to the puffs of smoke that were issuing out of my face up into the air. I became aware of my surroundings and began to speed walk back to my room before the cops came or something.

I never saw it coming, and I’m still not sure if mom did, but apparently it had been a side project of his for years. He was in his prime then. A big-wig at Proctor and Gamble and head of something or other very important international relations or products department. It allowed him to travel all the time. He would bring me back plastic figurines of women in silky dresses and little purses decorated with multi-colored beads from places like Hong Kong and Brazil that I would proudly display in my room and exclaim to all my friends who came over that my *daddy* had picked them up on his important, top-secret business trips. One year, he was on a new product/innovation committee and Melissa came in. She pitched some ideas about making certain soap products distributed by P&G

more eco-friendly. Apparently it was soon after that that it started. By the time of my high school graduation he had bought her an apartment in one of the fancy new loft buildings downtown and he began to run away there. It was his new Hong Kong.

Sometimes I wonder what would have been different if Melissa hadn't gotten pregnant. It's probably an obvious thing to wonder, but I can't stop myself from questioning. Would things really have been better? Could the lie have kept on for much longer? Would that have been nicer or easier? She was pregnant though. She was going to have his child. She did have his child. He chose them.

How can I not blame him though? Up until that point I had managed to go through life emotionally un-scarred. Obviously hard lessons about life must be learned at some point, but I don't know that it should be your dad who teaches them to you – not like that. I had a boyfriend, a major – hell, I had a passion, however unfounded. And I felt firmly rooted in all that I had known and all that I was privileged with and I knew where I wanted to direct my life from there.

He left the house and moved into the loft downtown. They didn't stay there long. They decided the new baby should have the chance to explore a new life. Spain was the place, apparently.

About a month before he went he asked to sit down with me for coffee. I turned him down, several times, before he finally wore me down. I agreed to a twenty minute coffee appointment. No more, no less, and no apologies.

“Thanks for coming sweetheart. I've missed you.”

“Yeah.”

“I know you're probably avoiding me. I completely understand. I just think we need to talk about this before I go. And I don't like that you have never even met Melissa.”

“I really don’t think that’s necessary, Dad.”

“I think it will be nice if you come visit me sometimes. I’m sure I’ll have room in the villa. We could swim and—“

“Cut it out. I did not come here to make bullshit plans.” I stared at him for a moment. “I don’t even know why I came.” I made moves to leave but he wouldn’t have it.

“No, please don’t go just yet. I just, I need to tell you sweetie—“

“Do NOT say sorry, please don’t you dare do that.”

“I won’t. I just want you to know, that I want you to come with me—come see me. Sometime, you know, when you want to. It’s obvious you don’t want to deal with this now—and rightly so, that’s...fine, you know, that’s fine. But you can, you should come.”

“I really don’t think you can tell me what I should and should not do”

“Okay. Okay.” He looked down and stopped talking, stopped trying.

And then he was gone. A friend of his at the company set him up in some sort of international trading scheme based in Madrid. They bought a villa with a fountain and a year later they got married in front of it. I saw pictures.

He sent a Christmas card every year, which had become a Christmas E-mail in the last few years. He faded incredibly quickly from my life—for a father. Especially for a father who had raised me. Who I had grown up in awe of. I *worshipped* him as a girl. He was my answer man and my guide post. He made me feel strong. I wondered at first how someone so close to you can fool you so thoroughly. I’ve spent my adult life now expecting and profiting off that very phenomenon—turns out it’s pretty common.

He disappeared, and I pretended that it had no effect on me. To look at myself now, it's almost impressive how much change one person can put herself through. A lot of things like a sense of good and of right and of love—things that were so obvious as a kid stopped making as much sense to me. I'm still not convinced they're supposed to. I don't think I believe that human beings are inherently good. Have you seen some of the shit we do? I decided I was being starry-eyed and financially idiotic to pursue social work as a career. I switched to a business major. It just makes sense to do something that will actually get you by in this world. A law degree seemed a fine next step—and he was always praising lawyers. How skilled and sharp they were, how impressive. I figured I should be impressive. And the salary is no drawback.

When I graduated from law school he popped back into my life again. I got a call from William Brendell himself, inviting me to a position at his firm in New York. I was ecstatic but confused. His name was vaguely familiar, but I didn't remember applying to work for him. Then he mentioned that he had been the attorney representing my father in the divorce. He had started a firm just a few years ago, but thanks to the highly generous contribution from my father, they had been able to make a name for themselves very quickly. Going against everything I was supposed to be learning about strategy and decision making, I instead jumped right into that job, very few questions asked. I was hungry.

I was on the subway once when we had to make an emergency stop. I remember just standing there busily engaging with the phone in my hand, handling something important that couldn't wait the twenty minutes until I would be in the office. Then I was airborne, hurtling both at and with the people standing in front of me until we were all

brought to a halt by the end of the cabin. I nearly wrenched my shoulder out of its socket and I'm sure my spinal alignment has been permanently altered. That was what it was like when she called me. It was just like someone pulling the emergency brake.

The words "This is Melissa" didn't register as anything to me at first. It wasn't like those times in movies where just the sound of a certain voice triggers ominous music and a knowing look on the part of the protagonist. It took a couple of repetitions of the name before I fully realized.

"Beth, are you there? It's Melissa."

"Oh, right. Um..how..what's.."

"I'm sorry to bother you, I'm sure your busy, but it's important. Your father, he's, he's gone." I could hear her fighting a whimper. "He, um, well, his business has been bad, you know, or you don't know. Anyway, business is bad, I guess the company is ruined, or something. It really just doesn't make any sense! But, he took— he couldn't deal with it, you know, it was disappointing. And so he hung himself..."

I realized after a bit of silence that it was my turn to say something. I just had to say anything, *Why couldn't I think of anything to say?* "Oh my God..." seemed appropriate. "I, um, I'm sorry."

"So, I know this might be way way too much to ask, but is it possible, or would you want to or be able to, come? I had thought that I would arrange for the funeral to be here, but I really think it would be good for you to come. And, you've got frequent fly miles, right? From your job? So, it shouldn't be too hard, I think.

"Uh, I guess...yeah? Um, okay, wow, I guess I'll come." I sat perplexed, lost looking in my head for anything more appropriate to feel or say. What is appropriate at a time like this? "So I should come as soon as possible?"

