

# Unreal Tales

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# Traffic Stop

by Zulu Alitspa

Trevor Fletch was driving home. It was his favorite type of afternoon: quiet, calm, and sunny. A perfect afternoon to live out in the country, he thought. On a lark, he rolled down the window and allowed the warm breeze to fill the cabin of his minivan. It was a spacious, economical vehicle. He really enjoyed driving it on days like this, when sunlight filled the back compartment just like in a commercial. In fact, he had actually stopped to vacuum it out on his way home, in anticipation of this glorious afternoon commute.

On his left side was a wild hedge, trimmed into a solid wall of shrubbery by the highway department. He didn't know who actually owned it, but Trevor considered it his hedge, because all he liked to do was look at it, and you don't need a deed to do that. On the other side, an open lawn rolled down to a stretch of trees, with a gravel driveway twisting down and away into the forest. He didn't know who owned that, either, but he was glad to call them a neighbor.

The scene was intimately familiar to Trevor. He knew every landmark by sight. They were probably only landmarks to him, various unchanging trees and ditches by which he could time the trip home. Right now he was passing The Great Wall of Shrubbery, which led directly into Dead Man's Curve. He was already preparing for the upcoming curve as he passed the end of the wild hedge. He liked to accelerate against the bend, to feel the weight of his minivan flattening out with the centrifugal force.

A police cruiser was parked in the grass, hidden from oncoming traffic by the shrub. That was different, and Trevor couldn't help but turn and stare. Almost instantly, the police cruiser lit up its lights and pulled out behind him.

That wasn't very smart of me, thought Trevor, as he pulled over into the open lawn. Taking his eyes off the road, doing five over. Heck, he'd even had the nerve to smile at the cop. The axle of his minivan rocked as he pulled off the road. Trevor jerked upright in his seat, and for a moment he was worried that he had broken something serious. And then he chuckled; he couldn't do anything right today, apparently.

The police cruiser came to a halt behind him and cut its lights. Trevor went to roll down his window, but it was already open. The officer came strolling casually up the road. Trevor knew the smart thing was to remain

quiet, but he couldn't help himself.

"Sorry," he said. The officer jerked to a halt, freezing in mid-stride. His eyes were obscured by dark shades, but Trevor could see deep creases forming on the dome of the officer's clean-shaven head. Trevor immediately regretted his outburst, and yet his mouth continued making words.

"It's too easy to get distracted on a day like this," said Trevor. The officer put his foot down and exhaled, taking a moment to massage his forehead with his thumbs before he started walking again. A few seconds later, he was at Trevor's window.

"If excuses were kittens," he said, solemnly. "The poor would have mittens."

"Right," said Trevor.

The officer stood impatiently, tapping his foot on the ground. He said nothing. Trevor said nothing. He was just getting ready to check his phone when the officer spoke up.

"Do you have anyone who might be able to come secure your vehicle for you, sir?" the police officer asked.

"Excuse me?"

The officer grunted, his nostrils flaring almost imperceptibly as he placed his right hand on his service weapon.

"Step out of the vehicle, please," he said.

Trevor began to ask why. The cop slammed his hand

down on the hood of the vehicle. The resulting boom scattered a small flock of birds from the hedge.

"I said get out of the car!"

Trevor was nervous, but he went ahead and unbuckled his seatbelt. Police officers are people, too, he told himself, as he opened the door and stepped out. And people have bad days. This was not Trevor's first traffic stop, but it was the first time a police officer had asked him to exit his car. He wasn't sure what to do with himself, and then-

One quick, practiced hand twisted his arm behind his back, and then another hand grabbed him by the shoulder and forced him face down on the warm hood of his van.

"Got any drugs? Got any weapons?" the officer asked, after a long, awkward silence. He took his hand off Trevor's shoulder and began running it around his waistband. Trevor tried to say no, but the officer twisted Trevor's arm so hard that he howled in pain before he could answer. Then he fished Trevor's cell phone out of his pocket and tossed it through the open window of Trevor's car. With a single, powerful hand, the officer hurled him to the ground.

"To the cruiser, smartass," he said, giving Trevor a swift kick in the knee. There was a pop, and judging by the electric jolt which emanated from his stricken joint, Trevor knew immediately that he would not be able to



stand. Still, the police officer had given him an order. They would get this straightened out at the station. But first, he had to get to the cruiser.

It was a long, agonizing crawl for Trevor, made all the more difficult by the fact that the police officer would periodically walk up and kick his arms out from underneath him. At the halfway point the officer made him stop and do five push-ups, but it felt more like fifteen to Trevor because the officer kept losing count.

Finally, Trevor was able to drag himself into the backseat of the cruiser, and the officer slammed the door hard on his uninjured leg before he could get it inside, then started swearing and kicking at Trevor until he had recoiled to the far side of the vehicle, his eyes wide with fear. Satisfied that the suspect was properly restrained, the police officer drew his weapon, chambered a round, aimed it at Trevor's head, and then paused.

Again, his forehead began to crinkle. His gun hand was shaking, and then suddenly it straightened out and the cold barrel of the pistol was lodged in Trevor's cheek. The officer twirled his other hand in the arm, muttering under his breath. Finally, he seemed to come to an understanding with himself. His voice was uncertain and frustrated. Almost reluctant.

"You have the right to remain silent?" he said. He mouthed the words again, soundlessly, nodding at Trevor.

"You have the right to remain silent."

Trevor gulped and forced himself to speak.

"Yes."

Pleased, the officer stepped back and gently closed the door. Whistling, he made his way to the driver's seat and settled in. As the officer began to drive away from the direction of the jail without telling dispatch where he was or that he had anyone in custody, Trevor decided that he should start asking questions. His voice cracked as he looked down and away from the police officer's reflection in the rear-view mirror, and spoke:

"Can I ask you something?"

The officer responded in a wavering, falsetto imitation of Trevor's voice.

"I wanna talk to my lawyer!"

Trevor settled back and looked outside, watching the calm landscape pass along on the other side of the window. He was a tremendously passive individual, and would patiently spend hours on the phone getting jerked around by a customer service representative, but something about this situation made Trevor feel as though he owed it to himself to pretend to be assertive. He had heard that bullies would sometimes back down if they were confronted, and he figured he didn't have much to lose since he'd already been shoved around and kidnapped. He dug deep and tried to get his blood boiling. He'd never really been skull-cracking mad before in his

life, so the most he could summon up was a profound sense of indignation, like how he had felt that time when his annual flight home to visit his parents was delayed for no visible reason, and the lady behind the desk had been somewhat short with him the second time he had inquired about it with her.

Just now they were turning the last bend to Trevor's house. The officer slowed down slightly as the driveway came into view. Even that failed to stir any emotion in Trevor's soul. There is something peculiarly lonely about living in a house where you have personally purchased every item inside, and although he would have preferred to be there right now, it wasn't like he was going to miss it.

"I'm not crazy," said the police officer, as he accelerated once again. "It's just a little act I pull. It makes people more compliant if they think you're insane. And it's not even fear, you know. It inspires hope. Like at any moment I might change my mind and let them go. They start talking to you like they can hypnotize you. You know? Like: you don't want to do this, you're just making a mistake."

They turned onto a backcountry road. Trevor had never gone this direction before, and he suddenly realized that he was now beyond the borders of his life. The officer was still talking.

"But you've hardly said a word. I know why. I said

I'm not crazy, and I meant it. I've been watching you. You leave at the same time every morning. You come home at the same time every evening. Your car has stayed in the driveway for the last three weekends. You shower at the exact same time every day. You even lather your left leg first every time."

Trevor guessed that he was supposed to be shocked by this revelation. But even he had to admit that there were fewer things less shocking than his personal life. His mind suddenly raced with thoughts of everything he had left undone. His stomach was churning with self-disgust when he realized that he had tolerated his own insignificance for far too long. For instance, he might have gotten an aquarium or even a bonsai tree to liven up the living room, and now he would never have the opportunity. He did not think he stood a chance of talking his way out of this, but now he had resolved to die fighting for something. Even if that something was his own dismal life. And so, he took what he had, sat up straight in the backseat, looked the cop's reflection dead in the eye, and cleared his throat.

"Excuse me!" he called out. The cop raised an eyebrow behind his mirrored shades.

"Yes?" the officer replied, very politely.

"Can you tell me-"

The brakes squealed and Trevor flew forward too quickly to stop himself, but he tried anyway and felt his

wrist crack when his hand folded awkwardly beneath his slender body. He decided to refrain from speaking until the police officer said it was okay, and focused instead on nursing his tender wrist. They drove on in silence for a while, cruising aimlessly down the backroads as the evening sun sank slowly behind the horizon. Finally, the police officer began to speak.

"Most people usually have a little more fight."

Trevor said nothing.

"I mean, yeah, you're obviously not used to getting kicked around, but I'd at least expect a little swearing before you gave it all in like this. That's the second most fun part. Getting you all frustrated, so you bounce around like a hornet in a mason jar back there. Funny enough, it's the weakest ones, the teenage girls and stuff, who fight the most. I think it's because nobody wants to smack them around, and they start to get this idea that it's almost physically impossible for someone to actually hurt them."

Trevor instinctively responded to the officer out of politeness.

"Well yeah-"

He winced at the sound of his own voice, certain that his other wrist was about to be broken. When the officer did nothing, he continued to spill his thoughts, emptying all of his emotion and feeling into his next sentence.

"Please don't hurt me."

They had come to a stop sign. There was no cross-traffic on the highway, but the police officer came to a stop, and turned around to look at Trevor. For the first time, he lowered his shades. Trevor was shocked. The officer's eyes were small, and perfectly blue. Right now, they were dead flat, but Trevor could sense a depth of emotion. Those eyes could easily be twinkling over a newborn baby, or perhaps even crinkling at a joke. The officer turned back around and they pulled onto the highway.

"Maybe I will. Maybe I won't. We're about to find out. That's the most fun part."

Trevor looked up. They were pulling into a gas station. He looked around. All the pumps were empty except for an SUV parked at the last station, on the outside near the highway. Inside the store, he could see a young asian lady speaking to the cashier, an older middle-aged man with a mustache. The police officer parked behind the SUV and cracked both of the rear windows. He then opened his door and stepped around to speak to Trevor through the window.

"Now, in about fifteen minutes you'll be out in the middle of nowhere, on your knees with my gun pointed at the back of your head. I will then make you beg for your life before I kill you. Make no mistake, you are about to die. You're probably doubting it, but that's go-

ing to change when you see that I have already dug your grave. If any of my fellow police officers were to find out about this, I am confident that they would immediately come speeding to your rescue. Your only chance of survival is to get someone to call 911 for you and report this. But they aren't going to, because you're in the backseat of a police cruiser. In fact, to prove my point, I've even cracked the window so that you can scream your little lungs out at anyone that walks by. Do you understand?"

Trevor nodded.

"No, you don't," said the officer. "But you will soon enough. Now, if you'll excuse me, I got a hankerin' for pork rinds like you wouldn't believe."

The police officer took a couple steps, and then stopped and came back to the window.

"You want anything? Like a coke or something?"

Trevor thought for a second to consider what he'd like for his final meal.

"A coke would be nice. Thank you."

The police officer nodded and walked into the gas station, pausing temporarily to hold the door for the Asian lady who was just now leaving. As she approached the cruiser, Trevor considered what he should try and yell to get her attention and convince her that he was in danger. She briefly made eye contact, then clutched her purse tighter before picking up her stride. His eyes desperately followed her as she made her way across the

parking lot, and then his attention was seized by his own reflection in the rearview mirror.

Trevor was met with the forlorn gaze of a hopeless man, his face coated with dust, his hair scraggly and his eyes bloodshot. He was still staring at his own eyes when the Asian woman started up her SUV and drove away, leaving him totally alone in the parking lot. He heard a ding as the gas station door opened, followed by the crunch of gravel as the police officer approached the vehicle. Suddenly, the officer paused, leering at him through the window.

"Well, are you ready to go? We can try somewhere else, if you'd like."

Trevor looked over. The only thing in the police officer's left hand was a bag of pork rinds. His right hand was empty.



# **The Collapse of H.M.S Mariana**

by Daniel Gavilovski

**September 2nd, 1855**

Being now the assistant cook to chef Mr. Fig Neil, following the disembarking of the previous assistant after the Ship's return to the Cape of Good Hope, I have been advised that it may be useful, and I agree, to keep note of HMS Mariana's provisions on its voyage to Bimini. This includes its supply of good water, cutlery, glassware, tinned meat, fresh meat, livestock, vegetables, fruit, lime juice, spices, and any other foodstuffs relating to the ship kitchen. There are few things which evade such a description. Of sweet biscuit and cream I will take particular note, as the Mariana kitchen has experience being the lair of petty thievery of such confections. Probably deckhands. I have no issue with a biscuit disappearing every now and then, but the Royal Navy is founded on order and documentation, and I must embody my role and duty. Therefore – a record will be kept.

What is more worrisome than the biscuits are the

fresh oranges which I have already found missing and unreported in the manifest. Immediately I suspected Mr. Fig Neil. As I've discovered, he has an affinity for secretly distilling fruity gin "for the officers", as he says. So I confront him in his quarters where he's asleep in his own sweat but he tells me that the produce was blue with mold when he checked on it and so, seeing it was unfit for crew or officer, threw it overboard with haste. To my ears, it sounds like a lie. How can two crates of oranges picked at an atoll go from tree to blue in two days? But both Mazlov and Evans on deck saw with their own eyes that the fruit was inedible. Noted in manifest.

Perhaps it is just how tropical fruits are but, just in case, I will wash down the storeroom of any black disease that might have caused this.

For the 5 officers of Mariana, dinner tonight will consist of two freshly slaughtered sucklings caramelized and stuffed with peacock liver and dates. Accompanied by aubergine roasted in butter, and baked potato. As dessert: crimson syllabub topped with bilberry and mint leaf.

For the crew of 87: tinned pork, fresh courgette roasted in honey, and boiled potato. As dessert: crimson syllabub mentioned previously.

No sign of gin...

**September 5th, 1855**

Raleigh the seaman along with surgeon Lezisky will be absent from dinner due to some injury the sailor sustained. The man is unable to hold his spoon apparently. Though the pain should already subside come the morning, Lezisky tells me he'll give Raleigh some laudanum and stay by his bedside tonight.

This comes as if in exchange for yesterday when, after having nothing but crew meals for three nights, Lieutenant Fitzroy finally quit his hunger strike and rejoined his fellows at the office table. If a certain Irish topman is to be believed, the Lieutenant had a disagreement with the Captain so caustic that he refused to share a table with the good man until now. Something about wanting to turn the ship back – signs of bad winds.

He personally came down below decks to thank the chef but, finding only myself, invested in me his compliments. I had never seen someone quite so content and delighted as he (who had just devoured a golden brown pullet stuffed with mash and leek). He must have been starving. "Marvellous, boy," he told me. "Simply marvellous. And they taught you that in the Rochelle did they? Well my God, my saliva was like a waterfall at the very sight! Keep it up, my friend!"

It's such moments that make up the dessert of life.

Tonight for five officers: ortolan drowned in armagnac and braised in rouge, alongside vegetable moussaka

topped with oriental tomatoes and dried parsley. As dessert: raspberry kaiserschmarrn with apple sauce.

For crew of 85: Boiled beef, roasted carrot and sweet potato mixed with oriental medley. As dessert: dried raisins.

### **September 6th, 1855**

Surgeon Lezisky and the deckhand are back for dinner as expected. Though today is not the best day to have two hungry mouths to feed: during stock check I discovered an immense amount of items that have gone inedibly bad. This includes 2lbs of ham, 9 loaves of yesterday's fresh bread (blue as the sky), 2 crates of turnip, and 16 crates worth of potatoes which up until now had no green in sight but have each and every one exploded saplings. I cannot understand why these goods that were meant to last weeks more have gone bad so rapidly, just as the oranges did. If this is an indicator of some disease in the storeroom, I thought, then it'll only get worse unless something is done.

Chef Fig was too drunk for concern, so I alone spent the day carrying up and throwing overboard each item that seemed to have even the tiniest bit of disease, lest it spread further.

I've also moved all goods that are not tinned or salted to the spare armory on the gun deck, lest we have some airborne infection abound in the storeroom.

It's a strange place, this ship. The boards groan behind me.

### September 7th, 1855

As I sit here in my quarters and prepare to write what I have just now seen, I find myself...in a state. Each time my pen touches paper it stalls from writing anything at all, as it seems as if I have missed some key fact which will make sense of a matter otherwise senseless – which will illuminate everything. But no matter how long I muse, no such fact comes to me and so I have no choice but to reconcile with what has happened not even a full day after moving the food store upstairs.

It is all rotten.

Each and every fruit, vegetable, meat, fish, flour, and bread. Rotten to the very core.

Even the salted meats and oatmeal, meant to withstand *years*, stinks so badly it makes me gag, as if it has all been stewing in the sun for decades. But it's not so. Not so. It was perfectly fine just yesterday. This – is a fact.

I am in disbelief. How could this have happened? Thinking logically now: is it possible that someone played a cruel trick on the kitchen? Has someone deliberately replaced our good food with rot? What's the motive? Perhaps they are disgruntled with the high quality of the officer's dining and, wishing to humiliate the royal hierarchy, have tainted their food as a form of pro-

test. But this is ridiculous, surely. Potatoes are dined upon by even the lowliest deckhand. And the bread ... By the time we reach Bimini we will have nothing to eat but the tins. The tins. Yes, they remain tight and unspoiled, and the hardtack crackers too are as edible as ever. And we can't forget about the livestock on the main deck, fresh and hot. Evermore a source of fresh meat. We will have good food yet.

... And anyway, why am I even entertaining such conspiracies? I have not in my short life come across a method of curdling butter or browning bananas. If this is the situation at hand, I must think about it soundly. I can't afford to run off on these wild mental chases. Clearly what is happening is a natural, albeit weird, phenomenon. I've told Chef Fig (to the extent that he'll listen) and that's all I can do apart from carrying on with what's left.

I'm slowly regaining myself as I write this. Dinner is approaching fast, so I must think of something for Mariana to dine on.

Tonight for 5 officers: Roast pork, salted, peppered, and seasoned with coriander seeds, alongside tinned vegetables. For dessert: caramel.

For the crew of 83 (Raleigh bedridden again. And two other deckhands who have some ailment or other): hardtack with tinned vegetables. No dessert.

### September 8th, 1855

It saddens me to say that Mister Arthur Raleigh will not be joining his fellows for dinner this evening nor ever again, as he passed away this morning from his ailment. Will be holding a wake this evening.

In addition, six more crew have become bedridden with ailments I know not of. That makes 8 missing crewmates as well as the good doctor.