“The funeral will be in three days, if that’s even possible, then yes, I would think you should leave right away, if you can. Or if you want to. And obviously you can stay here, there’s plenty of room.”

“Alright, I’ll, um..uh, do that then. See y- “

“Just one more thing. I was hoping you would tell your mother. She should probably know, I would think, or I would think she would probably want to, but I, uh, don’t think I should tell her.”

“Okay, I’ll tell her.”

“And obviously she can come too, if she wants.”

“Right, okay. Bye.”

There was no way Mom was coming, but she handled the news fairly well. I think the bottle of Jack Daniels she was nursing as I told her was helpful.

I started to gather my things as the plane touched down. I don’t remember dozing off, but it was good I did. As I got out of the terminal I just stood there. I told Melissa when I was coming, but we hadn’t discussed the protocol for when I got there. There was a father and his daughter standing next to me—of course. A petite woman with sandy blonde hair resting on her shoulders and a black cardigan buttoned up to her neck came up to me. She was beautiful but it was marred slightly by a furrowed brow and what looked like blotches from crying.

“Beth?”

“Yes.”

“Wow. You look just like him,” she said. I just stared. “Here, the car’s this way.”

We walked to the gray Audi parked down the drive and she helped me hoist my bag in. As I got settled in she reached into her purse, pulled out an envelope and handed it to me.

“Here. You should see it.”

I carefully tugged the letter out of the envelope and unfolded it. The way the letter “a” was written made it instantly recognizable. I felt weird about it, considering this note was not left for me, but I breathed out and began to read.

Dear Missa,

I have so many things to say sorry for. So many things I've done wrong, to you, to everyone. Maybe if I was actually able to say any of them, I wouldn't have to do this. But I can't

I did so much more than mess up. I lost everything we've been working towards, everything the company has been building. I'm sure you'll hear.

Everyone will hear. I just can't hear anymore.

I do want to tell you that I love you, very much. And I thank you for coming into my life. And I thank you for our son. Jack is going to be great, you will make sure of it, I know.

Love,

your Richard

I read through it twice. Where was I? Where was my mother? Where was his life in America? I stared intensely at the letter, and still there was no hint of it.

I refused to speak to Melissa as I processed the letter. It was annoyingly hard when I felt her eyes frequently flitting over me, looking, waiting.

“Do you need to talk?”

No, I thought to myself.

“Do you have any questions? Anything to ask me? You can ask.”

“No.” Of course I have nothing to ask you. You have *nothing* to give me, all you do is take. The anger was building up, gathering towards my mouth. All the emotion that had been pent up for him began to rise to the surface when I looked at her for some reason.

“Not now anyway,” I said through gritted teeth.

She pulled into a long drive and swung around to park behind the main house.

She showed me straight up to my room and I sat there on the bed for at least an hour after she had gone. What was I doing here? Why the fuck was I still chasing a man, clearly too self-destructive and egotistical to care at all about me. I just don’t even know what to do, I want to get back on a plane. Go back to my life. This trip has been a black hole from the start.

Someone tapped timidly on the door, and I invited them in.

“Are you settled?”

“No, not quite. I need more time before dinner.”

“Listen, I think we just need to talk now, don’t you?”

“I don’t really know what to say to you. I mean, I don’t know you, actually.”

“Well, I’ll start then. I’m the bitch who wrecked your family, stole your dad from you, and moved him to another country.” Her tone surprised me. It was like she was stating a fact. There was no malice or fight behind the words, she just said the words, completely matter-of-factly.

“What?” True, but “What? Why are you doing this? Don’t you just want this to be ignored? Can’t we just be done with this?”

“Sure, that’s fine, but I don’t think you’ll be done with it until you talk this thing out. I mean, what has your life been like? Have you missed your father? Did you know he missed you?” The more she talked the more uncontrollable the anger inside of me was getting. “I’m sure to you I’m the devil come to life, I am everything that is wrong with everything. But come on! Don’t you have something you need to know from me? Something you need to demand of me?”

“What the fuck? Why are you doing this? Why are you *doing* this?” I could feel the emotions rising up but there were too many to regulate.

“I just think you should know, I think it’s important—“

“No! You don’t *know* what’s important! One thing, is family. And you’re right! You did destroy mine. You destroyed my family. My Dad ran off with you and *I* never saw him again!”

“It’s true.”

“I know it’s fucking true, I lived it! I lived through it all but I didn’t get to fucking survive it. I did not survive! He thinks he didn’t survive, that he can’t live. I can’t live! What is my life? And it’s his fault and it’s your fault.”

“Yes, it was. I was our fault. But, also, I think you need to understand, to know—“

“Know what!?”

“Don’t you want to know why, don’t you want to know what’s going on! I’m actually not the devil. I know I was to you, and for that I am truly truly sorry, but there’s so much more than you have bothered to hear!”

“What are you talking about?”

“I did not ruin their marriage. I really didn’t. I wouldn’t even get involved with Richard until they were separated. They had separated! They hadn’t told you yet but they had.”

“Huh..wha..no! What!?”

“They had, it was done, their marriage was done, but that’s not even the point! That was happening and has little to do with me and almost nothing to do with you. The point is that, they were done, but you and he weren’t done. You up and left and broke his heart.”

“That’s insane! HE LEFT ME! He wasn’t there. He was here, in Spain, with you!”

“But you never came. He sent so many letters. He invited you every Christmas. Your room! The room you’re sleeping in was supposed to be your room whenever you wanted to come. But you didn’t.”

“He didn’t want me to! He didn’t try hard enough. He was supposed to do more, to do everything! HE WAS MY DAD!” I felt my knees begin to buckle and I eased myself down onto the bed. “He was my *dad*.”

“Yes, he was your Dad. He was your Dad.” She moved towards me slightly extending her arm towards my back. I had an urge to bite her, but somehow found myself burying my face in her sleeve instead.

Bawling until all the screaming was gone. Until all the energy was gone.

“I’ll be the first to admit that your father was an imperfect creature, he made so many mistakes, he was not cut out for a lot of things. But he did his best, his best just wasn’t enough.

She sat with me for a long time while I cried and whimpered, and for even longer while I just sat there and stared. And then I fell asleep, hard. I slept until the funeral the next day.

I got ready slowly. Taking my time in the shower, letting the water pour over me slowly and thoroughly. Rinsing every pore, every hair. I gently toweled myself down with a soft, white cotton towel. Taking care to get every drop of water off my skin. I slid my stockings up my legs and made sure all the seams were straight before guiding the silky fabric of my navy dress down over them. I went to the mirror and brushed out my hair until it was straight and past my shoulders, falling softly over the straps of the dress. I buckled the straps of my high heeled shoes at my ankles and straightened up. Examining myself. Still breathing, I went down.

It was a backyard vigil. Very small, only about 30 or so people. All of us gathered in a semi-circle around the closed Mahogany casket that contained him. The preacher spoke half in Spanish and half English, and so I tuned out for the whole time. Instead I observed the day. I stared in fascination at the contrast between the sniffling mourners in black, set against the brilliantly sunny day with the flowering trees nearby giving off an intoxicating scent and the birds moving about in their lazy way.

After the ceremony there was a small reception inside, complete with buffet. As I stood in line a shorter Spanish woman with a red scarf that matched her red lipstick came up behind me. After a moment she looked up and asked me how I had known Richard.

“He’s my dad,” I replied.

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Déjà vu

Sara Patek

The dead silence in the car should have been unbearable as we made our way down the gravel road, but I was perfectly indifferent to it, staring out the window at nothing in particular. The colors and shapes we were passing blended as my eyes glazed over, and all I could think about was the last time I was here.

I couldn't feel my fingertips. I'd left my Care Bears mittens in the car, wanting her to see my sparkly purple nails. I'd gone through a lot of trouble to put her favorite polish on, the one she always put on our fingers and toes when she'd go through her 'manic phase.' That was how I wanted to remember her, and more importantly, that's how I wanted her to remember me. Matt said she'd like that, and helped me finish painting my nails after I'd spilled nearly half the bottle of "Purple Craze" on the beige carpet of our living room.

So I wasn't about to let some February winds and a little snow keep her from seeing them now.

I glanced at my father, standing to my left. He looked cold. And sad, but not necessarily because she was gone. Sad because he had to be there and watch. He hadn't been around much for the last few months because "things at the hospital were hectic," but even at 6, I knew it was because Mom wouldn't take her medicine. Matt told me once that Dad wasn't good at watching people suffer because some people can't be helped. I always thought they could, if you tried hard enough. But I guess not.

He wouldn't look at me, so I turned to Matt on my right. He smiled in that somber way that really shouldn't even be called a smile and softly lifted his chin in the direction of our mom, redirecting my attention.

We stood there, the three of us, watching as they slowly lowered the casket into the ground.

A lump was forming in my throat, and I clenched my jaw to hold back the tears. It didn't matter that I'd already cried for her. My dull blue eyes, an empty replica of hers, blurred and I started to panic. This was the last time I would ever see her and I couldn't see *anything*. I reached up to wipe my eyes, but it didn't really help.

Then I felt Matt's hand slip into mine and squeeze. I squeezed back so hard my knuckles turned white. Tears trailed down my cold, pink cheeks. He didn't look at me, but he knew. And even though we were surrounded by lots of relatives and family friends, my tears were our little secret.

This time, it was my toes. And not because of the cold, though it was unseasonably chilly for August. It was the shoes. Damn heels. I should have known better than to wear them when we had to climb that hill to get to the grave.

I stood in the same position, the middle of three.

My father was still to my left. Somehow the lines time and worry had etched in his face seemed more pronounced in the soft, early daylight. He would have argued they made him look distinguished, but the truth was he just looked old. He had the same sober coldness about him he'd had almost fourteen years ago, but it was stained with a hint of suspicion, like he wasn't sure this was actually happening and didn't want to look the fool if

it turned out to be a dream. It just seemed so improbable that we should be standing here again.

This time, it actually had been an accident. We'd been given no warning, and it seemed too surreal.

Even though I knew he wouldn't be there, when I turned to my right, I was surprised to see Jamie. She looked so... out of place.

She was trying to hide her tears, but a smudge of mascara betrayed her. She'd only been dating Matt for a couple of months and it seemed she didn't feel like she had the right to cry for him. Part of me agreed.

It wasn't that I didn't like Jamie; I just wasn't used to sharing Matt. And I especially didn't want to share this. It should have been our last little secret.

I wanted to cry for him, convinced that if I did, he would come back to squeeze my hand like last time. But I couldn't find any tears. I was empty and alone. Alone with all these other people. It occurred to me that I should hate him for leaving me here by myself, but I couldn't even do that.

I wanted to feel something, anything. I would have settled for anger, sadness, fear, even my feet, at this point. But nothing came.

They said the prayer. Nothing.

They started lowering the casket. Nope.

But that's when we she started crying, tears racing down her pinkened face. I refused to look at her, that lump forming in my throat once more.

So I reached out, grabbed her clammy, delicate hand, and squeezed.

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Good Luck in the Universe

John Cogburn

“Yeah ya know you haven’t lived till you’ve seen clowns huffing ether out of bedpans,” Dreads Scott said to Jake, the burley bearded barista.

Jake served up his cappuccino masterpiece and replied, “Oh shit you mean all this time I haven’t been living, oh damn I should probably get out of this place more.”

Jeremy, sitting at his usual dinky one-man wooden table in the corner of Brady Tea, chuckled at the ridiculousness of this exchange. For the past ten minutes Dreads Scott had been geekingly reminiscing of his younger days in the Tripoli Shrine Circus as “that guy” who stands in the middle of the motorcycle cage. “Great stuff,” Jeremy thought to himself as he typed their words on his once-modern laptop. He couldn’t get the image out of his head of creepy clowns with faces smothered by ether-dripping bedpans. Jeremy’s mind churned with story ideas. This is why Jeremy came here, daily almost, for the last couple months. Characters and scenes were all floating around here, waiting to be pulled down like a balloon tied to a string. Jeremy never joined in conversations, preferring the role of scribe. Ether huffing clowns, religious nuts, theater nuts, whores, hippies, hipsters, it was all here in a seemingly endless reservoir of fictional diversions.