### September 9th, 1855

It's a good thing I got him to leave... I found him – Surgeon Lezisky – examining the cutlery and dishes this morning, wandering about the kitchen in his bedclothes as if he'd gotten lost on the way to the Head. He didn't notice me, so preoccupied was he with inspecting every tiny nook.

"Can I help you, doctor?"

"Not at all."

"Would you like something?"

"Just checking its vitals!"

This was all he said before he arose and left my kitchen. I think he suspects that something is off. And I have been wondering for a while about these patients of his. What is it that they're suffering from? What killed Arthur Raleigh? It cannot be scurvy, as the lime juice has remained unspoiled. If it was consumption wouldn't I and the rest of the crew have been checked by now?

Then the whole riddle seemingly answers itself. It must be the *food* that's making them sick.

The food they're eating, even what I considered good, must be causing all manner of bellyaches. I have been getting them too, running to the Head and back constantly. I'm sure Lezisky must suspect the kitchen.

### September 11th, 1855

Once again the doctor came down where I and a deck-hand had little work to do, since office and crew alike would be dining on hardtack, lime juice, and tins.

He begins making conversation with me. About the weather, about the ship's course, top deck rumours. Then, opening up a tin in front of me, he takes a large dollop of the pork and closes his lips around it. And chews. And his face goes sour. Instantly, I know what the issue is. It's what I've been fearing for days.

"All good, doctor?"

"Mr. Nelson". He swallows.

"Yes, doctor?"

"Have you tried the tins yourself recently?"

"Of course. I'm the cook."

"And what do you think of them?"

"Doctor?"

"The taste, Mr. Nelson."

"As well as can be expected. They're sealed well and are edible. And though the fresh food has been having



some trouble with mold recently—"

And at that moment he loses all pretence of civility and dons the demeanour of a hunter with a trapped hare.

"Mold?" He's almost feverish. "Mr. Nelson, say that again. Are you telling me right now that you've been having trouble with mold on your produce?"

I knew I should've held my tongue, but instead I kept talking. "Not just mold, doctor. Some of the fresh food is quite inedible – rotten as it were."

"Rotten? And it took quite a while to reach such a stage? Bad supply? Tell me."

"It was fresh, well, just a few days ago, doctor. Now – even the salt pork has been tossed."

Now the good doctor spoke each word softly so I would miss nothing. He was pale and wet on the forehead, his eyes drilling into my soul.

"When did this begin, Mr. Nelson?"

This is it, I think. He's connecting the point at which the food began rotting to when the sailors started getting sick. Having no good lie at hand, I'll say when it started, and he'll see that I am the cause behind his mess.

"It started," I say, "on the 6th. Perhaps the 7th. I'd have to check my log."

The doctor is now so white with rage I am sure he could strangle me here in the bowels where no one sees us. He utters nothing for what seems like an eternity, staring at some fixed point behind me. Finally, his eyes

meet with mine, and his lips twitch before uttering a single thing.

"Lord have mercy."

I didn't know what to say exactly. I told him that I would never cook spoiled food and that the patients' aches are not from my meals, but even I didn't believe myself. He spat out that he must take me to the Captain immediately, no time to lose, and when I lingered he grabbed my arm and dragged me to his quarters himself.

With no civility at all, he interrupted the Captain's tea and flew straight into a confrontation:

"You see? I've been telling you this whole time."

"This again, Mr. Lezisky? Haven't we put it to rest?"

"It's not just the men, captain. Their sickness. I thought it couldn't be explained – but this young man – he's been witness to the same disease."

And he plucked me forward like some auction showpiece. I'm sure I had tears in my eyes.

"He's sick as well?" replied the confused Captain.

"No. It's the food, Captain. He's your cook. The food has rotted."

"It is my understanding that it's the nature of produce not to last indefinitely..." wagered the Captain. "What has this to do with our ailing sailors? And why is it so serious that I should turn the ship around to the Cape, as you suggest?"

"Because if it continues, you will have no food left at

all, nor a whole sailor to feed it to. I've tasted today's tins. They're already turning rank."

I am nauseated. Feel the sickness within me, twisting my guts. The Captain's coming around now, beginning to understand. In just a few short words I will be stripped and flogged for everyone to see, and the ship will feast on my flesh. And for the murder of the bright young sailor Arthur Raleigh – I'll be hung from the mast. I can't bear it. The surgeon is counting on me staying silent, hoping to submit me as dead game for a neat reward from the crown. I realise suddenly that if I speak my side now, then I retain a chance to ease my punishment. I compose myself, find the right words, and finally:

"It's not my fault" I cry. "The fruit – the pork – the tins. How could I have known? How could I know they'd spoil so quick? I – I – and the men! Why, their bellies could be aching from anything – anything! Sailors die all the time!" I continue, astonishing both of them.

"Just a minute, Nelson", says the surgeon in a decidedly kinder voice. "Belly aches? My patients aren't suffering from belly aches. Not predominantly at least."

The captain chimes in: "Calm now, boy. You're in no trouble. Is he Mr. Lezisky?"

"Mr. Nelson, it's not stomach pains my men are suffering from. It's everything but. Small cuts, bruises. Arthur Raleigh died from a splinter."

"I don't understand", is all I said. "I'm not sure what—"

Just then some new stranger emerged out of nowhere and shoved me aside, bursting into the captain's cabin.

It was Mazlov the bosun, red in the face.

"What is the meaning of this!" cried the Captain.

Breathless, Mazlov kept it brief: "down in the orlop...looking for rope...the walls, sir. The wood.

It's decaying."

### **September 13th, 1855**

It's now been two days since the severity of our situation has come to light and Captain Ferdinand turned HMS Mariana around towards the Cape.

In order to assess our further plan of action he today assembled the officers, accompanied by the surgeon Mr. Lezisky, the carpenters, the bosun, alongside the purser, quartermaster and myself – all stuffed into the Captain's cabin.

"Mr. Lyndon here says the dry plank he's used to replace and reinforce the orlop deck should, winds being fortunate, allow Mariana enough time to reach port safely. He's sure of this. Though in our case we can't afford overconfidence. Who knows what this disease will bring. Mr. Lezisky, how are your patients looking this morning?"

The surgeon looked distraught enough for me to

guess at his answer.

"Yesterday I had in my care 14 men. Today 3 more have come to me complaining. That's seventeen seamen who a week ago were perfectly healthy, with strong constitutions. All with conditions that would seem petty even to an ailing grandmother. A deckhand came to me complaining of a 3 day old bruise that wasn't healing. Instead, it seemed to be creeping up his thigh. Today, the majority of his left leg is yellow with dead flesh. If I see no sign of improvement by dinner tonight, I'll be amputating it."

"Have you any experience with such a disease?" asked the Captain,

I noticed the surgeon stifle a sad-eyed grin before saying no, no he has not. "Perhaps if I hadn't seen the food and the orlop, I could say it's some violent gangrene. But...I don't think it is. I understood it when Mr. Nelson told me about his produce. Whatever is infecting my men has already done our food supply. And the ship too. Certainly, it's not the freshest ship, Captain, but I

*saw* the orlop. For timber to go from dry and sturdy to *that*? Soft and worm-ridden? These things happen eventually given enough time. It is the natural process of necrotic collapse. Decay. But at such a pace..."

For a moment he was gone. Suddenly he straightened up and spoke sharply to the room: "Gentlemen, what we are dealing with here is one of the most bizarre things I've

come upon in my years of study. If Science can explain this conundrum, then there is not a man on this ship or otherwise literate enough yet to understand it. One thing is clear: all the natural processes of decomposition we are so familiar with in our daily lives are accelerated at a rapid pace on this ship. The timber, the cans. The men are healthy because they are alive and beating, but the moment they attain dead flesh, no matter how miniscule – a bruise is sufficient – it devours the whole limb like mold on Mr. Nelson's oranges or rot on the hull Mr. Mazlov discovered." "What's causing it then?" chimed in a Lieutenant.

"Aye, so we can stop it," from the quartermaster.

The surgeon stopped dead in his tracks. He thought for a moment before replying simply, "I do not know."

Maybe it was some cargo we picked up carrying an oriental illness. Maybe it's this place – the air. Maybe it is even the ship itself, something in its walls. I'm sure once we get to shore we can inspect the men and ascertain the cause, but right now... I don't think it matters. It is here and we must deal with whatever it entails rationally until we reach the Cape."

With that, I think we all understood the gravity of the situation. Proceeding calmly, the Captain asked me how we are for food, and I told him as follows.

For the five officers of Mariana, dinner tonight will consist of seven hardtack crackers each, coated with sug-

ar.

For the crew of 86, six hardtack crackers each, equally coated.

### **September 14th, 1855**

The men who Mr. Lezisky amputated are recovering already. Seems that whatever the surgeon had in mind is working. One lad even joined a hunt today in search of fish and birds. Perhaps they'll give me something to do. And if one is to speak of bright sides, Mr. Fig seems to have kicked his drinking habit and often helps me in the kitchen here and there – not that there is much work to be done.

For livestock, HMS Mariana has now one rooster left along with one goat. Both feed on a ration of crackers. Saving them for an emergency situation.

### **September 15th, 1855**

Could not sleep last night. Terrible belly pain and constant gas. So I snuck down into the kitchen to have myself a drink. It always tastes the best at night. And it's almost like eating. So I gulp down a cool deep mug of water and it's only when I lift my lips from the rim that I notice something is very off.

I sup again – slowly. It sticks to the roof of my mouth. Sup again. There are seventeen water casks on board and I sample from each one. In and out.

By the time I'm done with seventeen it's undeniable – the water's bad. Not so bad, I think, to be undrinkable. But it's putrefying. Tastes like one's mouth does an hour after eating a meringue.

Perhaps not even that. But it's there.

Lieutenant Fitzroy was impossible to reconcile with. "The food we must endure, of course. On one expedition we survived on nothing but seal and snow, and we stepped on shore stronger than when we left. But without water...my God, man. Without water what will we do?"

The Captain suggested a grand idea: take the seawater and separate the salt by boiling it, leaving us with clean drink. But if I spent each waking hour burning off salt I could still not produce even a tenth of a half ration of enough drinkable water to sustain ninety-one men. We must find a different solution, I told him. That leaves us with no option but to quench the sailors (why do I say this – quench *ourselves*) with the next drinkable liquid we have. That is to say, stout.

At least we shall not perish of thirst. What I am more worried about is the supply of crackers.

Waning.



### **September 16th, 1855**

An oriental topman will be missing this evening. Fell from a height and cracked his skull. The rope tore apart neath his feat.

Also too, a hunting party of eight has taken with them the rooster and fled. I don't think they'll be back for dinner. In any case, the men can no longer tolerate having the goat – bleating beating roast – munching about on deck. It is late now, but tomorrow morning I will cut him up for an early luncheon. Otherwise, I suspect someone else will do it first.

### **September 17th, 1855**

Me and Lezisky today came to the conclusion that it doesn't much matter how it happened. I assumed someone did it on purpose, but the doctor was more forgiving. He does spend less time in the ship's rectum after all. Maybe he scratched his flesh on the bars or bit his cheek. All I know is I bade the goat goodnight and when I came at sunrise I found his bare skeleton, still locked in the pen.

### **September 21th, 84BC**

How can I grow those Indian Sticks? I have acquainted myself with the deck and its miscreants. These foul, foul people The whole ship reeks of death. There is nobody on this round earth more greedy and conniving than

the kind to eat another man's rations. I have been here for how many days lookit and I don't think I have a single time witnessed an act of charity a moment of kindness that is to say, the way of the Sailor is to never share his ration, never to sacrifice himself for his fellow man. Friend? I do not think so. What good would it do for him to help a bleeding fellow? A yellow fellow? Even in the gunk of London I would see – many times! – a beggar give his last crumb to a kitten. *I* don't want it of course. I tell them that. Sugar alone doesn't sustain me. I don't need it. But it would be nice to see some kindness around here! *That* would fead me. I'd jump right up ho ho! Man the Sales boys! Actually when I sit there with those idolons I am more Lucid than ever. That is to say, because I do not eat I have ample time to stare into their Eyes as they shovel down mugs of cane sugar and as they do I can see evil within them. Their teeth are *gunking*. Jackie sings to me with no teeth at all now. He is a sincere kid but easily manipulated by the others. I must spend less time on the ship's throat, lest they get funny ideas

## October

so, hungry.

??

haven't eaten anything in such and such days... must remember t

the pages are going. this journal is going. just like the sails the men my hand – it tickles.

and what did I ever keep it for in the first place? ah.

:For the officers of HMS Mariana, dinner tonight will consist of, maggots.

crew is lucky tonight. they will have their maggots flambéed neath the open stars, salt and peppered with cinnamon dust – according to taste. The juice will be doled out – according to taste. Will the captain have some – according to taste? Oh yes, Lezisky told me. captain Ferdinand died a while ago. That was a shock. no one even informed me. who's steering? And mr. Fig as well. From thirst of all things. And quite a few others. we don't even bother clearing their bones anymore. sometimes i observe one carefully and I can see their eyes dissapearing inwords like custard, their bellys engorging, the face digesting away. and finally the worms descending like a squirming creamy porridge. Porridge. Porridge with lard. Porridge with lard and sauce de pomodoro alongside mashed potatoes and ginger. Good Lord I'm sorry! I just wanted something to eat! And now my writing hand is being devoured...

It was when Fitzroy was gorging on fly milk that I got fed up with the birds. Always flying beyond the ship, taunting us. So I took a handful of the grubs, and in plain sight lay waiting. Wasn't long before I knocked out. I awoke to a seagull guzzling them down. Immedietely I

grab it by the throat and – I didn't think – snap its neck run down to the kitchen when no one's looking get a fire going skin it with haste leave the head. What am I doing I thought it's already growing discoloured. So I plunge into its still warm breast. But even in that starving state I could not bring myself to swallow. It was like chewing month old garbage. i throw the carcass on the ground. There'll be plenty more where that came from, i thought.

So I gather the men with limbs – can't find Lezisky anywhere – and we all stow ourselves away for the meat to descend.

And it works.

One by one, the men grab their gulls and immediately sink their teeth into flesh. No time for plucking. Hell, no time for killing. Let it still be throbbing when it hits the pipes. Its blood tastes like the sea tuna it ate last week. There was a savage noise as we were digging in, before finally a silence. In the moment when the meat hit the base of our bellies we were rapturous. In that moment we briefly became sober.

Each of us looked at the pale eidolons around us, with hair clinging, boneless hunches, spit dribbling. Jackie pointed at me and goed chef you're bleedin. The bird must have scratched me without my noticing. Already the wound is flooding my arm with brown. Well let it. Because someones whistling a tune! A familiar shanty. The burlier man springs up the steps and takes

the wheel, saying its time to bring this demonic vessel to Africa. Soon everyone's singing, first a jolly one, then something damn near operatic. Then a man leaves for the loo. Then another. Then another. Then the burlier man collapses on the wood and dies.

All alone now, my belly gargled. I became so weak that I sicked up the whole bird on the planks, already a lumpy sludge. I see now: Mariana is vengeful. She refuses us our portions. The food rots faster than we can digest it.

Again I noticed the rot which was circling my whole forearm. I took a cleaver from a corpse and aimed to lop it all off like a rabbit thigh. Steadied myself. And. i couldn't. i was so terrified of becoming another amputee. Even more than of the disease. The only thing Stirring in my mind was something Lezisky had said about the worms. The pupae. They only eat rot. Everything else they will ignore. Whatever it meant, it led to me grabbing a mouthful of the porridge and rubbing it into the puss. They squirmed – as they squirm now – and soon burrowed snugly in my meat. Now they devour me from the inside, lapping me up, chewing greedy and greedy to catch up with the sweetness. God in Heaven have Mercy on me – I am delicious!

## Home

I am not sure how many survived, if anyone did at all.

When the Arab found me on the beach he took me in – fed me, gave me drink and shelter. During our late noon teas from my arm he would draw much amazement. Alive, but with a massive chunk taken out of it. It can never sauté again. If not for this journal which was miraculously immunized by the salt water, then I would scarcely recall my own account as anything other than the delusions of a scurvy-riddled mad man. But it is here. And it is true. May the sea that swallowed up that beast never regurgitate it. May what remains of its boards never be preserved by the salt as I was, and may it continue on the path it laid itself on. Of all the mysteries of sea and land, none is stranger than that of HMS Mariana.

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## **Twin Candles**

by Miles McNaughton

### **I.**

Fading amber sunlight fell on the curtains of the old swamp house. All the windows were locked, the curtains were drawn, and a welcome note was on the kitchen table. Two large candles glowed in the bottom bay windowsill. A single pool of light passed through the darkening hallways, entering one room for only a moment before it tarried off to the next. A stray brush of wind rattled one of the windows and the light dropped with a sharp curse. The owner of the light—the caretaker for the house—seized it quickly and shone it in a wild pattern around himself. Satisfied he was alone, he pressed on.

He stepped carefully down the stairs and peered around them, looking down the hallway and at the kitchen and the back door which led to the patio. The curtains were still drawn, and it was now obvious that dusk was coming. The long hallway pulled him into the

kitchen and he quickly checked the back door, then tested the rotary phone which hung on the inside wall. The dial tone sounded in his ear. Satisfied, he started to hang up the phone, his gaze drifting to the little sunlight that came through the back door's square window and left a bright patch on the wall. Square in the middle of the patch was a misshapen shadow. As he watched, the shadow lightened and faded, and then it crawled across a neighboring bright patch coming from the window over the sink. A shuffling reached his ears, as if something were moving through the grass.

The caretaker quickly put the phone down and strode down the hall. He found his keys in his pocket and fumbled locking the front door. He stumbled to his truck and peeled out of the driveway, throwing gravel under his wheels and diving under the arbor of trees leading from the property.

He watched the house vanish in his rear view and let out a breath he'd been holding for too long, but no sooner had his eyes returned to the front when he saw something standing in the road. His foot slammed the brake and the pedal cracked against the floorboard. The tires dug into the gravel, scattering rocks against the undercarriage, and the truck screeched to a stop.

A figure stood in the road, half-illuminated by high beams from the truck. Its dark green robes were covered in dirt, like a corpse freshly exhumed from a crypt. The



caretaker looked nervously at the sky; dusk had arrived. He kept his knuckles tight on the wheel. The figure stood still for a long while, and then it left the light. A moment later, a shadow slowly pooled in his window.

The door handle jiggled, but it did not pull. He kept his foot on the gas. Seconds crawled by, and eventually, the shadow pulled away, and no sooner had it left than he put his foot through the floor and sped away from the house. As the night crept in, the only light left on the property came from two twin candles glowing like little orange eyes in the window.