Brady Tea itself made life and thought accommodating for Jeremy. The place was a gutted out old bungalow, truly a “teahouse,” likely belonging to an upper middle class German beer family in the earlier part of the last century. Twenty years ago, Dennis and Carla Brady, returned home from Paris, bringing back the idea of breathing Bohemian life into their part of the city. They wanted a place where people, especially young people, could simply “be,” whether over a cup of tea or coffee, or a cigarette if taken upstairs or outside. Where Jeremy had found

his little corner seat on the first floor, one could purchase drinks from lone baristas who were guaranteed to be eccentric on some level. If you smoked, unlike Jeremy who couldn't afford cigarettes, and didn't mind loud punk teens and the homeless, you went upstairs. The un-intoxicated thought, took place downstairs, although the chain-smoking paperback readers were notorious for their bathroom wall philosophies.

Jeremy feverishly tried fitting the clown scene into his novel-in-progress. Its twisted humor burned in his head. Readers would shit themselves reading a scene like that. Ultimately, the thought evaporated from his head, like catching a big fish and throwing it back. Dreads Scott was back upstairs, undoubtedly smoking his questionable cigarettes. Jake hovered, wiping down tables, signaling closing time. The action of Jeremy's story was dead ending with each path of thought leading nowhere. It was nothing new. He hadn't written a single scene or paragraph in days, maybe longer. As of late he'd simply been a typographer with pages of sporadic jottings. Quotes from the day like, "Yea I couldn't tie my shoes till the fourth grade" or "Yes! Will bark for food!" or "My life may suck but hey at least I don't have to work to make it suck" triggered nothing and fit nowhere. Jeremy pounded the "J" key as if its ferocity could solve things.

"Fuuuck!" Jeremy blurted.

"Jesus Christ man, chill out," Jake returned, "Don't take it all out on the computer, it didn't call your mother a bitch or anything," as he wiped the table next to Jeremy's.

"Hey, look, we're closing up soon and uhh..."

"... Oh sure, yeah I'll get goin." Jeremy diligently shoved away his laptop and coffee-ringed spiral notebooks. His back ached and couldn't feel his buttocks. Hours had passed since he'd left the wooden chair to use the bathroom.

“I see you in here just about everyday man. You’re either geekin or pullin your hair out over here,” Jake said focusing on the coffee stained table.

“...Yeah”

“Well uh my name’s Jake...and...uhh... I guess I’ll see you some other time in here.”

“Yeah. Yeah probably tomorrow.”

Outside, the city was a ghost town. The abrupt and singular conversation had jostled Jeremy more than he would’ve liked, but the placidity of the after-midnight street calmed him. For nine months Jeremy had been living inside his own head, above and away from just about everyone else. He’d become that detached observer feasting off the activity of human beings. He wanted to record everything through fiction, and hold it up to the world someday like a giant glass mirror. People entertained Jeremy, the way a child is watching penguins in a zoo. Unfortunately for Jeremy, to move about and interact with the human world meant falling into the lion exhibit.

Jeremy never knew what to expect from himself on walks home late at night. He either felt liberated or depressed. Liberation came if he had the means of readily entertaining his thoughts. Maybe he’d take his thoughts to Reverend Michaelson’s world, getting drunk off communion wine in the church parsonage. Maybe he’d stand in Anarchist Jim’s checkout line at Pick ‘n’ Save, short changing every oblivious customer. He could ride along with Syd the Psycho in his superfluously decorated station wagon, spouting off religious fanaticisms through the onboard microphone. Jeremy’s favorite world was DJ Marcus’s universe. He could sit ‘n’ spin records, smoke skinny j’s, and entertain the city all day. Of course Jeremy never really knew the people whose worlds he went to. He’d picked up names here and there, or simply invented ones for reference purposes. From the bits and pieces of conversations he’d hear or

imagine at Brady Tea and elsewhere, the lives of others could loosely assembled in his head. Some nights he found it extremely difficult to take himself there.

Jeremy's walk back on this night was one of desperation. His mind was like an empty tank of gasoline. It was another nine blocks before home and he struggled making his brain work for his mind. The fine living rooms of the townhouses on Macy St. were not illuminated, so imagining their charmed worlds for pleasure as he often did wasn't happening. He found it hard to play "rich-dad-with-hot-wife" and lecture his ten year old boy about standing up for himself on the playground. The longer Jeremy found himself with his-self, the longer the walk home became. Cars were only parked on the street, no one walked their dogs, no kids played in the yard, no young people walked with iPods, and not even the drunks stumbled past. There was conflict out of no conflict at all in Jeremy's head.

Moving his walk to the middle of the street, the subtle potential increase in danger entertained him with the possibility of something actually happening to him. It held him over till reaching his sister, Christine's, apartment on Broadview St. where he lived in the basement, separated from the washer and dryer by a bed sheet for \$90 a month. Christine had married the landlord, Jim, who felt reluctantly obligated to help out a brother-in-law. Mercifully there was a TV with free cable. Anybody would go insane without it down there. Finally able to call it a night, Jeremy laid down on his twin bed, masturbated, and fell asleep to paid programming.

Morning came, Jeremy could tell by the hazy dust-air illuminating through the basement window. The start of the day, if occurring before 11 AM, meant the \$3.95 breakfast buffet at "Sheryl's Kitchen." Jeremy's cat clock with the pendulum tail read something after 10. It wouldn't have to be another chicken broth brunch day. Robotically, Jeremy threw some water on his face, scrubbed his teeth, swiped his pits, and hovered over the washer machine.

Performing his change removal trick from the machine, he took four quarters, only enough to keep his brother-in-law from noticing. Thievery excited Jeremy, even if it was four quarters. He grabbed the rest of his needed change with a calculated handful from his change jar under the bed, then he was outside, backpack saddled, on his way to the buffet.

The walk to Sheryl's was pleasant and pain free. Car after car of dreary eyed business men and women with drive-thru coffee sped toward downtown. Other nomads along with the surprisingly content middle aged unemployed stomped the sidewalks. A few terriers walked with their owners. Life was in motion this morning, while Jeremy's mind fluttered, taking its sweet time waking up. The painful emptiness of the walk home the previous night like so many other instances of painful emptiness was, for Jeremy, like a dream one doesn't remember, yet remembers being dreamt nonetheless. The large abscesses of sleep Jeremy was getting with his current lifestyle helped store these instances of quiet desperation on high hard-to-reach shelves inside his brain.