## II.

It looked more like a boat than a house. Spanish moss drooped from the eaves like rigging nets. The gutters were clogged with old leaves that, in the afternoon autumn sun, rusted the trimmings and stained the masts of the porch. A long chimney poked out, a lone smokestack among the mangroves. And just inside the widest window on the ground floor, two dim orange lights glowed like whale oil lamps.

The family arrived in the late afternoon with a fishing skiff in tow. Todd McGrew stepped out of the driver's seat and smiled at the beautiful house—the perfect spot for an outdoor vacation. Bowie, the eldest son, shuffled out of the truck first and Charlie, the younger

daughter, followed, buried in her phone, occasionally slapping it in the hopes of landing more than a single bar. Lauren McGrew, the matriarch, had a skip in her step as she went to open up the house. With a clunk she unlatched the door and vanished inside; one of the orange lights disappeared from the window. Everyone else pulled their suitcases up the steps and into the darkened foyer.

With a sudden buzz, light filled the room. A staircase hugged the left wall and sloped into the second floor. The hallway stretched deep and branched off twice, and at the back of the hall was a cozy kitchen with a modern fridge and a small round dining table. A rotary phone hung on the inside wall. At the back of the kitchen directly opposite the front door was a back door leading to a patio, and beyond was the rest of the mangrove swamp.

After the initial unpacking and settling, as dinner sizzled on the stove and a red sunset soothed the swamp, Charlie went out back for a well-earned reprieve from her family, but her phone had no signal out back, either. The patio was screened against mosquitos, separating the civilized world from the mangroves and the shallow, brackish waterline. She reclined in a chair and stared at the swamp. A thin, low-hanging mist weaved through the trees, and the scene struck her as a little mysterious. Charlie opened her camera and flipped through her filters and found a few to her liking.

She went up to the netting and took a panorama picture, then grabbed a few selfies in various poses. When she was finished, she went to select the best of her pictures, and as she did, she noticed a stubborn green smudge in all her backgrounds. Charlie cleaned the camera with her sleeve and turned to take more pictures before the light fully vanished, and as she gazed at the swamp in search of a new background, she saw something dark green gliding between the mangroves. The tangle of roots and leaves mostly obscured it, but she knew it was not a speck on her eye. There was something moving in the woods.

Charlie pressed her face to the netting; the smudge stopped abruptly. Her curiosity turned to unease as she felt it was looking directly at her. It hadn't occurred to her until just then that the thing in the woods could be real, even human, even though she felt there was nothing human out there. She suddenly remembered her grandfather's funeral. She remembered the cold realization that she too would someday die, remembered the fear that mounted the longer she looked at her grandfather's stone face, terrified that he would suddenly lunge up and drag her into his coffin and she'd be buried alive, deep underground in the deafening dark.

The glow in the woods seemed bigger and brighter than before. As it drew closer, Charlie could make out a shape in dark green robes. It was too far away to perceive

a face. Terror rose in her chest; if she could just see its face, she wouldn't have to be afraid. The figure had halved the distance between them at this point, and though it had moved through thick brush and dense trees, it hadn't snapped a single twig. Charlie felt drawn from her spot, pulled as if magnetized toward the thing in the woods, and every animal nerve in her limbs demanded she flee indoors.

Charlie ripped her head away just long enough to steal a look at the kitchen window, hoping for the reassuring presence of her mom, and she instantly regretted it. Her mom was not there, and worse, fear paralyzed her head. Like someone roused by nightmares in a silent room, Charlie knew that as soon as she turned back, the thing in the woods would be right in front of her. She felt the urge to take a look, just a glance, just to see, even as her spine crawled with the thought of a glowing green hand reaching for her face.

Mrs. McGrew came to the patio door just then and asked her to set the table. Charlie bolted inside without another word. The imagined phantom chased her for the next half-hour; she couldn't look at the door to the patio without a chill running up her spine. As the warmth of the kitchen relaxed her nerves, Charlie's mood changed to match the happy songs Mrs. McGrew hummed over the stove. She even hummed a few of her own design. When her hands were free from their chore, Charlie ea-

gerly flipped through her selfies and showed one to her mom, asking her if it was a fairy or some unknown, special creature.

“Hard to tell,” Mrs. McGrew said. “Go ask your dad. Oh, and tell the boys to get cleaned up for dinner. We have to eat fast if we want to spot rare owls tonight.”

Charlie found her dad and Bowie out front moving things from the truck. Bowie was quick to escape inside for dinner once Charlie distracted her dad with the pictures she’d taken.

“It’s pretty big,” said Mr. McGrew. “Never seen anything like it, though. I’m sure ‘the Gram’ would love to see that.”

By the time dinner was over, the swamp had swallowed the last of the daylight. The girls went outside with their headlamps and tromped around in the shallows of the swamp while the boys finished moving things in and around the house. Mrs. McGrew had her journal in one hand and a sharp pencil in the other. Charlie was holding the camera. The thrill of the hunt was amusing at first, but since owls were hard to spot in the dark, she quickly became bored, and instead used her headlamp to cast tangled shadows through the mangroves. She splashed around in the water, imagining she was looking for an ancient fish found only in this one pond, the discovery of which would make her famous. She looked up once and her headlamp hit the mangroves again, and the

light, for a moment, illuminated a figure in green robes standing in the roots. She gasped and slipped and fell in the mud, her legs splashing loudly in the water.

“Mom?” she called.

“Charlie? What’s wrong, baby? Oh! The camera! Get up, quick!”

Charlie’s headlamp scanned the tree line; the figure was gone. That night she had a bevy of anxious dreams, and every time she woke, she saw a robed figure lurking in the darkest corner of her room.

### III.

Bowie’s day began long before dawn with a fishing trip to a large river three miles into the swamp. Mr. McGrew steered the skiff and worked the motor; Bowie merely tried to stay awake. The sun was far from graying the horizon and every glance at his watch reminded him that he had a long day ahead of him. It was easy to be bitter in the mornings. The air was cold and he’d nearly dropped his pistol climbing in the boat. On the upside, the woods before the sunrise were unexpectedly tranquil, and at least he hadn’t dropped a thousand-dollar camera in the water like someone he knew.

“It’s nice out,” Mr. McGrew said from the rear of the boat. “You tired, Beau?”

“Mmm,” Bowie said.

“If you’d gotten up earlier, you’d probably be more awake right now.”

“Mm-hmm.”

The river ran smooth in the middle, away from the shoreline vegetation and most of the tangled, fallen branches, and it was swaddled in a pleasant mist. Mr. McGrew idled his boat and sat with his son, each fishing quietly off a broad side of their choosing. Though they maintained their silence, the swamp was far from quiet. A pair of cardinals chirped in the trees, early morning insects buzzed the reeds, and moving water burbled through the roots. The ambient noise was genuinely peaceful until it was broken by a sudden splashing from Bowie’s float.

“Oh!” he shouted despite himself. “Oh, son-of-a-bitch, I’ve got one! C’mere!” He gripped the reel and pulled it in.

Todd hovered over his son’s shoulder while Bowie fought with the rod, whipping the pole and cranking the reel, sending the other fish running for the hills. With a final spasm the caught fish slapped the river’s surface with its body and Bowie triumphantly pulled it out of the water and dropped it twitching into their livewell.

Todd clapped Bowie on the shoulder. “Good catch.” He peered into the livewell and turned his headlamp on. “Wow, that’s a beautiful fish. Look how green he is.”

Bowie turned on his own headlamp and leaned over

the livewell. The fish was swimming in a tight circle, the glitter of his scales catching the light of the headlamp—a spread of beautiful green, dark at the dorsal fin and lightening slowly down to its belly, and two big, bulbous orange eyes. It was miraculous how well the green color kept across the body—not a hint of yellow or blue, even in the glitter, as if the fish had been dipped in paint. Bowie uneasily closed the livewell; it had been swimming in a hypnotic, tight circle without end. Bowie glanced through the trees for a hint of sunlight, but it looked to be a few hours away. The mangrove trees shivered under a quiet wind and a chill caught Bowie in the arms. He immediately sought something to keep his hands busy and he went to baiting his hook again, but he couldn't get the worm to knot correctly. Twice it slipped out of his fingers and onto the floor of the boat. Bowie dug around, agitated.

“You okay?” Mr. McGrew asked.

“Can't reach my worm.”

“Well, that pistol on your hip isn't helping, either.”

“I know, dad.”

“Just get another worm.”

Bowie made a frustrated noise. He heard the branches groaning and adrenaline pumped into his veins. “Just give me a second,” he said. No sooner had he spoken than his fingers found purchase on the worm and, in his excitement, pressed into it and squished it into two slick



pieces, covering his fingers in muck.

“Oh, God dammit,” Bowie said.

To his genuine surprise, Mr. McGrew didn't chastise him. Bowie wiped the muck off on his pant legs and sat up to grab another worm from the can. The can was still there, but Mr. McGrew was not. Bowie was alone in the boat. He looked over his shoulder, then over the side, and then all around him. The mist had thickened; the cardinals had stopped chirping. The sky seemed darker than it was when they left, and the sun was still nowhere in sight. Even the wind had stopped blowing.

Bowie jumped at the sound of his fish splashing in the livewell. The noise paused, and then it came again, more frantic than before. Tentatively, Bowie drew near the lid. His heart beat in his neck. As his hand landed on the livewell, the splashing suddenly ceased. The shock of silence stopped his fingers. He cracked the lid, then threw it open. His fish was motionless, belly-up in the water.

A faint light caught his eye and he turned. Farther down the river, a figure hovered just above the river's surface. It rose like a shadow from the waters, murky and menacing, the mist frothing at its waist. It was tall and cloaked in robes from the grave. The figure glowed a dim, deep, dark green, so subtle that if it wasn't for the black morning, it would have been a discoloration in the leaves. Where a face might have been was a black empti-

ness, an abyss that seemed to pull Bowie toward it and distort his vision in a shimmering whirlpool.

Two orange orbs formed in the darkness—a pair of burning, ghostly eyes. Then the black face stretched down and formed a long, jagged, gaping jaw that filled with orange light. It raised its long arms above its head and advanced in a shaking, haunting lunge. Bowie cried out in terror, and as he stood and backed away, his calf found the edge of the boat, and over he went into the cold river.

The water shocked him to the core, and Bowie breached with a gasp, splashing like a caught fish, terrified and lost in the dark. Bright white light burned his eyes and something heavy dove into the water after him. Bowie thrashed and screamed for help as arms seized his chest and pulled him away from the boat, away from safety.

He smashed his hand into the unforgiving bark of a mangrove and, with a jolt, his panic subsided and his senses returned. He found himself in the shallows in the arms of his father, who was shuddering and coughing and running his hands soothingly through Bowie's hair. The figure was gone, though the thick mist lingered, and Bowie reached for Mr. McGrew and patted the calming hands.

“What happened?” said Mr. McGrew. “What in the world did you see? A gator?”

Bowie looked again at the river. All he could see was their fishing skiff and the tangle of the mangroves. In the absence of danger, Bowie wondered if he had even seen anything at all. Mr. McGrew nudged him for an answer and Bowie hunted for the right lie, but nothing came, and he elected to stay silent. Mr. McGrew didn't press for an answer.

#### IV.

"Come on, boys!" Mrs. McGrew called into the room. "You'll miss the owls again!"

Bowie glanced up from the basketball game he was watching and shook his head. Mr. McGrew was working on the waterlogged camera and indifferently said he'd see them tomorrow. Charlie and her mom, binoculars around their necks, waited impatiently for another few seconds, and eventually Mrs. McGrew took Charlie gently by the hand and said they didn't want to lose too much daylight. The girls shuffled out through the back door and stood in the backyard squinting at the trees.

Mrs. McGrew pointed. "See those branches? See how high and dense they are? It's perfect for barn owls."

"Yeah?" Charlie said hopefully.

"Yes. We'll see plenty of those, though. What we really want is the short-eared owl. They're very rare at twilight. If we had a working camera we could get a pic-

ture as proof.”

Charlie’s ears went hot and red and her head bowed in slight shame.

Mrs. McGrew raised her binoculars, searching the forked branches, twin limbs, and bushy boughs for any sign of the owls. The orange sun glinted off her lenses like two little candles. The screech of a distant barn owl took Mrs. McGrew’s attention.

“We should write that down,” said Mrs. McGrew. “Good to keep a tally.”

“I saw dad working on the camera,” Charlie said meekly. “Maybe he’s fixing it.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I’m sorry about the camera, mom.”

“Accidents happen. Did you write that barn owl down?”

Charlie closed her eyes tightly. “I forgot to get the book. It’s inside.”

“Well, go get it,” said Mrs. McGrew. She didn’t even take down her binoculars.

Charlie hurried for the house; an autumn wind shook the trees behind her. Charlie fetched the book from upstairs and kept it tight under her arm on her way back down. She walked past the television room and paused as her dad called her name. He came out with the camera and a smile on his face.

“Got her fixed,” he said proudly. He hung the cam-

era over Charlie's shoulders. "Just a little water-logged. Go out and get some good ones, alright?"

Charlie grinned and headed for the yard, the book under her arm and the camera bouncing against her chest. She threw open the patio door and looked around, eager to show her mom that the camera had been fixed, but to her surprise, the backyard was empty.

"Mom?" she said. Charlie looked at the house. Could she have gone back inside? She scanned the backyard again, more thoroughly this time, and saw something in the grass. It was a pair of binoculars—Lauren McGrew's binoculars, complete with her initials in white ink on the side. The lens was cracked as if it had been dropped.

Charlie took a half step toward the house and saw a shape just out of sight on one side of the house. She took a half-step toward it, then sprinted over in a mounting panic. Mrs. McGrew was lying face-down in the grass. Her clothes were in disarray and her hair was tousled. Charlie shook her at the shoulder and tried to rouse her, and to her horror, she received no reply. An image of that robed figure swept through her mind and Charlie went hurtling for the house.

"Dad?" she called, shoving through the door. "Dad? Something's wrong with mom! Dad!"

Mr. McGrew was running outside before she had even seen him, and at the sound of Charlie's cry, Bowie

wasn't far behind. They got Mrs. McGrew inside and into the guest bedroom downstairs, across the hall from the television room. She was still breathing and seemed unhurt, but none of them could wake her up. No sooner had Bowie moved to prepare a cold washcloth when Mrs. McGrew shot up out of bed and screamed.

"Get away!" she cried, flinging her arms. Mr. McGrew held her and tried to calm her down. "No, no! Help me! Help me, please! No!"

Charlie left with her hands over her mouth. Bowie quickly followed her out, shutting the door behind him. He tried to stay stoic, but the unearthly screams from behind the heavy door chilled him to his bones. He found Charlie sitting on the couch with her knees to her chest watching the basketball game, desperate to drown the noise. Bowie joined her and turned up the volume, pretending not to hear the sobs of his mother coming from across the hall.

After some time, Mr. McGrew came into the television room. His eyes looked heavy. He settled on the edge of the coffee table and muted the TV. The piercing silence left a ringing in the siblings' ears.

"She's sleeping," he said, "but I'm calling a doctor anyways."

"Is she okay?" Charlie said. "What's wrong?"

"She'll be alright, sweetheart. She's resting now and I'm going to call a doctor to come see her, just to be

safe.”

“Are we going home?”

Without asking, Bowie knew that Charlie had seen the figure in the woods. Knowing his responsibility as the oldest child, Bowie said that as long as mom was okay, he wanted to stay. Charlie, taking courage from her brother, also hoped that they could stay. Mr. McGrew nodded and left them to make his phone call with the rotary phone.

Bowie unmuted the basketball game again and, over the next few minutes, Charlie calmed down. She even started asking questions about players and the game. Nevertheless, every little creak of the house set them both on edge. Once or twice, Bowie thought he saw a shadowy figure creep past the window or heard the unnatural sliding of leaves along the ground, and Charlie swore she heard someone wheezing just behind the outer wall. The sunlight had fully disappeared when the announcers on TV said they were taking a commercial break and let the game fade to an unusually quiet black screen. The only light in the room came from the hallway light which trickled in under the door.

As Bowie went to change the channel, a howling scream came from the kitchen. Bowie shielded Charlie with his arm. A half second later the back door slammed open with tremendous force, and then the whole house was eerily quiet. Charlie shrunk behind him, hands over

her mouth, anxiously peering at the door. Neither of them dared to say a word.

The soft sound of old fabric swishing down the hallway froze the air around them. From the dim crack under the door, the siblings watched a long shadow slide by and disappear, then slowly reappear from the other side and pause. Charlie put her fingers on the camera and opened the flash lamp. Bowie slowly drew his pistol from his belt and aimed it at the door. The gun shivered in his unsteady fingers.

The shadow lingered, then slid off down the hall. A moment later, the hallway light went out, and a moment after that, the handle started to turn. The door crept open. A long green hand, rotted like a corpse, wrapped four ugly fingers around the door. Another hand seized the door frame and, slowly, separated the door until there was only the pitch darkness of the hallway and two long arms vanishing into the sleeves of old, glowing green robes. A wheezing sound came from just beyond, and as the siblings watched in fear, two orange orbs appeared in the dark.

Bowie's fingers found enough strength to squeeze the trigger and fire three ringing shots into the doorway. The figure vanished at the first muzzle flash and Bowie was on his feet, Charlie's arm in tow, the moment the echo of the third had cleared his ears. They barreled into the hallway and went right for the truck keys sitting on



the credenza.

“Dad!” Charlie cried. She’d spotted her father lying halfway out the back door, apparently unsuccessful in his attempt to flee. Standing in the kitchen was a large figure, its horrible orange eyes blazing down at Mr. McGrew, but at Charlie’s cry, its eyes turned on the siblings and its jagged jaw filled with orange light. Charlie slammed the camera button with a cry, blinding the hallway with a flash.

“Go!” Bowie said, shoving the keys in her hand. “Get going!”

The figure advanced down the hallway with a shaking lunge, its arms raised above its head. Charlie screamed and Bowie shoved her onto the porch, then slammed the front door closed. Charlie hesitated only until she heard the gunfire, then took off into the yard, the key fob crushed in her sweaty palms. The truck lit up barely a dozen paces away, and just then came the strangled scream of her brother. Charlie bolted for the driver’s side and yanked the door open. She fumbled with the key and slammed it into the ignition, fired up the truck, then seized the shifter.

It wouldn’t budge.

Charlie started crying and fought the shifter with both hands. Just then she looked at the front porch and saw the figure’s face phasing through the front door, hunting, and then settling on the truck. The rest of the

body followed like ink dripping through a sieve, and then it started lunging for the truck, arms raised, eyes and jaw blazing, its robes glowing in the dim.

Charlie looked down at the shifter and tried to remember what she had to do, and in a sudden moment of inspiration, she drove her foot into the brake and pulled the shifter into reverse. She shoved her foot into the throttle and watched, horrified, as the RPMs flew through the roof but the truck went nowhere. A bright red word on the dashboard caught her eye: BRAKE.

“Please,” she cried, searching for a lever or button. “Please...”

Charlie found the brake release and, with it on the tips of her fingers, she instinctively looked up over her wheel. The last thing she did was scream as a horrifying, ghostly face came through the windshield and filled her vision.

Two EMTs and two police officers arrived fifteen minutes later and found themselves baffled by the scene. A truck had rolled into the porch of a house with an unconscious teenager behind the wheel. The two officers entered the house with their pistols drawn and found three unconscious people and walls riddled with bullet holes. They immediately called for backup.

Just before dawn, the house was taped off as a crime scene. Sitting on the hood of his car, one of the officers

reviewed pictures from the camera the teenager had been wearing. It was filled with hundreds of miscellaneous pictures, but one in particular was unlike all the others. It depicted the bright shoulder of someone blocking most of the blurry shot, but in the background, one could almost make out the strangest shape: two orange dots and a line of light wrapped in a menacing green shadow. No matter how he turned it, he couldn't make sense of the picture, yet the mere sight unsettled him and made him wish for the sunrise.

Something snapped in the bushes. He glanced up and saw something green gliding through the mangroves, but by the time he thought to call for his partner or at least shine a light in that direction, it was gone, and for some reason he couldn't explain, he felt relieved that whatever it was, it had decided to leave him alone.

## **KGB Agents From Beyond The Stars**

by James Krake

Lieutenant Waters had fingers of red wrapped around his throat like a burn mark. Like the rest of the squad, he had let his stubble grow out to a beard, and more often than not the beard had frozen solid in the Siberian winter. Rashes and frostbite were the norm, but Sergeant Hardy had never seen a rash take all the hair off. Waters might have been scratching at it, judging by the scrapes and cuts and the blood on his fingernails, but the rest of the team wouldn't know for certain because Lieutenant Waters was dead.

Private Alan stamped his boots to knock off more of the endless snow. The ice was as sharp as knives and clung to everything. How the Soviets were crazy enough to put a training camp this far north and east, no one could really fathom. "Think it was an allergy maybe?" he asked, puffing some breath between his hands and rubbing life back into them.

"An allergy to what?" their radioman, a black pulled out of Nome by name of Freeman, asked. He

was squatted next to the fireplace, using an old newspaper as a fan to pump some life into the flames. There was no shortage of wood in the cabin, just of food. The ice had seeped into the pile outside and it felt like any new log took an hour to catch. Lieutenant Waters had been left behind to keep the blaze going. Freeman gave up for the moment with a huff. "What's there to be allergic to in this kind of weather? A bug? They'd be itty bitty insect popsicles."

Alan frowned and peered over Hardy's shoulder. "Spider bite maybe? Do the Ruskies have poisonous spiders out here?"

Hardy tugged open his coat and reached inside for his pack of Korean cigarettes. They were garbage but, on the off chance the pack was found, they couldn't leave behind anything American. He lit it and sucked till he could blow out a cloud. He said, "The karakurt spider, maybe. I just don't know why he'd be sitting here if that's what got him. They had maybe three sentences on it in the handbook: how to identify it, that it hurts like hell, and if you do get bit you--" he jabbed his cigarette at the mark on Lieutenant Waters' neck. "--burn it off."

Freeman dragged a chair over to the fire and sat down with his hands stuffed into his pockets, his chin stuffed into his scarf. "Maybe he was sick. Would explain... you know..."

“Sick with what?” Hardy asked. He worked the cigarette around, tasting the nicotine as he stared at the body of his failure of a commander. The two of them were the only expert marksmen, for all that had been worth when Waters just shut down at the moment to shoot. “I ain’t ever heard of a sickness that gives you a rash like this.”

“Rusty razor?” Alan laughed and made another search through the dilapidated kitchen. He found nothing, just like the other dozen times he had checked for something better to eat than an MRE.

Hardy shook his head and walked over to the fire. Leaning against the hearth, he said, “We’ll have to see what Hanz has to say about it, but we’re going to have to burn the body.”

Freeman scoffed and kicked one of the half-inflamed logs. Sparks swam up through the smoke like fireflies. “We can barely keep ourselves warm and you think we can burn a body? A wet body at that? Sergeant, there ain’t even gasoline out here. No fucking way we can burn him.”

“His clothes then. Everything identifiable. Maybe we do let the Soviets find his body but he’ll have to just be a body.

Freeman hunkered down again, staring at the embers. “We should be bringing the body with us.”

Alan pulled something out of the cabinet above the

sink. “What if it was some kind of spy weapon?”

“Spy weapons aren’t fucking magic,” Hardy said. More often than not, spy weapons were things like the m1903 Springfield rifle they had wrapped up in a wool blanket across the hearth to keep the action from freezing. The commander certainly hadn’t seen that coming at him. “We were all checked before getting in the boat, remember? That’s the whole reason Freeman’s here.”

The radioman scoffed. “Wish you people would have left me back in Nome. I think I got frostbite on my pecker when I took it out to pee.”

Alan tossed his find on the table and held up a crumpled cigarette. “Don’t worry, Freeman. No woman was gunna touch it anyway.”

“Fuck you, Alan.”

“Sarge, got a light?”

“Are you going to smoke a year-old Soviet cigarette?”

“Sure am. I ran out last night.”

Hardy tossed him the lighter and shook his head. While Alan was sucking on the worst piece of tobacco that he could imagine, the door to the cabin opened up. Hardy’s hand went to the rifle—the bullets were still loaded—but it was just Hanz.

The older man didn’t tug out of anything. He even left his frozen mittens on as he stared at Hardy with his ice blue eyes. “Haven’t you people smoked enough? I

can barely breathe in here.”

Freeman finally moved, hunching forward and digging through his coat, he pulled out his own pack of Korean cigarettes. “I’ll stop when I’m home. It’s just cigs man.”

“And in ‘Nam it was heroin, but that was at camp, not out in the shit. Hardy, get your coat on and bring the gun.”

A moment later, the two of them were wool scarecrows, collecting ice and staring at treks in the snow by moonlight. Hardy flicked the butt of his cigarette away and tugged his scarf up to his eyes. “What are you trying to show me? Was someone here?”

“No,” Hanz said, folding his arms. “That’s the problem. They fucking sank our boat out of here, so why aren’t they here? If the ruskiies had come in and shot Waters, I’d at least understand. What the hell is going on?”

Hardy drummed his fingers on the stock of the gun. “We’re going to have to steal a boat.”

“Their navy would swarm. We’d never get back to Alaska.”

“Alright, maybe we don’t go to Alaska. We go south, go to Japan.”

“We’d need a hell of a boat for that.”

“Then let’s find a hell of a boat.”

Hanz sighed and turned his gaze to the stars. There



were millions of stars visible, the kind of darkness that hardly anyone got to see. Siberian farmers, Alaskan radio operators, and maybe the Norks. It made it seem like the whole universe had shown up to take a look and watch the little ants trudging across the snow. Of course, there were the big stars, the planets, the constellations, even the hazy streak of the Milky Way. There were just more.

Strangers among the stars.

“Get some rest,” Hanz said. “We’ll move out before dawn, while there’s still time. Let’s move when the ruskiy are still getting their coffee in. Find somewhere in the village to shut into for the day. Make a better plan there.”

“We could move out now.”

“We have to do something about Waters. That takes time. Get some rest, Hardy.”

The sergeant shook his head and half turned back to the cabin. “Want a smoke to keep you up?” he asked, reaching for his pack. The paper was all crumpled, and he could feel the last few sticks rubbing against each other. Only three left.

Hanz waved him off and started another trudge around the cabin. “They just make me cough.”

Hardy stepped back inside, stomping the slush from his boots. Alan and Freeman had gently coaxed the fire to a blaze and huddled around it. They peered

over their shoulders at him as he got the blanket for the gun again. "Well?" the black asked.

"We gotta strip him. Let's go," Hardy said, and both of the privates grumbled. The body was already getting stiff, be it from rigor mortis or from the sheer cold. "If you want an extra layer, take it," the sergeant said, but hardly anything could be salvaged. The socks were taken and the scarf too, but the pants and coat had to be cut off Lieutenant Waters before they could be tossed on the fire. Hardy took it upon himself to rip his underwear off and add that to the fire, before covering the poor coward with a sheet.

The fireplace wicked most of the smoke up the chimney, spewing a horrid, black haze into the night. It probably made them stand out to anyone looking, but they'd freeze without it. It was the smell that lingered with everyone. The wool and dye seemed worse than a fire in a barbershop. Because of the cold, they couldn't even get away from it. They each bundled into blankets right next to the hearth and tried to not imagine monsters in the shadows. No soviet spies and no karakurt spiders.

But they still didn't understand what had killed Lieutenant Waters.

The sun was up when Hardy woke. He leapt up, heart racing as he scanned the room. Everything was how he remembered, with Alan and Freeman sleeping

next to him. Their snores were interrupted, each of them rousing because of him. "Where the hell is the Captain?"

The farm wasn't too large. Perhaps it once had been, before pine saplings had infested the fields. The fresh snow made it easy to limit their search as they fanned out; Hardy with the rifle, Alan and Freeman with their pistols. Each trudging in the dawn cold, their breaths fogging through scarves, and trembling with fear, they circled round the cabin and found Captain Hanz.

Hardy stopped them from rushing over. The old soldier was laid out in the snow, ice coating his cheeks and mustache. "Check for prints."

If there had been any color in Hanz's cheeks, there would have been a fight, he was sure; but nobody rushed to help a corpse. Each of them crouched down and stared at shadows and snow until they felt half blind. They crawled around and examined boot holes and deer tracks. Eventually, Alan made a loop the whole way around the cabin and came back with a shake of his head. "Nothing came here, Sarge."

Hardy tried to swallow, but his mouth seemed to have frozen dry. The only foot tracks they had found in the snow matched their own boots and if a deer had done him in, there would have been blood. Poor Captain Hanz seemed to have simply fallen backwards,

dropping armfuls of firewood into the snow beside him. He looked like maybe he had been shot dead from a great distance, but again, there was no blood. With a hard grimace, Hardy knelt next to Hanz and pulled the frozen scarf off the man's throat.

He had bright red marks wrapped around his throat, like he had been strangled with fire.

"What the fuck does something like this?" Freeman asked.

"I don't know."

Alan asked, "What are we going to do about it?"

"I don't know."

"Do we have to burn him, too?"

"I said I don't know!" Hardy roared, his voice echoing through the young forest. Then he started digging through Hanz's pockets. He got the man's personal effects, what sparse things he had brought on the mission. A German badge his father had left him. A scratched to hell pocket watch that had a date written on the inside. And the man's pistol with custom grips. There was no identification of course. None of them had identification. "We're leaving."

"What?" Freeman asked. "Just like that?"

"Look, we're under attack by something and..." he ripped his scarf off, rubbing at his neck. It was sweaty and covered in stubble. He couldn't feel any insect bites, but he could barely feel anything with his fingers.

“Both of you, get rid of those. Keep your necks clear and clean. We have to get somewhere with water. Clean ourselves up. It must have been a poison.”

“But, sarge,” Alan asked. “Where the hell are we going? We missed rendezvous.”

“There’s a backup rendezvous,” Hardy lied, but the lie was necessary. The two soldiers underneath him shook their heads and took off their scarves. Freeman made a show of turning his over a few times to check for spiders, but left it on the ground. Hardy went to the truck first and sparked a little fire of coal. The farm barely had any left, but there was enough to warm the engine and break the ice. Climbing into the back with the rifle, he took a look around the overgrown field. If it was the Soviets, they would have come in force. There would have been a dozen KGB jackboots stamping their faces into the mud.

The commies had no reason to be subtle in their own country.

Alan and Freeman got in each other’s faces next to the driver door. “I ain’t letting you drive,” Alan said, puffing his chest out and doing the monkey dance.

“I’m the one who lives in Alaska. I think I know more about driving in mud than you do, Kansas.”

“I don’t--”

“Alan! Let him drive,” Hardy ordered, and that was that. The roads they could take were limited by snow

and fallen trees, but also by having to avoid the communal farms that were still in operation. Earlier in the trip, before the shot, they had been able to bribe their way through checkpoints. That wouldn't fly again. Thankfully, they weren't outside Moscow, they were in the middle of nowhere. The officers sent to this side of the continent were being punished and wouldn't be interested in challenging three armed men, he hoped.

Their truck was leaving a trail. He kept staring at it as they drove, till he felt like he would go blind. If it weren't for the occasional puff of cigarette smoke, it seemed like all the color in the world had been stolen by white snow, black mud, and grey sky. Of course, the smoke was grey too. The ember held the color that had even vanished from his aching fingers.

He doubted the Soviets would think to follow their trail though, because they were going the wrong way. They were going west, to the Sea of Okhotsk. He kept repeating the logic to himself, that the navy would be patrolling between the peninsula and the aeolitions. Their resources would be pulled away from stopping them from getting to Hokkaido and the military bases there.

With no actual rendezvous, it was the best chance they had, until the truck ran out of diesel. Alan slowed it to a crawl on the road and cracked his window. A puff of warm air escaped as the private asked, "We have

to go to a town, don't we?"

The three of them ended up on a communal farm. Shoddy thing. The wooden cabins were falling apart and the concrete replacements looked like snow-covered tombstones. A tractor path let them pull around to a distant cabin. There was nothing they could do about being seen, but across the fields they would just be three figures. They wouldn't be identified.

They broke into the barn. They could hardly even call it lockpicking when it was nothing more than a ram-set lock, but it was all the local comrade had to protect his motorcycle. "Get the diesel," Hardy ordered, and they all spread out to find where the fuel cans had been hidden.

They moved quick and efficient, half training and half stress. Both Hardy and Freeman turned up knock-off jerry cans that still sloshed with fuel. They were standing next to the fuel tank, cans tipped in, with their chins to their chests like the puffs of their breath would linger more. Then they heard the gunshot. Hardy and Freeman both jerked their heads up. The sergeant shoved the can into the black's hands. "Fill it," he growled, and ran to the other side of the barn.

Alan stood over the steaming corpse of a farmer, pistol at his side. "We shouldn't have brought Freeman," he said.

“The fuck happened?” Hardy growled, his heart racing as he scanned the village. They weren’t the only ones who had heard the gun.

“There ain’t no fucking black soviets, sarge. It was one fucking glance, sarge! I had to.”

Hardy grabbed the man by the shoulder and threw him at the truck. “Move it! We’re going, now.” He snatched up the rest of the fuel cans and jumped in the back again as the others threw themselves into the cabin. The engine sputtered to life and for a moment Hardy was afraid they had poured in moonshine. Then the diesel started firing and the wheels started spinning.

It was about an hour later, after no visible turn offs on the thing loosely marked as a road, that cars appeared behind them. They were making better time because they had the advantage of the truck’s ruts. Hardy snarled and hunkered down against the tail-hatch, shouldering the rifle. For a moment, he took a look through the scope at the plain black trucks chasing after them. Then his breath fogged the glass and he had to try to wipe it off. They were closer when he looked again, and more of them than he had bullets.

“Hang on tight!” Alan shouted, before he hammered the accelerator.

Hardy barely had time to grab on before he was suddenly riding a bucking bull. The truck plowed through snow and ice and burst onto ice ruts so hard



their underbelly smashed through an old snowdrift, hard enough to jar his teeth. Black exhaust popped out their back end, trailing into the sky as they kept bouncing and skidding, whipping from one ice patch to the next. He tried to scream at them that they were a couple of crazy bastards, then he saw it was Freeman at the wheel and Alan was as braced into his chair as could be.

The Alaskan emptied their fuel tank in no time, but as it pattered to a stop, there were no trucks behind them, just trees.

Snaking through the unclaimed forest, weaving between green and snow, was a pattering, icy river. Freeman kicked his door open and jumped out from the Zis-5. "Come on, come on, we're fucked," he said, cinching his coat tight around his frame as he ran to the river.

"Where are you going?" Hardy bellowed.

"We need a boat!"

Alan and Hardy followed quick enough, the sun setting behind them and ending an all too short day of travel. The luminous orb seemed to have been hugging the horizon like it was loathe to loom over the trees and quick to vanish back to night. A tiny fraction of the day was given over to the sun, and the lion's share to night and to ice. Creeping freeze would encroach on all things that moved, already it ate from the shore of the river in. It lapped at the hull of a barge hardly big

enough to haul cows, coating the sides and encasing the ropes.

The captain gave a shout, rubbing at his eyes and peering again at them as if at some winter mirage. He scrambled for his trunk, throwing it open and digging through blankets before Freeman shot the man dead.

Hardy and Alan clambered aboard the lumbering thing, peering back at the road and expecting the fleet of KGB. The motoring shapes didn't emerge from the trees yet. "Move, we have to move," Hardy barked as he threw Alan back from the railing. Wherever the poles were, he didn't know, but the cattle were restless. Freeman seemed to know what he was doing, taking the helm of the rudder and watching the two of them. Hardy grabbed the first thing he found, a fishing net, and shoved them away from the sand bar they had climbed in from. Alan came later with the actual mooring pole to shove them into the proper flow of winter water.

"Careful!" Freeman shouted as they drifted back and forth, bumping logs and sand. The depths of the river scraped their bottom with such terror that Hardy imagined the noise could echo through the entire woods. Every moment that passed drew them further west. In time, he found a proper steering stick and took position at the front of the barge. He fended off any block of the river, while Alan guarded the other side. It

was heavy and constant work to keep the ship from ruining itself upon the nature, but every bend of the river hid them from their pursuers.

Soon the sun set and Freeman had hardly figured out how to slow them naturally. Anchors existed, but only those that would stop them completely. They had no choice but to trust the glimmering darkness beneath the stars and hope to not become stranded. With no fire and no safety, they couldn't stop until they had found some village or perhaps the coastal city. Hardy didn't even have a map of the peninsula—that information had been memorized by Waters before he died, but there were only so many places they could end up.

None of them felt the strength to talk, as if the moon were a poor confidant of their travels, but in time Hardy moved back to the flimsy hovel that shielded the captain's wheel. He sparked up his second to last cigarette and asked the radioman in a rough voice, "Will this make it to the ocean?"

Freeman shrugged and stood with his hands buried within his armpits. Steering the vessel was relegated to his hips lest frostbite strip him of his vigor. The wintery death had already seeped into the Soviet they had shot. "It was designed to, we're no good with it though."