"Sheryl's" was quiet, with the morning rush behind. The scrambled eggs bin at the buffet line looked dry and crusty, but Jeremy scraped every bit he could, piling sausage patties and greasy wet bacon on top. At his usual corner booth already, without thinking, he was face deep in his meal before removing his backpack.

"Breakfast of champions right there," Kim, the young waitress said to the back of Jeremy's head, "must've felt like seizing the day this morning... haven't seen ya since Monday, I think."

Jeremy finished swallowing his food, "Been that long? Wow."

"So how's your greatest story ever written or whatever coming along? Does the kid ever end up seeing the light?" Kim was one of Christine's old friends from high school- not a best friend, but a friend. Among many other fantasies, Kim was one which frequented Jeremy's thoughts before falling asleep at night.

“What? ...o wait ...yea... I mean no...I’m not sure yet...haven’t gotten that far.”

“God, you’re such a space cadet.”

“I try.”

“Haha, well I gotta go take down the buffet line. Tell your sister I said hi. Oh and tell her to quit being a huge corporate dick sucker. Tell her that, don’t forget.”

Jeremy’s plate was clean shortly after Kim left. He stayed to watch her break down the buffet line. The booth offered a safe spectator distance, allowing for quick aversion of the eyes. On this day, Jeremy noticed himself staring in a different way than usual. It wasn’t Kim the sexy waitress, but the drama he saw in a toiling human being’s face. Quick dynamic mini bursts of chaos on her face, subtle as might seem, thrilled him in a peculiar way. Lips squeezed colorless together from the heavy push of dish carts, eyes squinting and forehead skin wrinkled from hot water vapor, face muscles pulled drum tight from accidental contact with heat lamps, sporadic smiling from humorous interactions with coworkers, all this fascinated Jeremy. If only he could unscramble the situation and rearrange its beauty into words and phrases, he’d have the story he wanted. It might not come out as a woman tearing down a buffet, but that eternal allure of human emotion and expression would be there nonetheless. Just one true sentence is all Jeremy needed, as Hemingway would say. Jeremy paid his change to the face behind the register and walked home, head and stomach full.

Outside his apartment he found Stevie the pot dealer attempting to buzz into the building.

“Oh shit, hey Jeremy what’s good? Fuckin 12E’s not here again and he’s not answering his phone. These god damn career kids, do they want dro or not?”

“Shit man, can’t rely on anybody these days.”

“Hey, mind if I kick it downstairs with you till this fuck gets back to me, I’m kinda stuck out here?”

“Sure man I’ve got nothing going on... at least nothing I can’t do later.”

Jeremy first met Stevie at a bus stop nearly a month after he’d moved into the basement. Stevie had approached Jeremy, asking if he needed some weed. At the time, even more so now, Jeremy’s haggard “vagabond” look gave off the impression of a “stoner,” no doubt. Fresh off his recent departure from his last real job as an editorial assistant at “Herder’s Express,” Jeremy wasn’t about to hurt his bank account given the jobless future he’d planned for himself. Jeremy, instead had an offer for Stevie. He gave him the rundown of how he was living in the basement of a goldmine... how the young college grads above him who couldn’t afford to live downtown didn’t know where to get weed. Every third person washing their clothes in the basement would poke their head through his curtain and awkwardly ask. If Stevie promised to smoke him up anytime he came by, he’d give out Stevie’s number and let people know he had the good shit. After arduously explaining he was not a cop, Jeremy had Stevie’s number.

“So what exactly have you been doing man? You make any headway on that story or novel or whatever?” Stevie asked as they were walking together downstairs.

“Been kinda just floating around mostly- experiencing the day to day with nothing to do and no money. I’m not sure what to make of the whole lifestyle yet. It is what it is. I go to “Brady Tea” a lot, working on the story, and whatever.”

“Living the dream...nice. Yea business is going pretty well for me these days. All the money these kids make burns holes in their pockets and I’m not complaining. Plus they don’t even know what an eighth looks like anyway, so I don’t even bring a scale.”

Jeremy and Stevie parked themselves on his street- rescued couch in the lamp lit corner of the designated living area. Stevie pulled out a baggy and pipe as if simply what one did while

sitting on any couch. The two sat and smoked abundantly. No one was home midday to wash clothes. Although meeting under the pretense of business obligation, the friendship they shared didn't feel that way. Maybe it's just a convenient excuse to get high. Occasionally they'd share a laugh.

"You should flip the tube on man," Stevie suggested.

"My thoughts exactly. Maybe Celebrity Rehab is on."

"Haha, that show is so fucked. I don't even know who those people are. Wait, that isn't the show with that loser fuckhead from Saved by the Bell is it? What's his name...ah shit, what is it?"

"Screech"

"Screech! Haha fucking Screech."

"Haha, but nah man he's on Celebrity Fit Club."

"Oh god damnit 12E's calling now. I'm gonna run up there, then I gotta meet my guy back at my place. But shit it was good seein ya. I'll pop my head in next time I'm over."

Jeremy sat feeling rather hollow inside. He understood the two dimensions of drug dealer friendships, but this was one friendship among few others. In his current state of mental detachedness, it was the only kind of relationship he could readily maintain.

Jeremy sat and watched TV like he always had, like it was porn. The Office was on. It disturbed Jeremy. The show seemed to mean more than all the laughs. Michael's off hand politically incorrect statements, Jim's painful pursuit of Pam, and Kelly Kapoor's college-ish observance of the world, all made him laugh, but uncomfortably. The random venting interviews from the show's paranoid characters and their sporadic looks into the camera out of

pleading desperation were absurd and normal at the same time. Too lazy to write it out and no one to explain it to, Jeremy's mind pressurized with thought. "Somebody should write about how this represents such a bleak fucking world we live in," he wondered, "some bad ass non-fiction could be written, too bad the show is so damn funny. Is it pathetic to imagine a life consoled by cameras and feeling more alienated with them not being there? Is living a fictional life more preferable than your own?" Jeremy switched to Animal Planet for a break, then tuned into Spongebob Squarepants for three hours.