Then, the animals proved themselves wiser than the Americans. The cows tossed their heads and bellowed. They stamped hooves and scampered away from their

rickety pens. Great beasts of hairy brown that threw themselves against the ship so fiercely the thing nearly snapped in half for their fervor. They trampled themselves, scraping their hooves against the icy deck, throwing themselves again and again until the ship lurched and creaked. They had no choice but to fight with the wheel and watch as they scrambled over the sides and leapt into the water, as black as ink and as cold as death.

“What the—Alan!” Hardy shouted as the stampede cleared itself from the deck and revealed Alan’s twitching form.

The sergeant tore free of the captain’s cabin and charged over with gun in grip. The butt of his cigarette between his gritted teeth, barely letting a trickle of smoke in as he came upon the gasping corpse. Alan clawed at his naked throat, scratching feebly as he gaped at the stars. His fingernails left trails of blood counter to the burning lines that gripped him like a hangman’s noose. Hardy could see it then, as not upon the corpses. The thing that ailed the private was no spider, no rash or allergy or poison.

Something squeezed his throat with five fingers of wrath, and yet the something was nowhere to be seen. It had no body, no form, no presence at all save for the throttling power that had Alan upon the floor. “What’s going on!?” Hardy roared, his voice alchemy of fear and

rage, smoke and mist.

The pressure abated. Alan's skin rebounded a fraction but his windpipe had already been crushed. He could do nothing but work his jaw up and down and fail to form words. He grabbed at Hardy's pant leg, tears in his eyes as he, at last, ceased to move. Alan lay dead, eyes fixed to the sky.

"What the hell happened?" Freeman shouted, and the boat's crude little two-stroke motor sputtered to a stop as if the ice of winter had killed it.

"I don't know."

"What the hell are we going to do?"

"I don't know."

"We need a radio. I'm calling in for help. We can just get a ham radio or something. I know the codes. I know the frequencies and and maybe I'll have to adjust it. We're on the wrong side of the land but maybe there's a way I can get the signal to carry, you know? We need to call for help."

Hardy shook his head, unable to stop looking at the rash that covered Alan's throat. "If you do that, we'll have soviets down our throats before we even get a response. The plan is to get a boat, a sea boat, and get out of here. We stay quiet, we slip out and save ourselves. Got that?"

The radioman turned away and slammed his boot into the motor. Part of the bracket holding it to the

ship cracked, but it didn't fall off. The man crouched down and hugged his knees to his chest as he lit another cigarette.

The current still carried them down the river, which had grown deeper over time. They had been lucky to find it unfrozen at all. With the cattle scattered over by fear, the barge seemed imbalanced. It rode high on the water, skimming over ice and branches as it lurched around the bends. The rock became nauseating, but Hardy settled his stomach with another cigarette—the last one from his pack—and searched Alan's body.

Nothing had shown up on Waters' corpse, and they had firelight to check him then, but he worked regardless. He had to find an injection sight, a bullet hole, a spider bite, or anything at all that could have caused the man's death. People did not simply choke on their own breath.

And yet, that had been what he saw as he held Alan in his arms.

"It's a ghost or something," Freeman said. He had gotten back to his feet and pattered around the back of the boat until he found a little maintenance cubby. The original captain had left behind a bit of starter and some spare fuel. He went through the motions of re-parking it with his head down.

"Ghosts aren't real," Hardy said.

Freeman shook his head and flicked the butt of his cigarette out into the water. "You got a better explanation? Psychic powers maybe? Invisible men? Aliens?"

"Those are all psyops. They're disinformation. We're just... there has to be something going on that we just don't understand."

Freeman laughed and turned back to the night. Then he looked up at the stars and went quiet. There was absolutely nothing interesting about Alan. He didn't even have anything in his pockets except for the crumbling cigarette pack from the farm. As far as Hardy could tell, there was no reason that Alan had been the one to kick the bucket rather than either himself or Freeman. Hanz and Waters he could at least understand were isolated, but Alan was hardly isolated. The boat was tiny and had been carrying cows.

"Why do you think the cows ran off?" Hardy asked, rising from the corpse and walking over to the railing. They were long past where the cattle had clambered over, had crashed through ice and water and sliced themselves red.

Freeman's response was to kick his foot against the sidewall and make a gasping noise. The only one between the two of them who could hail the Japanese navy for rescue was asphyxiating before his eyes.

Hardy ran over and grabbed Freeman by the shoulders. He hauled him away from the rudder with a

roar, and he felt a tug of resistance. He bellowed again, breath fuming with smoke as he gave in to instinct.

The smoke hit something in the air. It stopped and twisted, flowing around some form that the sergeant was wholly unable to comprehend. The steam and nicotine smoke clung to the thing's surface, coiling around it to extract some shape from the void of existence. From that momentary flash of illumination, he saw a face that was not a face. Sight but no eyes. Hunger but no mouth.

It let go of Freeman and the two Americans fell to the deck. Freeman grabbed at his throat as he sucked in breath, but before he could regain himself, the figure had gone. Only the impression remained. "How did you...?"

Hardy plucked the smoldering butt of his cigarette from his lips and stared at it. The fading line of tobacco smoke trailed to the stars like incense. "Something about the smoke."

"Well fuck, give me one!" Freeman shouted. He grabbed at his pockets and dug through them, finding his pack empty.

Hardy had just ran out himself, except for the one he had taken off Alan. He swore and lit it up. He took one long drag, his arms shaking as he did so. With his lungs full, he passed the cigarette to Freeman. Between the two of them, it would only last a few minutes. Bare-



ly a moment of safety that he stretched out as long as he could—until his chest burned with the held ashes. He needed the pause so he could grab the rifle again. When he exhaled, he spewed the smoke back at the motor—where the thing had stood. It struck the inhuman figure and parted, casting a shadow in negative.

Hardy fired but, of course, a shadow couldn't be shot.

Cause of death for the five Americans was filed in the Lubyanka as inexplicable suicide.

## **The Branca**

by L.A Labuschagne

Tama woke up before dawn to demand the Sun give her a man. Sitting on the village's tallest tree, she watched the tips of its rays rise over the jungle as she began to pray. Morning twilight cast back the darkness and painted the canopy in pastel colors. Tama sat in the tree and would have let her prayer echo across the wilderness until the Sun gave her an answer, even if it burned her alive.

Except, another, older villager, Marya, came to the foot of the tree. She set down her strings of water gourds and stared upwards. There was no ladder, but she had hands and feet for that. That was what kind of people the Branca were. People of the jungle, people with no other choice.

And Marya beat the tree trunk until Tama came down, and then she beat her. "We tell you the Truth, but you insist on lies, child. What for?"

"Your Truth makes us die alone." And Tama glared into Marya's face. Features sharp as bone, skin just as

white, under a camouflage of mud and leaves. Tama had the same face.

They all did.

"The Sun gives to her loyal children. Child, you know this. What kills is the opposite. What kills you is climbing into the clouds when there is water to be carried." She shoved one string of gourds into Tama's hands. "Come, before the Sun tells us to rest."

She could feel the sweat on her brow already, greasy as it mixed into her mudpaint. And the string felt far worse. It cut like bone knives into her rangy shoulders, carving flaky lines into the only clothing she wore. All the Branca wore mudpaint. Without it, the jungle would eat them. Stinging bugs and snakes, the Sun's cruel heat.

The Branca did not belong. They came from somewhere else when the Sun was set on fire. Now only in the jungle's shade could they survive.

Despite how quickly they learned to survive, their numbers shrank. With their bone knives and bone spears, with their snares and fish-traps, with their mudpaint and Sun God, they survived the hostile, foreign jungle. Sometimes leopards or apes hunted them. Sometimes the Fire people did. But they survived in their trees and wattle huts. Regardless, their numbers shrank.

Something was amiss. Not with the world, but

with them. With their blood.

But as tough as the Branca were, they couldn't drink only blood. So, like they did daily, Tama and her Marya walked through the shady rainforest jungle. Each day Tama felt as if they walked longer, took more time stepping around the blurry patches of burning Sunlight on the forest floor, and the rivers felt further away.

They held their spears tight, and stepped lightly so that the gourds wouldn't rattle on their shoulders. The Fire people used the rivers too, and there were more of them than ever these days. They streamed into the jungle from every direction and seemed to carry better weapons every day.

"We fetch too much," Tama whispered.

Marya ignored her. With her Branca face, just two black eyes under muddy gray bark, she stared ahead, through the undergrowth, down at the mulch floor.

"We fetch too often," Tama groaned.

Marya ignored her. What she didn't ignore was the forest floor and its footprints. Neither the hoofprint of a gazelle nor the knuckle-walk stamp of the ape was pressed into the soft, rotting leaves. Instead, there was a round print like a foot but with flat bars instead of the depression of heel and toes. People.

"There are no young men left to water anyway," Tama said. And she left.

Marya froze, hand outstretched for the girl's shoulder. Not close enough.

The snare's bell rang loud in the quiet, cramped wilderness, ripping like a garotte through the humidity. Tama was flung upside down, a scream lashed out of her chest. Marya stayed frozen, scanning the horizon with twitchy eyes. Perhaps, if they were quiet, the poachers would pass them by.

Perhaps not. Barely a minute later, young men burst out of the undergrowth, three of them in combat boots. They wore tan uniforms, sunglasses, and battle scars. They were not native to the jungle. Paid by a dying government far downstream, these soldiers had come to hunt.

But Marya hunted too, for something better than cash. She hunted to live and she leaped into action before the first one of them had even cleared the brush. She landed a spear in his guts, the bone-and-hardwood spike piercing through his fatigues like it did through air. A second later, its poison started burning. The bow-legged man collapsed and began to quiver.

Everyone screamed. The other mercenaries screamed battle cries and opened fire. Their guns sprayed red rain from their ejection ports. Not cartridges. And brilliant, solar light zapped out the barrels.

*Rayguns!*

The older Branca screamed in agony as rays charred her black in moments, before she could even ready a second spear. Tama screamed because they'd poached her, and she might be next.

The tallest mercenary, a shoulder of his uniform coated in patches, his jaw coated in stubble, whistled just like his raygun had. "Well, I'll be damned. People are out here."

"Let's sort out Beetle first," said his comrade, clean-shaven, red-faced under his aviators. "Else we have to carry his kit back to camp, Karali. And the girl. At the same time."

Karali shrugged. His comrade nodded at the girl. Beetle kept screaming. His round sunglasses had fallen skew to reveal narrow eyes gone wide.

The Branca girl had never seen men like these before. Their clothes were strange. Their skin was sallow, unlike her bone white or the bark-brown of the Fire people, who so long ago had set the Sun alight and driven her ancestors to the jungle. No, Unlike the Branca or their enemies, they wielded the power of the Sun.

Still, they probably weren't going to blast her. Immediately.

And it was hard to keep screaming with all the blood rushing to her head. She was woozy enough as is. Any more and Tama feared she'd start venting blood

like the strange men's strange guns did.

The two men continued in that language Tama didn't speak, nor one she'd ever heard before. Clipped, coarse, vicious.

Halfway through a sentence, Karali suddenly knelt by Marya's corpse. The corpse was still steaming from the rays, its mudpaint and flesh a melted mess. The tall soldier scratched at the ruined body with his knife like a mantis picking at its prey. His knife glinted like Branca bone tools didn't.

"Sheng, we're hunting the refugees, right?" he said, "Kinshasa said they'd pay us five hundred per scalp. For the pygmies, anyway. Didn't trust us with the full size men, lest we just start hunting them." He finished the sentence with a laugh, because they were right not to trust him.

His comrade ignored him and went to yank the poisoned spear out of Beetle's abdomen. The bug-eyed man was frothing at the mouth.

"These don't look like pygmies. These look like..." Karali scratched some more, revealing skin. "Hell, these look like Americans."

His comrade ignored him.

"What the damn are Americans doing naked in the Congo jungle covered in mud?"

His comrade ignored him and began to scratch around in his rucksack for the antivenom his PMC

hadn't issued.

"What say you and I take the girl back to base camp, make her carry Beetle's kit? Probably more of her kind out here we could get later."

"Been ages since I had an American." Sheng grinned, his teeth tobacco-yellow and his gums sickly. "Take her back, sure. Then we make her tell us where her village is. I don't figure they've got pygmies to enslave, but Americans oughta sell just as good."

"Kinshasa ain't buying Americans. Least the government ain't. Unless they're small and Black, which these ones aren't." Karali scratched away more mud. This time, from Marya's face. He raised his wrap-around shades and peered at her. "These ones are just white... inbred-looking. Hell, we wander into Alabama or something?"

With half-blind eyes, she watched the men. Their figures were blurry, overlaid with the afterimages brought on by their flashing ray guns. She waited until both were properly distracted. Then, she planned to cut herself free and run. They didn't know the jungle like she did. Just one second and she'd be just another mud-brown shadow.

She peered up and wondered if she was high up enough for the Sun to hear her prayers. She wondered how loud she had to whisper for it to answer. She wondered if it even still cared.



Suddenly, the second man, Sheng, snapped Tama out of her musing. He yelled at her in French. But no reply past a vicious glare.

"She don't parlez vous your Français, Sheng," said Karali. He stood up, brushed the mud and raw skin off his bowie knife, and walked through the sunlight to the girl. "Hey, Alabama, you speak Swahili? Mandarin? Russian? English? Portuguese? Arabic? Anything?"

"Portuguese," Tama winced, because she did. The Branca spoke Portuguese since before they'd been the Branca. They'd spoken it on the island where they'd lived before the Fire people rebelled, set the Sun alight, and drove them to the jungle.

And now these young men had mastered the Sun. Tama's world was upside down.

"I heard stories about y'all, actually," said Karali. "Ancient family legend. Some commie revolt we engineered on Sao Tome. Back in the 1970s. Reds managed to commandeer a Saffer battleship or something. Turns out it was carrying a little more than seamen... It had a nuke. Long story short, the flash scared the shit out of the Porras so much they let the place go right quick. Except for a couple of colonist nutjobs who fled into the forests during the chaos instead. Been eating native ever since."

Sheng, who'd heard the centuries-old stories, shrugged. He lit a blunt.

"You're a Fire person?" gasped Tama. Then gagged back her vomit.

"Im a peace tourist, come here to do your job better than you." The ex-PLA punctuated his introduction with a cloud of smoke blown in her face.

"If she's one of them old colonist runaways, I know people who'll pay a lot more than five hundred per head for her," whispered Karali, not in Portuguese.

"How much're we talking?" The shorter man relit his blunt with a match, dropping the spent stick onto Marya's corpse. The body was too charred for the dying match to even sizzle against it.

For Tama, it was easier to cough than to scream. Easier than yelling at the Sun for answers that weren't coming. Easier to wait for a moment that seemed ever further off.

Karali's first answer was a shrug, his gangly frame bending sharply. Then, after a second and a pull of the comrade's smoke, he answered, "Enough cash to pack up and fight a real war. None of this poaching shit. We could go tangle with full-size people again."

Sheng's turn to cough. As he did, Tama slipped a bone knife up to her ankle. Unlike her gourds, dangling below her from their strap, the wire snare cut a far deeper line. One that dripped blood down her leg and only made her nausea worse. The mudpaint wouldn't kill her, but the tolerance she had for it wasn't enough

to prevent sickness either.

Time to act. While she still could.

Slashing herself free wasn't the hard part. The Fire people had snares too, after all. What was harder was landing her knife in the stoned soldier's thigh before she even hit the ground, before he could react. While he choked on his blunt, Tama put that same knife in his throat. Sheng spasmed to the floor, the third corpse of the day.

The process took a single second.

And Karali already had his gun raised, and he had the smile of a man who'd now be splitting the eventual profits with two fewer men. "Alright then! Damn fine show, Alabama. Damn fine. But I play in higher leagues than pygmy-eating savages."

"You'll kill me?" hissed Tama, "I asked the Sun to give me a young man, a husband. And it seems Marya's Truth was correct. There are no good men left. At least make it quick."

"Ain't planning on killing you... Where's the rest?"

"What rest?" Tama tried not to stagger as the world twitched around her, as sour bile rose in her throat.

"Look, Alabama," Karali flicked a button on his gun. "Play nice or I stun your albino-looking ass and haul it back to base camp. If you're still feeling rowdy by the time you sober up, you'll get one Hell of a shitty week entertaining us peace tourists before we drive to

Kinshasa. Then I sell you to my relatives and, well... not even I want to know what they'll do with a pretty girl like you."

Tama snarled, gripped her spear. "And if I play nice?" she spat. "Then what? Maybe Fire people ambush your camp, and I crawl away free to a miserable village and fetch water until I die alone?"

"We could work something out. Can't imagine you Porras exactly like hanging round these parts anyhow. Y'all could come willingly."

Tama's glare relented, but her grip on the bone spear didn't. "You won't make me work, won't trade me to Fire people?"

"If you cooperate, no. Hell, I oath on my family's honor, I'll keep you out of trouble, Alamaba. Long as you play good." The tall man flicked his eyes, green and serpentine, in the direction of his patches. They meant nothing to Tama, but what Karali said next didn't. "We caught our fair share of whores and slaves anyhow. Don't need to add one as special as you to their ranks. Lest you'd prefer that, of course."

"I want to get out of here, free. Away from Marya's people and their Truth. And you saw how we fight, Sun man. We Branca have reflexes too fast for any treachery."

Both grinned. Tama's smile was as white as her skin. Wider than the horizon seen from the tallest tree.

Karali's smile was as bloody as his career. He raised his palms, fingers close to claws. "Hey, Alabama. I like you too much for treachery. You got moxie. And I figured you think the same about me. So, let's deal. You show my tour group these... Fire people villages. And I'll show you a world where we got these."

Gun raised high, Karali fired. The muzzle whooshed like rain, blood misted from its ports, lightning beamed out the barrel. In the shade of the jungle morning, its sweltering heat muffling life's sounds, the solar shot flared across Tama's wilderness world. The world was painted every pastel color of the morning twilight, lighting up the three corpses and the two living monsters.

The Sun had given her a man.

The mercenary knelt beside his comrades, collected their rayguns, flicked the safeties back on, and tossed one over to the wide-eyed Branca.

Tama cradled it like a personal sunray. She did so as she limped all the way back to base camp.

# Silver Pasture

Or; Maggot On The Broccoli

by Guy Hayes

Raymund parked his pick-up and hobbled into his favorite restaurant, the Silver Pasture. The ladies at the front were always so flirty. Their smiles and bright eyes made his day, and they all knew him by name. He was really somebody here. They all wanted him.

“Hey, Raymund,” the blonde one—he couldn’t recall her name—said as he approached the counter. “Sweet tea as usual?”

“Sure thing, sweetheart,” he replied, grabbing a tray. The blonde sat the sweet tea on the tray, and he scooted it down to the register. The brunette was there. He liked her the most. She always gave him the senior discount. It was their little secret.

She winked and gave him the receipt. “Enjoy your dinner, darlin’.”

You gotta play hard -to-get with types like her. They get bored with an easy game. So, without a reply, he took his tray to his favorite table in the far corner by

the window. She'll chase him down soon enough. Usually, she doesn't wait long. The poor thing can't help it.

He went to the front, snagged a plate, and made his way to the buffet. The pot roast looked tasty. So did the steamed broccoli. An ample portion of both seemed like a good start. On the way back to his table, he stopped for a roll and some honey butter. You gotta have the roll and honey butter.

As always, the food was superb. The pot roast savory and seasoned. He never knew how they could make something as simple as broccoli cause his taste buds to dance. Although this time there was something different about it. An unfamiliar spice. New. He loved it. He made a mental note to have the waitress compliment the chef.

Every bite of the pot roast was consumed, and he was down to his last piece of broccoli when he heard a funny little voice. "Excuse me, sir!"

Raymund peered around. No one from the other tables seemed to pay attention to him, and the brunette waitress served coffee to a group of men in the reserved section. From whose mouth did this tiny voice squeak?

"Down here, sir!" The voice said, sounding as tinny as a wristwatch alarm. "On the broccoli."

Raymund shifted focus. The tiny green floret didn't look unusual, just a simple piece of broccoli. He took the readers from his breast pocket and rested them

on his nose. His vision cleared, and upon closer inspection, on the stem of the floret was a single white worm with a black spot on its head.

A maggot!

His stomach churned. And he held his finger up in the air toward the waitress. Now she was playing hard to get. This was no time for games, woman! There's a maggot on my broccoli!

"Wait!" The maggot said. "Don't get the waitress!"

"Why the hell not?" Raymund said, leaning closer to the plate. "They need to know their broccoli is tainted."

"Oh please, you just want a refund."

"You're damned right I do!"

"Listen." The maggot undulated and lifted his little black head in the air. "I don't want to meet the same fate as my comrades."

"Your comrades?"

"Yes! You ate my friends! I should be quite upset with you. But I'm willing to bargain. I can put aside my grief for a moment if you can. If you're not willing to cooperate, I can make your life hell."

"Am I being extorted by a maggot!?"

"I simply don't want to be eaten by an old man."

"Old man? I'm only..." Raymund's age didn't come to mind. When was his last birthday? Is it today? Never mind, age is just a number. There were more



pressing matters to sort. “Why would I want to eat maggot-infested broccoli?”

“Well, you ate Jeff and Bob and Felix. You enjoyed it, too!”

“I didn’t...see them. It was nothing more than broccoli!”

“You don’t get it, Raymund, you thick-skulled David! It’s more than mere broccoli! They each had their own floret! And they were happy until you selfishly devoured them! You’re a pig, Ray! A pig!”

“You sound like my wife.”

“That’s right. Your wife, Ray. Where is she? Where is your Floret?”

“You leave her out of this!”

“You killed her, Ray.”

“I most certainly did not!”

“You did! You and your appetite! It’s catching up with you now. Your mind isn’t what it used to be, is it?”

“Wanna refill, darlin’?” The brunette waitress stood at the table with a carafe of sweet tea.

“Huh? Uh...no. I’m...”

“You alright? You don’t look so hot.”

“Woman, I’m busy. Go away.”

“There’s no reason to be rude, Ray,” The maggot said. “She’s just doing her job.”

The waitress left without a word. Raymund wad-

ded a napkin and wiped the sweat from his brow. A wave of weakness raced over his limbs. Face tingled. Vision blurred.

“You really don’t look so hot, Ray,” The maggot said. “Maybe someone should call an ambulance.”

“I’m...”

“Might want to repent, Ray. Now would be a good time. Before it’s too late, I’d say!”

“Nonsense...”

His stomach twisted and burned. He turned to get up for the restroom, but the gray carpet came at him and hit him square in the forehead. Pain seared through his skull.

\* \* \*

Beeps and chimes pierced the quiet air. Pale acoustic tiles of a dropped ceiling greeted his vision as it returned. Something was caught in his throat. He tried to cough it up, but his lungs wouldn’t respond. Arms and legs were weak and almost nonexistent. Not even his eyes could be forced to turn.

What have the commies done to him now? He was playing cards in the bunker. Something happened. That’s right...a bomb. The shrapnel. How did they find us? Where’s Jeff? Bob? Felix? Did they survive? Oh, how he wished he was home with his Floret.

HELL echoed through his mind. REPENT, Ray! Now would be a good time!

A group piled into the room. He could only perceive them by their footsteps. Their whispering. They're talking about him. Someone was clicking their tongue.

Someone played with his foot. "Raymund," the man said. "Can you wiggle your toes for me?"

Raymund wiggled his big toe for the man.

"Nothing," the man said. "No response at all. Have you heard from any family at all?"

"No, sir," a soft feminine voice replied. "He doesn't seem to have anyone. His wife passed away a few months ago, and there are no living relatives."

"We'll give it until tomorrow. If there's no one, there's nothing we can do anyway."

Raymund wiggled his toe again. He curled the damn thing as hard as he could. Why couldn't they see it?

He was suddenly aware of air being forced into his lungs. The shrill beeping trilled faster in his left ear.

"He's in A-fib," the man said. "He probably won't last a couple hours. We're wasting resources on this one. DNR if—when—his heart stops."

What have I done?

\* \* \*

“I’ll let you sanitize the body,” Gallagher said. “I’ll watch you. It’s hard to screw that part up. I’ll do the rest, and you watch.”

The apprentice began to lather the detergent. “What’s his name?”

“Does it matter?” Gal said.

“It does to me.”

Gal went to the clipboard on the counter across the room and thumbed through the pages. “Raymund Williams.”

“We’re going to get you all nice and clean, Ray,” the apprentice said.

Gal shook his head and chuckled. At least his new apprentice had zeal. Maybe this one will last the whole required year. She made it through school, so that was a good sign. “He can’t hear you. The dead don’t care.”

“Do we know that for sure?”

“No, I guess not. But for their sake, I’d hope they can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Wouldn’t it be awful to feel the embalming process? Especially the trocar.”

“I see your point. But we still don’t know for sure.”

“I guess one day we’ll all find out.”

“Yes, we will! And I want to be treated with re-

spect. You know...just in case.”

Gal set the clipboard down and approached the embalming table. He didn't like speculative conversations. Relying on his senses and logic made the most sense to him. So, he changed the subject. “Don't forget the mouth. The hospital never checks it for some reason.”

“I'm getting to it.”

It doesn't look like she's outgrown the teenage attitude. That might be a problem. He cleared his throat to hide his offense. “So...how do you like staying upstairs?”

“It's cozy.”

“It doesn't scare you to live in a funeral home?”

“If it did, I wouldn't have chosen this as a career.” The apprentice flashed Gal a smart-aleck smirk. “Time for the hair. He's got such beautiful silver hair, don't he?”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“I wonder how he spent his life.”

“Well, he was a veteran. They sent his uniform to be buried in.”

“So, he was an honorable man.”

“Could've been. Are you going to be like this with all of them?”

The apprentice looked her mentor straight in the eyes. “Yes. Is there something wrong with that?”

“No,” Gal said. “As long as you stick around for a while. I really need the help.”

“I’ll be here or be square.” She rinsed out the shampoo and began on the mouth. “Let’s see what we have here. Oh my...”

“See? They never check the mouth! What do we have?”

“He’s got broccoli in his teeth.”

# Vestigal

by Sophus

Flecks of gray snow come down softly now in the face of barred storefronts, onto dying grass and alleyway pavement, entombing those damned to sleep there neath a bitter dandruff slush.

Naked black trees adorned in flocks of dangling shoes lay ragged under stripes of ashen snow, made gauzelike in the few red tears of sunset which streak through the fog. Scraps of rotten canvas lay scattered in the snow, peels of shoe leather falling in the wind. The air is bitter here and will be for some time longer.

The streets are devoid of life, even the birds holed up for cold and murk. Haze obscures the far off towers which yet host some light, and in these outskirts there are only darkened windows. Faint squelching shifts of flaccid snow and odd rustlings of dead branches are the only sounds here though some distant turgid droning fills the air as if the fog itself carries a hungering growl.

One of the wretched alleymen awakens. His extremities rigid with aching cold, ears full of slush and

humming fog, he forces himself upright in a series of stiff jerks. Crusted layers of ice and filth slide off his flank. Empty-headed, empty-stomached. Brainstem sensations pull at him, primal tuggings for warmth or food which go unanswered and only vaguely conceived. In lurching steps he parts the slush and struggles shin-deep through a gray mire which smothers his resting place and fellow travelers. Without quite understanding it he feels a tugging despair. The sight of a frozen body brings forth some nameless dread in him. He leaves the alley propelled by an unknown sensation. He feels lost and rubs his empty fingers but finds no relief from cold.

How far he trudges he does not know, nor does he know where he really is. Things once basic elude him, names and ideas now but a mire of muddled imagery and instinctive drives in the mind. He wonders without thinking if his state is permanent. If signpost glyphs will ever regain their meaning and thoughts their constructed order. He hopes not, fearful without knowing why. The snow picks up and soon his fleeting attention is diverted again.

Raising his head, the alleyman sees a wisp of light emanating from a warehouse near the trees. Blackened fingertips twitch in their gloves, feet shuffle along more urgently. His aimless wandering appears all at once justified, as if this light had been planned from the



beginning. Without hesitating the alleyman approaches, slipping through the tangled folds of a rusting chain link fence. There is no snow ground at the edge of the warehouse door, gray slush tapering off into a damp blacktop. His soles scrape against this dampness as he climbs the curb and approaches closer to the warehouse door which, slightly ajar, is leaking warm air into the near-gone dusk. He stops a moment and feels the warmth brush against his dying face. He smiles.

The door opens further without issue but the warehouse appears unoccupied. Crates line the walls and there is very little walkable space. He looks around a moment and sits. He will wait here awhile, perhaps the night. It is unsure if he will ever warm up.

Though he tries, the alleyman cannot sleep. The dingy snow has sloughed off his coat and shins and faded into dampness and some coldness has even faded from his flesh but despite this, he cannot sleep. Something eludes him yet.

Under blackened empty sky he emerges from the warehouse, flesh's aching somewhat abated, and begins walking the perimeter. Nothing there, no indication of what this space is or whose property he trespasses on. The alleyman stands a moment yet and looks to the void above, dead save for the pale falling of yellow-gray snow, illuminated by warehouse lights. He turns with vague dissatisfaction and makes to head inside.

A movement behind him. Electric awareness rips through him in response but it is too late already and he finds his newly-warmed body thrown into the slush again. A man stands above him, not in ragged stolen clothes like his own but in proper workman's gear, denim and wool without the trappings of slush or filth. The man is tall and wiry, face obscured. Rough gloved hands lift the alleyman up, throw him again into the slush, the curb. His hair and collar are yanked upward together, forcing his back to arch, slush dripping into cuts along the brow and jaw with his squirming. He is stuck from behind, stuck again until his vision blurs severely. Without understanding he feels his small mouth open, chipped teeth forced to scrape along the curb's concrete pores. His protest is mere yelling, noise, not words, inarticulate and animal. Lethal black boots, which have merely jabbed at his neck and torso thus far now become altogether more serious, corded nylon and patent leather and buckles raised with killing intent. Some dim awareness lets the alleyman intuit that he will fall asleep again, like he did before the first gray flurries started some time ago. Perhaps he will wake again too, but there is no time to ponder as the leaden sole smashes into the back of his skull and all at once the world goes small.



For a blissful moment it is warm. Then an itching comes, a crackling feeling along its skin as warmth rages into subdermal broiling. The thing gives a panicked gasp, a short screech of inhale, and begins to claw at itself, opening raw flesh to the air in a maneuver which only stokes the infernal heat. Its blood streams along ruined skin but will not drown the pain. It seems that nothing will. The thing writhes for an unknown time. Agony rips through the wretched body in compressing phases. There is no real respite. Seeming ages pass before it can cultivate the will to stand.

It stares with glassy eyes at the landscape, a seething waste of pallid yellow-brown sands and clustered domes of ruby membrane. The air shimmers and a strange flaking dust like dried blood flutters about. The sky groans a dull and hazy red. The thing has a sensation of being trapped in the rotting husk of some horrid pomegranate. There are no creatures out, and no sounds but the quiet howl of wind on sand. The air carries a deathly smell, sweet and rancid. This place has a name, one it does not yet know.

It begins shambling in what appears to be a valley bottom, great ridges of sand protruding on the horizon wherever it looks. Far far away are immense pillars thrust against the red sky. Direction is random, mean-

ingless. It moves but its body is evil, gaunt beyond recognition and withered with premature age. Naked in this unreal Outside it feels barely human, a feeling which sparks some faint memory of an existence long ago where things were not as they are. But this is merely a glimmer of something lost and its mind lays fallow in pain and scattered trajectories of deep but fruitless contemplation.

This plane exists in what seems a time before time and in a space altogether alien. Its footprints are obscured almost immediately by the oven winds, continuity impossible here. Wandering for miles it finds the environment just as familiar as before, whole mountains of sand shifting faster than they can be kept track of. Only the red bulbs of membrane stay constant, but they too are obscured and uncovered at a rapid pace. It is lost for an imperceptible time, needing neither food nor sleep but caught in a terrible pain nonetheless, hunger and exhaustion fading in and out like some obscure tides.

It walks on an edge of the craterous valley, having finally reached the steep upward slopes. In its path is one of the membranes, nearly spherical but obscured largely by the sands it lays embedded in. The thing approaches and places a hand against it, feeling the slight give of taught outer skin. It stains his cracked and jaundiced palms a rich red and leaves almost colorless

translucent prints on the membrane walls. The thing wipes a larger patch away and peers through the pinkish tint.

A sapien figure is suspended inside. Crucified by something insectoid, slowly pulsing, its fingering tendrils embedded along spine and around larynx. Its wings are splayed, bound in a curve against the membrane wall by almost mycelian fibers. The whole thing is vaguely fungal, shedding odd spores which dot the fluid of the membrane, networks entangling the wall to the bound figure. Their eyes are put out, twitching antennae sprouting from the sockets, curving fungal scythes twisting back toward the placental insect monstrosity. The creature spasms and slaps its palms against the membrane, tendrils and human fingers bulging outward against the shifting wall.

The thing recoils and scrambles up the slope with animal panic as the membrane deforms, splitting in a rush of fluids as the creature slides onto the sand. It looks down from the slope and sees a valley of membranes, hundreds of them nested together, all watching — all watching it now. It turns wildly and sees the creature stare. Wings beat and the creature raises itself, deformed and twitchy, neck in a hangman's sag, its human head drooping grotesquely. The creature approaches the thing with incredible speed, vomiting forth a clear jelly from its clicker-jaws. It gasps and

clicks, only inches from the thing now. Gibberish and then words:

“Hello. What is your name?”

A psychic barrier shatters. It, the thing, he – he *thinks*. Tangible thoughts: *I’m fucked, it’s over*. These words loop infinitely. Paralyzed, he feels the embrace of tendrils on his face, crawling toward his eyes. Human hands wrap around his throat as a great thorny stinger runs through his belly. Echoes of speech ravage his mind, perceptions strangled and forced into linguistic terms. Mushrooms burst from his genitals, his ruined form further decaying into a decrepit form of sex as the insect thing crawls from one host to another. He cannot scream.

The man across from him smiles as his bodily deformities lessen, receding until only the terribly lengthened neck and a few fungal brands along the flesh remain.

“Thank you. Congratulations.”

With this the man throws himself down the slope, tumbling into a mass of broken flesh and jerkily burying himself at the bottom of the mound, disappearing into the sand faster than could be believed. The sands shift with the wind and his trail of descent is blown over in seconds. He tries to react but is overwhelmed.

“In the beginning was the word I want this I want this I want this *now*.”

Speech, Outside words flow from the Outside in: wasp-body bacteriophage bestial entity births alien spawn which swelling pregnant bleeds unto – mycelial roots root through connective flesh bridge into body, body tearing different reshaping nets cross wired cross flesh – stretched larynx cords taut near snapping click into snap into a parallel with the bars caging barred brainstem – thoughts lost language cage trapping tapping thoughts into fuel into parasite food – cordyceps words septic words from an Outside firmly embodied and ready to be cast off to the world's geometry now cast in grammar trappings.

His vision blurs erratically. For an instant he sees blood pool on pavement, studded with chunks of ruined enamel. The creature invades him, he feels its tendrils probing inside him, corrupting flesh. He blinks and finds himself covered in a ruby gel, expanding outward, swelling into another membrane. He jabbers against his will, empty words rushing out until the gel fills his mouth, his lungs. He pounds against the membrane, stretching against the slippery walls to no avail. Capillaries web through the walls, small vesicle cores, organs, shifting fluidly along the ovarian structure. Sight fails him now and he feels terrible trunks rip out from his eye sockets. Pounding, stretching against the walls he howls tangled sentences into liquid silence. He sees now through insect eyes, in foreign wavelengths

and in thoughts linguistic without substance, void as his old primal intuitions. Retreats into thought are useless. The membrane is inside him too, inside his mind. He cannot be him anymore. He is human now only to the extent that the parasite binds him is the human parasite, toxoplasmotic in its frequency and subtle control of the species.

In his final free seconds he attempts to go mad, supersede the authority over him but it does not work, schizoid flights terminating at a newfound limit of speech, psychic stinger through the belly over and over. The last vestiges of him are small encapsulated sparks trapped forever in the mind of this bound creature he has become. He envies the man who infected him, craves for that same oblivion. His final sighted image is again from his human body, a horrible distortion of his hands pounding against the membrane, forever.



“Hey, he’s pulling through.”

“Christ I thought he was done for.”

“Yeah with cranial damage like that – he’s lucky.”

Light pierces him. It is blinding there. He weakly raises his arms and finds them resting on the sterile mattress of a hospital bed. There is a pressure against his lower face, the light cool feeling of a gown against



his torso. His jaws ache terribly and his throat feels swollen almost shut. He tests opening his eyes again and sees the people above him, a female doctor and some out of focus technicians. He falls back asleep with some vague relief.

It is days before he is off oxygen, days more before bandages come off and he is free to move from his bed. He finds an irresistible urge to speak and is almost joyous when he finds himself capable again.

“I really can’t thank you enough, I thought I’d freeze to death, but that guy who stomped me – I really can’t express how grateful I am to be off the streets for a while.”

It is normal. Things are good for him. He acclimates to the routine of it all and settles, his thoughts ordered by matters of paperwork and by days of the week, journal entries and letters to family long estranged, most of all by recovery progress timelines read to him by his doctors. Things make sense, and the gap between that ancient period of steady employment and waking up in the hospital seems alien to him. Sleeping on the streets, how had that happened? He can't even articulate to himself how he felt then, almost animal. It disturbs him.