Home from her job downtown, Jeremy's sister Christine went downstairs to find her brother passed out in the upright position, drool forming on his chin. Christine thumbed the volume-up button, blasting, "Ohhh who lives in a pineapple under the sea..."

"I gotta say this is quite a pathetic sight," Christine said. "Get the fuck up and let's go to Brady and get some coffee, looks like you could use some."

"You're a big corporate dick sucker."

"What the fuck?"

"Kim told me to say it."

"Next time you see her tell her at least I'm selective with my dick sucking. And tell her she didn't go to college to serve hoodrats. Okay let's go. I'll meet you upstairs in five minutes."

"I don't wanna know what that first part means but okay."

The two drove in Christine's civic, going over Christine's big important day at her big important job. She didn't let Jeremy have more than three sentences on the short car ride and even well after the two had sat down with their coffees in Jeremy's little corner.

"... and so then Camilla from accounting came back a third time and bitched at us all again, and I was like 'We get it, we're the dumbass cubicle people, and you're the little number girl

who takes home all the money we make for you'... I didn't really say it but fuck, I really should have, I might next time, that cunt." Christine took a breath then sipped her coffee.

"I think you just need to relax and take the day as it comes. Don't focus too much on Karla or whatever her name is. Who gives a shit?"

"Easy for you to say. What the hell have you done today, get high and watch cartoons?"

"Well yea but I'm okay with that. People forget the importance of being idle."

"Jeremy you do absolutely nothing all day. You say you're writing a 'book' but you can't even tell me what it's about."

"I don't want to tell you what it's about."

"Oh, like it's some great mystery."

"Hey, I know what work's like, I probably worked harder than you ever did, and I've gotten out of doing nothing, more than you'll ever know. Don't think I'm below you just because you're a slave."

"Wow, fuck you, I'm leaving. I'm meeting Jim at Olive Garden anyways. Oh and you're welcome for the cheap pathetic basement."

"Thank you, Jim's wife."

"You know, Jeremy, why you can't write about anything... because you don't actually *do* anything! You've got no real friends and all the ones you did have, have real jobs and lives somewhere. All you do is watch people. You never do any living yourself. You're pathetic. Why don't you write some gay little story about that?"

Christine gave him a smirk of satisfaction as she left. Her words got to him. Reality was something he had to face. She'd pulled down his emptiness and quiet desperation from the top shelves of his mind and shoved them in his face. It had been nine months since he left the job

he'd gotten out of college. At the time he'd never felt more compelled to do anything than doing nothing, while taking everything in at the same time. The world he had been around didn't think, they just plugged in. He wanted time and room to think, and now it was all he had.

Fresh air might help the feeling like shit, Jeremy decided. Out west the sky was on fire with color, but the air was cold. Across the street a thin man with Bob Dylan clothes and Ray Ban's breathed into a saxophone, unrecognizable yet beautiful melodies and phrases. When he finished, an old couple listening in clapped and dropped a bill in the man's open case. After the couple moved along the man disassembled his instrument.

"Hey what song was that?" Jeremy called from across the street.

"Oh that, that was some of my own stuff I wrote a couple of weeks ago." The thin man walked across the street in Jeremy's direction.

"I really liked it, didn't sound like anything I've ever heard before."

"Thanks man, I kinda just play what comes out." The two were standing outside the teahouse.

"So where ya from?"

"All around really. I was in Montreal a couple weeks ago and before that New York, Boston, D.C., some others. Cigarette?"

"Yea sure. How do you support yourself doing all that?"

"McDonald's, ha. I usually just find a McJob and work for about six months, then head out anywhere. Playing my sax is enough to cover food money most of the time."

"In a weird way, that sounds like the best life. Work a little bit, do what you love, move around. I like it."

"Yea I'd say I'm satisfied with life. It's not always the easiest but I wouldn't have it any other way."

“Hey you want a cup of coffee as payment for your service? They let you smoke upstairs here.”

“Sure man, is it good stuff?”

“The best.” Jeremy bought two coffees with his change, and he and the thin man went upstairs, wandering through clouds of smoke to find a seat. Jeremy had only been up there a couple of times just to check it out. Through the haze in the back corner he saw Dreads Scott squinty eyed and laughing with the punk teens half his age. Jeremy found a spot by the window.

“So what do you do?” the thin man asked.

“I live in a damp basement, probably as god awful of a place there is around here. I try to write as often as I can and watch too much TV. I used to work for Herder’s, this publication place downtown, but I wasn’t doing anything I wanted to be doing.”

“And what’s that?”

“Fiction, but now I’m even falling out of love with that. There was a time when I used to think I’d rather be a character in a piece of fiction than a real person at all. Lately I’ve just been wondering what the difference is. I thought the feeling would translate into being a good writer. It remains to be seen.”

“What made you think of all this?”

“I don’t know it’s hard to explain. I usually just write down these thoughts and never say em to anybody, but... Well you know that show ‘The Office’?”

“I don’t really watch TV, but I’ve heard people talking about it.”

“It’s like this fictional reality show sitcom thing, but it’s shot more like actual footage than a normal TV show, so it looks and feels entirely real, like too real. Then there are these little interviews with the workers about drama going on and then they’ll randomly stare into the camera even when they’re not being interviewed like they’re saying “GET ME OUT OF THIS

REAL WORLD!” You’re meant to laugh at all their painful awkwardness. I mean funny things do happen but it’s the awkwardness you’re supposed to laugh at. And the fucked up thing is I do laugh, a lot, and it scares me.”

“So you think noticing this says something about yourself?”

“It’s not just me, eh it might be, but I feel I’m living everybody else’s story but my own, like I’m always watching myself on TV. Our generation has watched thousands of hours of TV and movies. You can’t help but think that has some psychic effect on our minds. Books aren’t much better, but at least you can create kind of your own world, but in the end it’s the author that’s done all the creating. It’s like I’m stealing someone else’s story and getting off to everyone else’s life except my own. God I’m sorry I’m laying this all on you, a total stranger, but I don’t get many chances to.”

“Hey no worries, we’re not strangers anymore. Dude everyone goes through an identity meltdown sometime. You just gotta filter shit out. Gotta watch what you’re watchin and learn to control what goes through your mind. It’s like that redneck expression ‘freedom aint free,’ only it’s legit. You gotta set your mind free knowing you as a human being can never fully be free... don’t kid yourself it’s not in our nature... still the goal should be and ought to be liberate yourself as much as possible from others, but most importantly yourself. And you gotta protect that freedom. The trick of it all is you have to know to let influences in from time to time, otherwise you’re just another ignorant fuck.”

“Damn I hear all of that. It’s crazy, just being here talking sort of evaporated the clutter in my head.”

“Human beings are worth more than serving as fictional characters.”

“I see.”

“But hey I sorry I gotta get going. The first breakfast shift starts tomorrow. Don’t forget to let

the real world work for you for a change and just fucking write. One true sentence man.

[RETURN](#)



CREATIVE NON-FICTION

Rodion Sadovnyk

Give me your poor, your tired, your huddled masses, and forget about your American Dream.

Most people heard about the wars of conquest, and the majority of people also know about wars of liberation. Humanity's pursuit of freedom is the highest of virtues, and one of the most discussed topics among philosophers. Every rational human being wants to be free. I was no exception. I sought freedom, and nurtured the dream of independence as protectively as any mother would guard her child. I believed that as a human being and a citizen of the world, I deserved equality and recognition. Alas, where I come from recognition and respect are commodities that are often assigned an inchoate numerical value. I left my abode eight years ago, hoping to escape corruption, "grades for sale" flyers, and the general hostility towards each other too often veiled in immorality. As I was flying across the Atlantic I silently prayed for the future in which my children would never have to leave their home.

Ten hours later I was confidently strolling down Wisconsin Avenue. Worn out jeans, cheap sneakers and a baseball cap turned backwards. This costume immediately blended me with the "free" crowd. I was whistling one of Louis Armstrong's tunes and smoking a cigarette. Being free is truly an intoxicating feeling. In those moments you feel like happiness herself descends upon you, puts her arms around your neck and gently whispers promises of loyalty in your ear. She kept her promise. Every American citizen was concerned about my well being and always inquired about how I was doing on a given day. I always responded positively and thanked them for their concerns. Life was beautiful and I began to believe that America was truly a blessed place where citizens are members of a large family. My love for this country expanded

even further when I learned that this poor and innocent state lost its fathers long ago, and was left in the custody of an uncle. I made myself a promise that I will not disappoint the founding fathers. I would work passionately hard and acquaint myself with that famous uncle.

Trouble and doubt came in the form of a slick, smooth-talking, suit and tie immigration consultant who began his sentences with a stretched out “w-e-l-l” and ended them with the reference to his fees. The officer of justice swore on three Bibles that all my savings would be sufficient enough to seal my freedom with the official stamp of the United States. I grew up extremely poor and I clinged on to my money for as long as I could. Eventually I brought in everything, down to the last penny, and dropped it on the table in front of this immigration czar. He did not even blink. In fact it seemed like he was reluctant to even touch the worn out bills, and called in his secretary to scoop up the pieces of paper that represented my worth. After the last coin was taken away, this representative of the law asked me some basic questions and photocopied my passport. He promised to contact me in a few weeks, and gave an estimate of a few months before my freedom would be permanently sealed. We shook hands. As I was walking out I noticed in the corner of my eye how loyal he was to his antibacterial lotion.

I came back in a few weeks and waited for over three hours, ignoring the cringing grimaces of a well manicured, model-type secretary. Soon I was informed that attorney B. would not be able to see me today due to some immigration emergency. I responded with visions of dying immigrants, separated families, oceans of tears, and a barb wired border. I apologized for my persistence, promised to come back, and silently prayed for a successful solution to the mentioned emergency. Years later I learned that his reason for not seeing me would be an appointment with his golf buddies that he just had to uphold. I understood and agreed to the idea that eighteen holes of golf were more important than a sixteen year old, who reeked of construction materials and fantasized about equality and respect. I faithfully came back, yet time

after time families were bawling louder than before and the border fence kept getting higher. After three months had passed I finally gained admittance and was ready to trade mere survival for basic living. However my immigration consultant thought little of my wishes and in a highly technical lingo explained that my case is hopeless. He said the best option for me would be to return home. I shook my head pretending I understood and agreed. I made a few theatrical sighs, said something about having better luck with another attorney and promised to be on my way as soon as I got my money back. At the mention of money his whole person became tense. He adjusted his tie, looked at his watch, and began with the usual stretched out “w-e-l-l.” Attorney B. told me all about the difficulties of his profession and the value of his time. The whole time he was talking to me he seemed to be looking over me, as if reading from a teleprompt. “S-o,” he concluded, “Your funds were enough to cover my fees, and you don’t owe me anything.” For the sake of preserving the decency of this written tale I will refrain from retelling my first response to his concluding remark. I turned white and began to chokingly explain that it was all I had, and have been saving for a long time. I felt like there was a tie around my neck. Each spoken word came at the expense of the next breath I took. Surprisingly, the officer of the law remained calm and said that there was nothing he could do for me. He kept looking at his watch, and, I guess, was giving me a hint that it was time for me to leave. I refused to abandon my hard earned money, and most of all, the die-hard pursuit of my dream. The Armani suit and the Rolex watch sitting in front of me calmly paged his secretary and in trice I was escorted out of his office by a security guard. The guard escorted me to the front doors and wished me farewell with an unnecessary shove out of the door.

I quickly realized the horror of my situation. I was what the newspapers called an illegal alien, who according to them was a parasite to society. Senator Sensenbrenner joined in, and in one of his statements offered incarceration of all illegal immigrants. I guess his ancestors were

lucky enough to find an honest Indian immigration official. People persuaded by the media fought furiously against those who deprived Americans of jobs and opportunities. I had not a cent in my pocket. My landlord was kinder than the guard and gave me a gentler push out of the door. The most frightening aspect of my situation which sent shivers down my spine was the fact that I literally did not know what to do. The evening following the day I lost a roof over my head and what I thought would be my opportunity for freedom I took an entirely different walk on Wisconsin Avenue. I saw hundreds of students, cheering, laughing and rejoicing at the freedom and blessings they had in their lives. It was impossible to fathom that they could have been rejoicing at something different. I was not looking for pity or charity. I was confident in my strength, and decided that for now a narrow, cold bus stop bench will do as my temporary evening residence. I had Jack London with me, and together we made the best of our situations. My strength was tested further that night. I kept getting harassed by the police who spoke to me in authoritative voices, threatened me with imprisonment, and cared little about my troubles and tribulations. Their general attitude and the manner in which they addressed me suggested hostility, resentment, and prejudice. I remember hearing one of them saying that my situation was entirely my own fault. I silently replied with a growing despise for the men dressed in the cloak of justice. As I was walking away my mind stood petrified as I realized the similarity between the officer's last remark and the slogans so popularly used during the time of eugenics and sterilization.