This goes on for another month almost when finally the pins in his jaw are pulled out and he has a final night of bed rest. A nightmare occurs. He is being

raped, it seems like. Something is running through his torso and he experiences this wordless agony with startling clarity. He looks up from the protruding blade in his stomach, clear jelly gushing, and sees a curved red film which he pounds against desperately, but cannot get out of. He feels his throat close and jerks awake.

Discharged four hours later, he walks from the hospital in a daze. He finds himself moving without will, speaking and ordering food and filling job applications as if autonomously. In an interview, they ask what his goals are for this job. He sees the membrane wall for a second and pounds against it. *I want to get out.*

“I want to improve my communication skills, I have some leadership experience but you can always get better.”

He pounds against it but it only deforms slightly. There is a monstrous wasp running its stinger through the interviewer's ear. Her eyes erupt into fungal antennae as she grins despotically.

“We love that, bringing people together.”

He sees his bondage again, the mycelium roots tying him to the beast. The network under those shifting sands which bridges membranes, the massive dendrite branches of hive, of larvae. His thoughts are behind that clear film, and he writhes against it, constricted in his chair. Every person he sees has fungal eyes and sickly

amniotic wings. Every action he takes is one against his fundamental will and propagates his enemy.

There is no escaping now. It has him and will not let him go. It has everyone.

Years later he finds himself in a bizarre domestic life of something else's choosing and stares at his son who might be the last thing he can love and when it stares up at him with child's love and bright green eyes starting to tinge fungal white and says 'dada,' he screams and cannot stop.

# Ajar

by Aitserp

Ajar. The door slightly ajar. Oh, how Claire loved the jumping, tumbling, slowly springing of a- word a-jar. Bouncing across the bedroom in rays of the golden hour from the wraparound window and---

Mincing, creaking, blunt. Shut. The bedroom door has shut. On its own? Doors don't have accord; they seldom act alone. Claire looks to the window sill, shut. Not the wind then. Perhaps the front door? Also shut. But she's alone in the bedroom; utterly completely alone. If the front door of the single bedroom apartment had opened then...

"Hello?" She calls. Standing in the doorway between rooms. Overlooking the armchairs and flatpack-sofa: a candle, which previously suited the golden hour so sublimely, was the only thing to flicker-move. It's twilight now, candles are different at twilight. A creak. Long. Overwrought, from the kitchen? She walks across the elongated living room. The kitchen door, ajar.

The kitchen is empty. Old. Empty.

There's a crash in the bedroom. A collapse-- something fell down and collapsed and it's behind her and she will walk back into the bedroom slowly now across the length of the living room. She must rush back to the bedroom. Surely this is all in her head and the laundry was hung out to dry and she does not want the laundry on the floor. So, she must rush back to the bedroom to see what has collapsed.

Ajar, the bathroom connected to the bedroom, the door is ajar; tumbling, something inside the bathroom is tumbling. But what has collapsed? It did not collapse in the bathroom. This isn't *The Shining*, and she wishes her boyfriend hadn't talked them into watching that last night, and she wishes he was here, or that she hadn't watched it here, or that whatever was in the bathroom wasn't in the bathroom, or that the door wasn't ajar. What has collapsed? She will deal with the bathroom, but first the little sunroom attached to the bedroom, where there was a collapse. That is sensible. And this way the bathroom can settle, and the collapse can be settled, and twilight will settle. She should turn on a light, but now she is on the other side of the room looking at a potted plant that is no longer potted. A bump, then thud in the bathroom, but it is not time for the bathroom. Rather, a formerly potted plant is now growing on the ground of the sunroom/the-

breakfast-nook and it is too dark to be sure why it has fallen but...

Light. More light. To clean up the pot, the light. The light switch is on the other side of the room, next to the bathroom door, ajar. Inside the bathroom: dark.

Tumbling inside the bathroom. Tumbling? The laundry machine inside the bathroom. Tumbling. Turning. Waiting. She pushes the door. Fluorescent white light inside. Face to face with ashen, haggardly, older, mother. Not her mother. Familial. Similar. Familiar-her. It's her. Her. Herself. With a half-folded cardigan in her arms, she stares at the apparition of her younger self, once again bouncing around the ancient apartment. The useless little window above the shower -ajar.

# Not My Problem

by Snac

Snaking up the coastline, State Route 1 carried the old Camry northward. Luis picked at his sock as he sped down the fresh asphalt. Ulcers had been developing on the soles of his feet but they didn't hurt. He'd just left the same socks on for a few weeks and hoped they'd heal on their own <sup>[1]</sup>. Changing socks was a real hassle.

Although the driver's seat was too small to comfortably fit such a large man, the past few days had been spent negotiating the terms under which he could borrow it, so though he'd had to lift up his gut a bit to rest in on the wheel, Luis could only smile and thank Raul for loaning him the vehicle <sup>[2]</sup>. Eighty thousand in debt already and interest building. The freaks at Bank of America had tried to put him on a 24% APR plan but who do they think they're fooling? Down to nineteen now, Chase was a hell of a lot more reasonable. Now, his friend up north had got him an easy interview in the bay and a chance at work in Mountain View wasn't something he could turn down <sup>[3]</sup>. Zooming west first,

from Salinas, windows as open as they'd roll, he knew the cold air would keep him awake. Now northward, real scenic, real nice, the smell of fish occasionally blowing in made him want to vomit <sup>[4]</sup>.

Hassah said rent was due on the first but he'd read the lease and knew it wasn't really due until the fifth. After that, the state government <sup>[5]</sup> would probably let him stay at least a few more weeks without paying and by then it'd be no problem. She'd probably buy his sob story and even if she didn't, what was she going to do? Not his problem.

The noise of his tires on the rumble strips woke Luis back up. Only asleep for a second. 'No problem, no problem' to himself as he tugged his sock again <sup>[6]</sup>. Another car sped by on his left side, passing him. What assholes, he was going 80, do they think this is some kind of car commercial? The summer here was hot as hell, and despite the breeze the hot air still left him itching his neck. His back, where the wind couldn't reach, felt wet and sticky. Maybe before the interview he could check his trunk for a button-up. He turned on the radio, though what exactly the commercials were trying to sell was tough to hear over the wind whipping by. The distorted sounds of 'HUMBLE' might help keep him awake <sup>[7]</sup>. Christ, the sea smells like rotten fish. The plastic bottle of cola made a welcoming hiss as he cracked it open <sup>[8]</sup>. Raul told him he should switch



to diet coke but Luis knew that those artificial sweeteners weren't any good for you.

Almost all he could think about nowadays was debt. Credit interest compounding, he needed his cell-phone too, couldn't let that run out, it was an investment, and he'd gotten a good deal bundling it to his internet. Rent, obviously. Eh, but maybe he could ignore that. Plus, the letters his mom got in the mail told her that he needed to pay the minimum on his anthropology degree, though he got in-state tuition, so he knew he should be grateful <sup>[9]</sup>. Maybe he could get some deferment. Plus, he'd heard there was some program that would give you free cash for that, ten or twenty thousand. When he thought about it, and lied to himself a bit, the situation really wasn't bad at all. Even as he tried to cheer himself up, he couldn't help hating these damn Japanese cars that always made his chest feel so tight. Why couldn't those mongolitos make them for normal <sup>[10]</sup> sized people?

Lazily guiding the car to the right, the tan sedan rolled to a stop on the road's shoulder. Sitting still for a moment, popping the door open, then leaning his head out the doorway. No other cars in sight. The California sun was high in the sky, shooting its stream of heat down on that round head. The heat felt much worse without any wind rushing by him. With one arm on the head rest and one on the door frame, he heaved

himself out of the sedan with a grunt. Shuffling around the front of the car, he unzipped his fly. A sign for Año Nuevo State Park stood in front of him, advising guests not to feed wildlife <sup>[11]</sup>. The frothy stream turned the base of the wooden post a much darker brown than Luis expected. The lumber had looked almost red before, maybe from dust. He scratched at the velvet-colored skin of his neck <sup>[2]</sup>.

Before falling back into the car, the man tried futilely to move the seat any farther back. Then, right leg in, left leg in. What he wouldn't give for a quick nap. Hard to get good rest. When he laid on his back he'd choke on his tongue, wake up gasping and out of breath, but when he tried to sleep sitting up, he couldn't get full breaths of air either <sup>[12]</sup>.

Thinking about a pillow commercial he'd heard earlier, he pulled the wheel left and lurched back onto the highway. As the car rolled back into the road, a car flew past on his left. Idiot, that clown should pay attention to traffic.

Whack whack - slapping his cheeks to stay alert. Though his face had become red it didn't help his eyes feel any less heavy. The car was in cruise control at 75, feet off the pedals, windows down, music screaming. "Hear me now / I'm down on knees and praying / Though my faith is weak / Without you so please, baby, please / Give us a chance / Make amends and I will

stand up / 'til the end / A million times, a trillion more (Hey)". Crazy that guy died so young, didn't even make it to the 27 Club, gone too soon, honestly. Luis' foot bounced along to the beat as the city crawled closer to him.

His meeting was at four and it was only one o'clock. He should be a responsible driver. It would only be about an hour to the city, a quick nap wouldn't hurt. Smart move, it would give him time to relax and rest a little. Gotta be at the top of your game, no reason to show up sweaty and tired. This time he hit the turn signal as he began to pull off to the shoulder. The thought of rest put him in a good mood. He picked at his sock. Around the bend in the road, a new F150 was in the wrong lane<sup>[13]</sup>.

As the truck hit the back left corner of the Camry, Luis could only mumble curses. The airbags had stopped working years ago. Whipping around, the right side of the small car smashed into a concrete barrier. His head whipped left, then into the steering wheel, then back 'fucking bitch truck'<sup>[14]</sup>. The world was shaking and he felt hot, awake, and full of dread rather than pain. With the car at rest, he didn't feel like taking the effort to get out of the car. Let those EMT assholes carry him out, make them work for their money<sup>[15]</sup>. Raul was going to want his car back. Neither of them had insurance<sup>[16]</sup>. 'Not my problem' he hazily mum-

bled to himself. As his vision cleared, his eyes focused on the rear-view mirror. No front teeth. Who was going to pay for that shit? 'I didn't even do anything wrong, that retard was in the wrong lane'. Blood streamed down from his nose and mouth. His left hand groped for seat's 'recline' lever.

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# The Fairyland Sisters

by Nacre



It was a muggy summer afternoon at *Enchanted Forest* interactive theme park, and Mom's feet were very tired. Since they arrived that morning, she'd been dragged by the arm to every attraction by tireless little Frances, while Dad jogged behind and snapped pictures of the birthday girl. Dad had taken a business call while Mom helped the girl decipher a treasure map, following clues from an in-character employee with a fake eyepatch

and a faker accent to earn a chocolate gold doubloon. He'd taken another one while Frances explored a castle to earn candy rocks from a dwarf, and he didn't find them again until Frances had completed the mermaid realm quest too.

Now it was getting late in the afternoon, and Dad was making up for it by insisting that Mom give herself a break. The park wasn't very big, anyways, and probably just about the safest place to let a kid run about unsupervised for half an hour. So Mom did eventually let herself put her feet up on a picnic bench while Dad waited in line for pretzels and mead.

Frances stopped by just when he was returning with the food, mostly to brag about her progress. She was more than happy to speed around without a lumbering grown-up.

"You sure you don't want some real food?" Dad asked.

She shook her head.

"What quest are you on now, Frances?" Mom asked.

"The fairy quest! It's the last and hardest one of all of them but I can do it."

"Uh huh. And what do you win?"

"I get to go to the fairy realm!"

Mom chuckled, "Well, don't stay too long, I already planned dinner." Frances nodded rather seriously

and darted off again.

Dad sighed. "I wish she was this excited about anything in the real world."

Mom tensed for her own reasons, hardly hearing his comment. "It still feels kind of weird having her out of sight."

"Hey, this is a lot of progress."

"Suppose so."

He was right. It was very different from a year ago, when Mom would start to panic and faint if Frances disappeared for more than a minute or two.

"At least I have time to do my homework," she said, and cracked open a hefty children's novel.

"How's this one so far?"

Mom thumbed through the pages and scribbled on a notepad. "Questionable. But not as bad as *The Fairyland Sisters*."

Last year, when Frances returned to school, she began to act out. She'd always been sort of antisocial, but usually it took the form of shyness. Her parents were very surprised to hear that she'd been ripping out the hair of other girls and growling nonsense words at them. After weeks of stubborn silence in guidance counselor meetings, she finally confessed her motives: she was following instructions from her sister Elsie, who taught her to cast spells and speak the fairy language.



The list of culprits was narrow. Was this something she had seen online? No, Frances was not allowed to use the internet. Was it some game the other girls were playing at school? No, Frances didn't have any friends. All she'd been doing was reading *The Fairyland Sisters*, a children's fantasy novel about a misfit girl whose dead sister returns to give her fairy powers.

Mom sipped her mead and raised her eyebrows, adding a third tally next to the "dead parents" bullet in her notepad.

"Why can't she be into some other genre without so many orphans, like romance or those books about horses?"

Dad shrugged. "Those romance books probably have even worse stuff for developing little girl brains. Do you want the last bite of your pretzel?"

"Yes. Anyway... What about horse books?"

"I dunno. There's probably some animal rights issue there. Point is, absolutely any way we let her engage with the world is gonna include the bad parts in some form."

"Well, either way, she doesn't seem to want to live in the real world. I guess that's the appeal of this fantasy stuff. The bad stuff has a lot more whimsy to it. The rules are a little looser."

Dad finished his mead. "Well, it's serving her well. I still haven't seen her cry about it. It's like nothing's real-

ly set in.”

“It will. Eventually.”

When the adults tried to explain that the books weren’t real and Elsie wasn’t coming back, Frances eventually conceded with make-believe earnestness, as if she were the adult entertaining the delusions of children. She began to behave herself, but would slip up from time to time, like asking about plans for Elsie’s birthday party. A parent would coldly say, “Frances...” and she would casually recall, “Oh, yeah.”

One time, Dad yelled. He’d managed to not think about it for a while, but one day on his way home from work he saw a girl with Elsie’s same exact butterfly backpack and he honest to god thought it might, somehow, be her. The whole drive home, he felt sick that he didn’t pull over, that it could have been her right there, perfectly safe after a terrible mix-up, and now he’d never know.

When he got home and Frances ran up asking if she could borrow one of Elsie’s toys, he just yelled, “Frances! For god’s sake!” She stopped.

Mom closed the book. “It’s getting late. Can you find the fairy realm on the map?”

A minute later, they were searching through a garden, with whimsical lights flickering on as the sun got low.

“Are you sure this is it?” Mom asked.

“There wasn’t a fairy realm on the map, but this is the elven realm.”

Her face went white. “Why would she say that? Frances wouldn’t mix those up.”

Mom flagged down a teenage girl with a nose ring and prosthetic elf ears. “Excuse me miss, is this the fairy realm?”

Dad kept looking around. The conversation, increasingly frantic, faded for him as his eyes caught something in the distance. A girl with a butterfly backpack, just for a second, then she was gone.

“How the hell is this park organized? Where—” Mom drew a deep breath, “—is my daughter?”

The employee was clearly clueless and possibly stoned. “Ma’am, well—I’ll—uh—”

Dad snapped out of it. “Honey? It’s okay, let’s go talk to management, okay?”

Mom huffed with exasperation. “I can’t do this again, she *needs* to learn not to disappear like this. We need to talk to her. *You* need to sit down with her.”

“Yeah.”

“Why do you sound so spaced out? What were you staring off at?”

“What?”

“You were looking at something.”

“Oh. Nothing. I don’t remember. Just looking for her. For Frances.” He paused. “We’ll find her.”

“Why would you say it like that?”

“Like what?”

“Nevermind. Let’s hurry, before the park closes.”

And so they marched off towards the entrance, the last of the lights flickering on behind them.

## **Nuclear Man**

by Joshua Vitullo

Though I am in disbelief, I have completed my delivery, so now I'm pushing my titanium luggage cart across the gray countryside, back over the deserted highway which bisects a once-promising wheatfield, back the way I came.

Six days and five nights passed before I arrived at the drop-off terminal, but I'm certain the return trip will take far less time. The whole of my journey was a hundred-mile-long straight line, with not a single trace of life in between. I'm barely an exception, utterly exhausted by so soon having to make my way home, but at the very least I'm no longer burdened by that padlocked storage crate I'd been transporting, and if there is any mercy left in this world, I'll never have to see it again. On a handful of occasions, I'd lose minutes of progress because the container began to slide off my vehicle, forcing me to scramble over, kneel the package to re-center it, and then readjust the bungee straps as necessary. That's what I get for my fruitless, repetitive

self-reflections, paying all mind not to the road, but to the horizon which promised my destination. Each of these humiliating fiascos provided a thrilling workout, but those minutes add up.

When I received this delivery order, I requested a second cart be taped to this one so that nothing would be hanging over either edge of its steel base. Despite my mission's urgency, which my superiors took great effort in communicating to me, my proposal was rejected without explanation. Upon arriving at the packing yard, only one cart had been left by the gate, attended by a single trainee, a soft-spoken boy with no good news to impart. He'd only been tasked with keeping watch of my assignment until I arrived to steer it out of the encampment.

There weren't any spectators for my dawn departure, which in retrospect shouldn't have disappointed me as much as it did. I wasn't expected to be gone more than a few days. This wasn't a coast-to-coast trip, after all, so no ceremony or 'safe travels' remark would've been appropriate. This didn't stop my sister from commencing a prayer. I impulsively stopped her, asking her to do it in my absence, perhaps out of brotherly guilt. I'm certain she's praying again now, and knowing her it'll be twice a day since I'm far past my deadline.

No one in their right mind would have expected me to roll this slab of metal across half the state and

back in seventy-two hours or less. Management claimed there'd be a second deliveryman waiting at the midpoint between both our campgrounds. We'd lift the trunk off my cart and onto his, and I'd have done my part. So long as I kept an eye out for any living thing in sight atop the road, otherwise only obstructed by the odd abandoned vehicle, I would find him. Knowing me I'd first mistake him for an apparition, then afterward come to my senses. We'd exchange words or share a meal like true partners, a pleasurable thought. On the way, I began reciting greetings to no one, then duly considered practicing a wave of the hand with dozens of variations. If I first noticed him from a distance, it'd require a much different gesture than if I rolled up next to the guy and nearly missed him.

A tedious depression crept in once I recognized the unignorable, the possibility that this man or woman, but most likely a man, may not wish to connect with his fellow deliveryman, and may instead shrug off my gesture of goodwill and companionship. For the next day or two I'd speculate if I had made him uncomfortable somehow, perhaps having made an insincere-sounding inflection which gave him reason to put up his guard. Then I'd trudge home miserably, and perhaps each and every misery I'd ever encountered in life would revisit me in an eyes-closed montage, as it tends to happen in my rock bottom moments.

Rather than any of those things, something more unexpected and possibly even more sad took place, which was that no one met me at all. I waited patiently for my partner on an empty truck bed, a little over fifty miles into my route, a number I'd tallied using the recurring signs adjacent to the highway. I kept my eyes fixated on the horizon and even after much time had passed I decided I'd not begrudge my partner his lateness. I'd wish him well on his trek home, and maybe even offer him a slice of bread to keep up his strength, should he not be well-stocked already. But no, I am not a delusional man, and in due time it became clear that my partner would not be here, there, or anywhere along the highway to meet with me. This delivery and exchange of hands had been planned weeks in advance by my superiors, yet there I was, unclamping the industrial wheel lock, a man with a sense of duty so deeply ingrained that he'd never dream of turning his back to an abandoned cart. I guess that was me.

Optimistic, I still kept an eye out, hoping there'd be someone out there I was sharing the road with after all. It was possible he had overslept on his third night and had stowed himself away on the back of a truck, above ground to avoid the wild dogs as has become my routine on other lengthy deliveries. I checked every looted vehicle abandoned on the road. Evidently, he never heard me calling out to him either, but as time went on



the idea he was somewhere and just had to be found seemed more unlikely. The exchange was scheduled for roughly noon, when the sun would've been beaming down upon us, dowsing our brows with sweat, not discriminating based on who bore greater weight on their cart at the time. I gave my partner more than four hours to manifest, but no signs of life sprouted from any side of me, even from dogs or birds. I pushed on.

At my destination, at first there were no friendly faces, but instead a pair of large men in silver, reflective suits. I took them for astronauts, which I never mentioned aloud. They received the package, but none of my questions. I offered to assist them in lifting the luggage to the gate, but the two of them must've decided ignoring me was sufficient as a 'no'. It was a two-person job anyways, and I should've been resting. Just as I found an outdoor chair to lie my back against, an elderly man acknowledged me wordlessly, then slid a can of mushroom soup down a bannister and into my unwashed hands. The can's contents were cold, but the gesture wasn't.

Waking up in the middle of the night, I discovered my journey was so far only halfway realized. Even though I knew I wasn't in good health, I was desperate to lay in my own bed again. I knew they wouldn't have any proper lodgings to spare at this quarantined campground, so I didn't try my luck.

The road is still nothing but a straight line, the same crumbling one I'd already passed for nearly a week's time. I'll find my home on the other side, where my sister will be waiting. I think her heart deserves a break from pleading with God, or perhaps mother Mary if his shadow seems too imposing nowadays. If she still feels she must do this, then I cannot stop her. Every hundred feet I limp across this concrete I feel I only need it more, and I might find it even more useful to rather have ten of her praying at once.

It's hard to think of anyone but myself right now. For the mission I had only stocked four days of rations, mostly bread and canned fruit, and it'd be yet another chronic headache to report that I'm just about out of everything. Despite this fact, I have never lived a day where I was less hungry than I am now. If I'd been tossed an extra soup can or two for the remainder I have to travel, surely I'd only have taken it out of courtesy. And no doubt I'd puke up that chunky white goop just as I did earlier this morning, somewhere on the neverending line of asphalt and concrete where birds and dogs could attempt to make some use of it.

It's no use making wishes, since I've not been a child in many years, but I'd much prefer to be driving that unwieldy weight I left behind, all the way back home on this cart instead of carrying this excruciating pain in my stomach which despite its emptiness feels

heavy enough to threaten to sink below my groin. There was a half hour of this experience where I blamed the old man for his cold mushrooms. I thought possibly the only reason he'd offered them to me was because they were perfectly spoiled and ready for a toss into the garbage, but I got off it. I've spent too much of my life blaming others for my troubles. It's easy to get a sense that the more troubles you have, the more finger-pointing you should be doing, but I've no subject around me to harass from any angle. What should I do, yell at this crack in the pavement? Even in my pathetic state, I don't plan on letting it capture my right front wheel, so I make a statement out of a sharp turn.

I have only removed one of my problems in doing so. As I turn, all of my organs feel as if they had shifted out of place, disorienting me to the point where I lose my balance multiple times. The only thing dulling the ache and sharp pangs in my lungs and stomach so far is my body's own tiredness. It slowly and mercifully erodes my senses. My thoughts simplify, yet still it has not brought me peace.

Even when ignoring the sensation itself, I just ponder its cause, and become far more belligerent. I urge to crush my own skull with the wheel of my cart, or strangle my neck between its handlebars. No, I have not become feral with rage. I'd never actually put such juvenile acts of violence into practice. I'm releasing each

of these ideas now, like steam rising up through my scalp. However, I cannot stop myself from wandering down this cruel psychological pipeline.

I was told as a young boy that a man of good sense should never needlessly presume the worst, especially in people. Regardless, I don't believe a man can make this journey, end up with this harrowing result and not question the curiousness of my bad fortune. I'm not a moron. It occurred to me already that I may have been sent to transport that luggage by my superiors with full awareness that nobody would be waiting for me at the waypoint. It already felt as if I were being tested, and now I'm certain they had trusted me to be a good little delivery boy and selflessly finish a task I may have not accepted otherwise.

This would also mean that no one had ever intended to share my burden. My partner seems to be none but my own creation. He couldn't have taken the bread I'd left uneaten for him, and the forgiveness I was prepared to offer for his crucial tardiness now hangs on a thin, colorless wind. I'd perused bitter, insensitive thoughts about his character, but thankfully stopped myself in consideration that he may have gotten lost in a corn maze, slaughtered by a brown bear, or perhaps became debilitatingly ill as well.

What if I was sent to die? Surely not. The contents of that box must have been significant. It's grueling

work to push this cart when it's full, but I wasn't asked to build a pyramid. It's simple enough work, even if it's a marathon of sorts.

How might others react when I return home in this sorry state? Perhaps my superiors hoped I would collapse and decompose far enough out from our base of operations that whichever wild animals remained in the cold, rigid country would clear my remains in the following days. Then nobody would ever happen upon the gruesome scene. I'd be successfully erased, at best preserved as the perfect memory of who I was before I took my death march of two hundred miles to which it seemed I would be coming up short.

Yet another unsettling thought emerges, but I think it may be the most persuasive of all. I'm convinced the package I dragged for dozens of miles upstate is the key to my undoing. It may seem far too late for me to contemplate this, but the strangeness of it all was not lost on me. Management informed me that its contents were a confidential matter. Even if they chose to invent a lie to insult my intelligence, the container was sealed with three different types of padlocks, so I had no method of opening it and confirming or denying their claims. At the destination point I was kept away from even entering the gate, so I wouldn't have been able to see the astronauts break it open.

I should clarify an earlier thought further. When I

say the contents of my package were possibly my undoing, I don't refer to the mystery of what lay inside, as if the secrecy of what could be within was driving me mad. Instead, my actual physical condition is worsening, not my brain. And I know it's contributed to by more than just dehydration, malnutrition and fatigue. My skin blotches, my hands seize up, my head aches tremendously, not with a pulsating feeling but rather a continuous, unpredictable meddling, as if someone were sifting through the surface of my brain, shaving off portions with their dirty fingernails. By now I am frequently coughing, heaving and yelling at no one, releasing my agony in each direction. I believe encased in the sealed container was some sort of radioactive substance. Some of its contents leaked, and since I had no partner to share this burden with, I was the only person available to receive the deadly consequences of this mistake.

So why am I putting much thought into returning to the mail barracks at all, then? Why indulge this curiosity at my own expense? Why allow innocent bystanders to look upon me, assuming I make it to them in the first place? Why not wait the agony out and sit under the stars, rather than toil in it for my final days? After all, I'd only be doing what my superiors want me to do: suffer in greater and greater amounts. Yes, if I'm being honest, I'm starting to think, or know

this was their doing. If this was someone's intent to poison me with radiation, then it has become quite the success. If my partner was a forged concept by those who briefed me before setting out, then they could not have been more thorough, lest they send me naked. Six days and five nights of continuous exposure. Brilliant.

The man I am now is not who my sister is begging God to send home anyway. She would have rejoiced to see me in one piece, with my full strength intact, not halfway dissolved into the atmosphere like it were a half-fulfilled wish curling a finger on the metaphorical monkey's paw.

And then of course there's the possibility I could endanger someone else. If I summoned the strength and returned home, I'd only spread my condition to other bodies around me. My neighbors would fall ill and die, or maybe this sort of thing doesn't work like that. Maybe radiation isn't contagious like a virus, but I reckon a healthy bout of paranoia could still make the rounds.

Would anyone even wish to see me? Is there anything anyone could do to help me? Is such a hope worth even considering? If not, then how should I respond? I guess rapid deterioration and perishing on the homestretch is par for the course here. One last irony. Or maybe I could last enough days to solve this murder of myself. Would I have enough time? Surely I have no

method of obtaining justice, and the best I could muster up would be causing chaos. Plus in my final moments I'd just be more demoralized, but it occurs to me also that this may have all truly just been an accident, and the container leaking may have been in spite of all my coworkers' efforts, rather than because of them. In that case, all of this will have been cruel on them as well.

Now my grip is losing strength. On reality too, yes, but mostly on these handles. I can barely push this cart, even while empty. I thought perhaps I could leave it somewhere on the road, then after recovering in town I could return to locate it and bring it home with me. Unfortunately at the moment, it seems to be the only thing holding me up. I'm crossing my arms atop the handles and my eyes are closed, often for several minutes at a time. The pain sears through me, my skin rots itself away underneath my jacket. I don't dare lay an eye on any of the burning spots for fear the sight of them would make me give in.

Eventually it is done. I collapse on the road, shoving the cart forward one last time with the force of my fall. I manage to catch myself with arms and elbows, but it still hurts enough to not feel worth doing so in the moment. I've lost control of my legs, but not all feeling yet. I helplessly attempt to drag the right one up so I can sit on my knee, but it doesn't seem to be coop-



erating. I stare ahead as my cart rolls fifteen, twenty feet away. There's a fragment of poetic richness in the sight of the railroad tracks cutting through before me, creating a makeshift crossroads for me to strangle for breath upon.

I lie silently, trying to focus on anything but my own disintegration, which continues its dreadful performance on me in spite of this. I cannot shake my conscience of the flurry of questions which enter my purview, one after another. Will I be searched for? If so, will the cause of my death always be a mystery? Did I spend the remainder of my life fulfilling a noble goal? What would the radioactive material even be used for in a dead world such as this? To what degree was the success of my mission pivotal to anything?

I remain under the darkening sky for hours, at times looking up but lacking the strength or sense of purpose to push my way back over to the unmanned cart. Perhaps it will never be retrieved, by me or any of my coworkers. More importantly, I know my body will never be. I sense that now. It is one of the only things I can sense. I stare at cracks in black pavement which form small rivers of stale rainwater. My nose picks up a dull scent from clumps of wheatgrass. I taste the vomit residue around my teeth. I feel my body breaking down, with each sector of it being decommissioned as it becomes entirely inoperable and useless to what is

quickly becoming a corpse.

I hear something on wheels. I've no interest in taking a mirage seriously, and just wish to await my end in peace. But the sound persists for minutes, only getting louder and louder as seconds pass. The temptation finally hits a boil, and I use my remaining strength to turn my head over to something unexpected, a group of strange people, like four or five, riding atop the railroad on a rickety chariot. The design is old-fashioned and the wood is stained with mildew, but the faces of the people riding on the cart appear kind, including that of the woman who walks beside the horses. She shouts something in my direction, but I can't hear her words. The horses and wagon eventually stop, and a few males leave it, following the woman over to me. They all keep their distance. I think by now they've realized I'm still alive, but they do not spring into action to apply first aid of any kind. This is a good thing, since even without being able to observe myself from their angle, I know I've only moments left.

Somehow I no longer feel any resentment or fear. I wish to speak to them, to lift myself to my feet to embrace them all at once, but I know I have no strength left to muster up. I get one last look at the faces of my companions. I didn't realize people looked like that. Their concern feels genuine. They are witnessing my final moments. I cannot think of anything to say to

them, so I do not speak. They're all so very kind, and do not leave me alone. I close my eyes and let them make of me what they will.

## **Unbound**

by David Herod

Pity me, the poor reader, who has been left to wander and wonder lost in a dream without end—for the waking dream may only be put to an end in one way—and in this dream I read a book without end, so how could it end? It dwells in me still, that mess of yellowed pages unbound from a glue which lingers like warm ice down the gutter of its inner spine. Folded corners, a cold draft flutters its loose sheets to the floor, yet its shadow looms as a headman's sword over me.

I found this book, the book which owns my mind, in the unlikeliest of places. Not in a bookstore, antique shop, or the dusted storage of some obscure collector—for such places have wardens to mind their gates. The book of which I speak came upon me quite by accident at an estate sale. That day we had shuffled, myself and many strangers, through a dead man's home (a recluse and hoarder by all appearances), and assessed each of his dear trinkets for their fair market value. Choking dust for air, the dim glow of a window pane taped over

with newspapers darkened by years of filth and sun-stain. I blinked at what would become my singular obsession; it sat atop a guéridon table within arm's reach of a mold creased recliner. The gilded script on its face simply read: A Treatise on Jean Bouchard.

The contents of the book are irrelevant, an academic distinction for your purposes, but suffice to say it was autobiographical in nature and handwritten by the titular Jean Bouchard, an aparatchek of the colonial authority of Niger in his era who, in a self inflicted exile of sorts, resorted first to living amongst the natives in their urban warrens until he was forced to flee on account of a warrant from his former employer for the bribes he had been accepting to maintain his reputation as a high-stakes parlor cards player. He fled deep into the African bush and pledged himself to a blood cult of self professed shape-shifters, an affiliation of outcasts and half-wild men; the cult is known by modern records as 'The Human Baboon Society' but never did those words pass M. Bouchard's pen. His writings were one of a kind, exceedingly old, out of date—or so some would say. But some ideas are called that, out of date, without becoming incorrect if you understand my meaning.

An amateur historian myself, I was scarcely able to still my quivering fingers long enough to press a knot of small bills into the consignment official's hands. That

night I withdrew to my divan, an island of incandescent light amid stale darkness, and read page after page of the treatise. My palms sweat through age soured paper as the story grew in its derangement and I experienced in livid detail the author's fall to alcoholism, depression, and unspeakable depravities of flesh and soul—sanity slipping as he violated sexual and cannibalistic mores in pages of flourishing prose, crooked personal notes made in margins overgrown to dominate entire pages, and hastily drawn diagrams of what appeared to be interlocking lunar, human, and baboon-man life cycles.

But then, with dry lips, I turned the page to my death. First I felt only curiosity as mid-narrative the turned page showed itself to be blank, and then the pages continued on unmarked for the remaining twenty pages—each one bare vellum yellow. I rolled them over, again and again, in a slow dawning realization. I read the book again from the start—feverish, for surely the sun must have risen by then although I have no memory of it—but again the book ended in nothing.

No, I realized the truth. The pages were not just blank, they were unwritten, unplanned, incomplete, and forgotten by an uncaring author who thought nothing for all the poor fools who would read the damned thing. A fool like me, like you perhaps. I must have screamed, for my mind swam so furiously that my

vision blurred, and I truly remember nothing until I awoke on the floor the following evening.

A stronger man would have thrown the hateful book into a fire that very moment. And yet M. Bouchard's world lived in me. I had bitten deep enough to cut my lips on the barbs of a stolen June plum's seed, seen bodies drawn burning in sunlight over the blood-letting stone, and tasted manflesh raw and wet down the sides of my lips before my brothers and I threw our knees high at wild midnight fire dances.

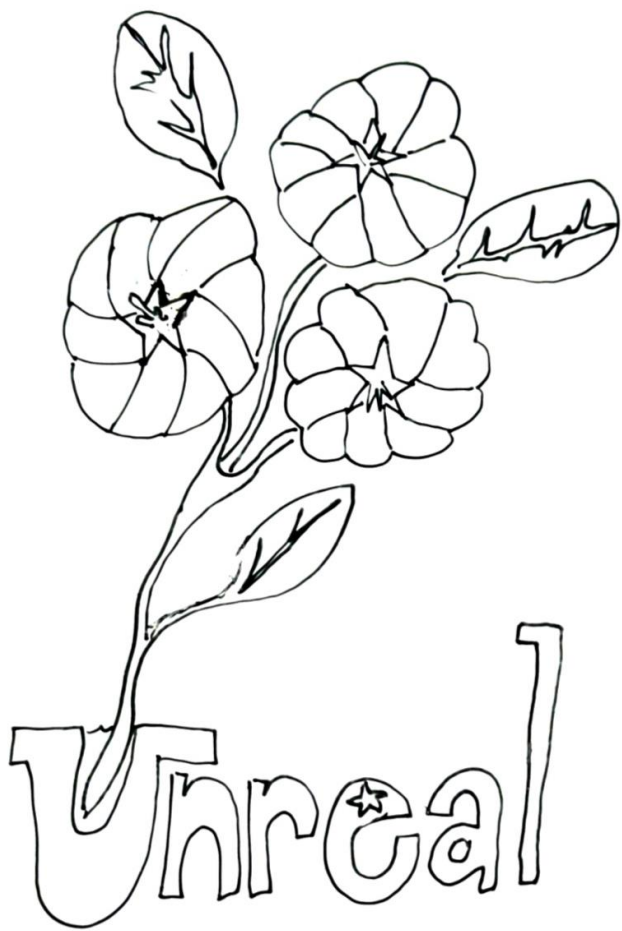
All this and more I had lived, and I languished in it all—in his cruelty towards me. Unfinished, unresolved, unkind to an audience who indulged his selfish whims, acted as willing pupils to his every word until at the promise of finality we were abandoned! I will not lead another living soul astray to this haunting absence of finality.

And so I beg you, forgive me for burdening you with this book's existence, and when the end does take me do not steal the treatise off my threadbare divan. Instead take my nail raked walls as a warning and let the book moulder with my remains in obscurity. For I cannot stop reading it—it occupies my unsatiated mind even now; my only solace is in returning to that dark journey each night to put the inevitable hollow conclusion from my mind for a time.

If you do read it I am no longer accountable, for

you know you risk becoming lost in the dream as I have, a man wasting away as if chained in the depths of some medieval dungeon, worn ragged by his own company without relief. Let those who love life avoid my miserable company, my fate, and read only that which is complete in its entirety.







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