The idea of returning home was out of the question. I could not imagine giving up. The people who founded America furiously fought against injustice, and did not give up. The famous Uncle Sam, of whom I had lately heard so much about, did not give up either in collecting his dues and protecting the nation from job thieving parasites. Following their examples, I refused to fail. The trick to being an illegal immigrant is fairly simple. You are a stranger and an alien to

everyone. Every single door is shut in front of you, and no matter how hard you knock all you hear in response is “America is for Americans” or “You can’t just come in and expect to be welcomed.” I guess they were right. Perhaps, it was permissible for their ancestors to shove Indians as far West as they could, rob Mexicans of Texas and California, and employ slave labor in building their true democracy. I had no Driver’s License, Social Security Card, or any other document that would aid me in securing my situation. The circle was locked, and the handcuffs tightened around my wrists.

Salvation arrived unexpectedly, like a winter storm in the middle of August. I got a job as a “you do everything I tell you” small liquor store clerk. My pay was at the sub-minimum and sub-survival level of five dollars per hour. I silently ignored federal minimum wage posters as I carried boxes of liquor up and down the stairs. I needed money to get ahead, and worked fourteen hour days every day. I was grateful at the generosity of my superior who reluctantly allowed me to make a bed out of cardboard and sleep in the store. On one hand, I was live security for his establishment. On the other hand, he was running a slight risk of me running away with a case of vodka and drowning my sorrows in it. His fears triumphed over the idea of security, and he locked me up every night in the store’s damp basement. Due to poor illumination I could never tell what time it was and was rather brought into the new day by the turning of the key in the lock. Six months into my captivity I saved a considerable sum of money, and began laying down the foundation for my future. Making my way through the jungle of hate and prejudice I found a pro bono immigration attorney, who turned out to be a curt but sensitive woman. She came to see me in the store, and in a motherly way she scolded me for smoking and my poor attire, but agreed to take a look at my case. She kept her promise and three weeks later I was invited to see her. The elegant furnishing of her office immediately alerted me, and I put a hand into my pocket to protect the hard earned dead presidents from any unnecessary

intrusion. She immediately noticed, and instructed me in the latest of manners. In my defense, I made a brief mumbling reference to attorney B. She took no notice of my rebuttal, and without acknowledging my presence she began pacing back and forth in front of me. She held her hands behind her back and carried an emotionally infused conversation with some invisible speaker, who I thought at first was hiding behind one of the steel shelves. In a trice she jolted to her desk and began pounding out an angry tune on the keyboard, searching the screen was answers. In the meantime I grew doughty enough to pick up a nearby Shakespeare anthology, and in silence I found my way to Othello. “Aha!” she yelled out so loud that I nearly dropped the book on my foot. “Alright,” she said, “I will help you, come back on the third of March, I arranged for a judge to hear your case.” Happiness peaked out from behind the shelf and smiled. I was so emotionally overwhelmed that I near fell and almost walked away with the anthology.

March third was an unusually warm day. The sun was shining so bright that it seemed that He wished to rid the world of all chthonic deeds once and for all. I remember walking into the hostile courtroom. I recall the oath, and the piercing eyes of the law that studied my every movement and weighed my every word. Most of all I remember raising my shaking hand and pleading for the opportunity to fully explain my situation. My request was granted. I filled my lungs with air and my speech seemed like a long and painful exhale. I looked the law straight in the eyes and declared, “Your Honor, I know that life in itself is unfair, but I believe in justice. I believe that fairness is the foundation of justice. I am poorly versed in what constitutes just or fair actions, but I believe that I deviated little from God’s prescribed principles and as He commanded: earned my bread with sweat and blood. I am seventeen years of age and I am here to live a simple life, which I believe is attainable through hard work and impeccable morality. I desire nothing more than an opportunity to educate myself and serve for the greater good of this land. I had misfortunes in my way, yet I am confident in my success. I realize that I broke a law,

and I would be more than happy to reimburse the government with everything I earned in the last year.” At that moment I pulled out a pile of bills and laid it on the table in front of me.

The Judge waived off at my eagerness to repay and asked me to continue: “Your Honor, the ancestors of this great nation have made mistakes yet they were given an opportunity to repay. People today make mistakes, but they are given a chance to correct their folly. I am here today to show you that I am not a parasite and although I might live for the sake of others, I will never ask others to live for my sake. I have been blessed with physical and mental strengths and I am confident I can greatly contribute to the success of this nation. In return I am merely seeking recognition of my humanity, acknowledgement that I am no different than the ancestors of many Americans who came in search of a better life. Many have claimed that I will be a burden to society and steal jobs from American citizens. As I mentioned, I am capable of sustaining myself through any means possible. Therefore will never be a burden on society. I will do jobs that no one wants, and if they do desire a low paying position which works you to the point of fainting, I will gladly surrender it. What good would it do to lock me up or deport me? How would it benefit America? It wouldn’t. If I am permitted to stay then I can work and in a multitude of ways and enrich this God blessed land. I am a meek immigrant in the country of immigrants and seek nothing more than freedom in my actions and thoughts. Unfortunately I cannot find such opportunities back home because even though our freedoms have been prescribed by the Constitution they are seldom enforced. I believe that in the United States democracy is not a mere abstract concept, but a genuine and real ideology. I want to live in the country where people are still regarded as humans and not a mere means for some political end. I want to be free to the fullest extent permitted by the concept we call freedom. Please accept my proposition, and I will prove to you through my works and not my words that I am an individual worthy of this great nation. Thank you.”

The justice did not blind once. The rest, as they say, was history.

[RETURN](#)

