



GOOHEY

magazine

self-absorbed and deeply meaningless

#01

Spring Issue 2023

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GOOEY is published annually by a growing body of authors, editors and visionaries. The editorial team for this issue, fondly referred to as “The Overlords” are Benjamin Banerd, Cynthia deConinckSmith, Whitley Dunn, Kim Hunter, Gabrielle Josefssen, Henry Osborne, Francesca Pacchiano, Sophia Wasylinko, Megan Zolorychi, all under the watchfull eye of Susan Juby.

Volume 1

Mother

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We are grateful to the Snuneymuxw people for allowing us to live, learn, and make this magazine on their unceded territory. We would also like to thank the Quw’utsun and Tla’amin peoples on who’s traditional lands Vancouver Island University has campuses, and where some of us have studied and lived.

GOOEY magazine is an online publication and can be viewed globally but we want to reflect on where these stories come from. Many of the contributors are students at VIU and have written these stories first for classes held there. Our stories, whether consciously or not, are shaped by where we live and we are privileged to be here.



UH-OH by Kate Aplan

Making UH-OH was really a cathartic experience. I used its making as a sort of break from day to day life. When school got to be too much, making it was like taking a step back, letting my brain spill for a while, only increasing the weirdness of the whole piece.

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from the desk of the Overlord

You're starved for fun. I can see it in your weary little eyes. You're groveling in a poorly lit corner, mascara running down your cheeks, over someone's latest sad attempt at pretending to be Edgar Allen Poe. Dark and ultra-meaningful art has you in an anaconda chokehold, and by gosh, it's not going to let go until it crushes your ribs, gapes its jaw, and swallows you like a Costco hotdog.

You've had sad and pretentious stories rammed down your throat for years now and there's no end in sight. You have no idea what any of it means. You're left asking one question over and over again: was that really Casey Affleck under the bedsheet the whole time?

Dark stories, dark art, it's all important, but seriously, maybe there's room for something else? Being sad is cool. But this is GOOEY, and GOOEY has no time for that. GOOEY's the strange, barbaric voice screaming through the night. It's the calloused hand that slaps you across the mouth when you complain too much. It's the cherry lips that kiss you passionately so that you'll stop crying because you look kind of ugly when you cry. GOOEY's made for eutherian mammals and by golly, that's you.

So, it's time to dry your bitch tears, pull up your jeggings, and read this issue of GOOEY. You'll find stories to electrify your soul, interviews to break your heart, and art to melt your brain.

GOOEY is your mother, and you are its fetus. Sink into GOOEY's placental love. Float in its amniotic fluids. Hook into its umbilical cord and let it pump self-absorbed and barbaric fun into your belly button. Come on. Don't be a nerd. Just do it. You'll finally be one of the cool kids.

With warm and rageful love,

GOOEY

The Artists of GOOEY

Here at GOOEY, we like art. Unfortunately, we are very poor. Unfortunately, art can be very expensive. Thus, we at GOOEY must be at least somewhat resourceful when acquiring art. For the Spring 2023 issue, we cut costs by using stock images for the thumbnails of our stories, interviews, and non-fictions. These were collected through the shifty means of using multiple email addresses to subscribe to multiple free trials at multiple stock art selling websites (and then deleting those accounts after we ran out of free stock downloads). This incredibly cheap method of gathering art (in terms of money, but definitely NOT time), allowed us to use more of our budget to throw at hard-working and talented artists.

As you can see, we were able to acquire the gorgeous, and somewhat disturbing piece "UH-OH," created by Kate Apland, which we've used as the face of the inaugural GOOEY issue. With our leftover change, we were able to huck a few loonies (but mostly quarters and nickels) at Evan Shumka for a bunch of doodles he sketched while he was supposed to be learning how to write poetry. I'm almost certain he'll write something about these random scribbles being, in their relation to his poetry class, poetry themselves. Don't buy it folks. He was just procrastinating. And you know what? WE PAID HIM REAL MONEY FOR IT. I personally spent about 25 hours combing through stock photos so that we could afford to pay Evan for his procrastination doodles. The moral of the story? Become an artist. Artists are clearly swimming in cash, stumbling into money for random drawings they make during poetry classes. Anyways, GOOEY loves art and aspiring artists, yada-yada, even if they made it when they should have been paying attention to their professor.

The Illustrious Existence of a Subway Employee

Henry Osborne

Love, Hoagies, and Danny DeVito

You have a date with your childhood crush, Sandie. It's next Saturday, at the Rusty Truck. You're stoked. So stoked, in fact, that you don't even notice a little Danny DeVito scurry out from under the Subway bain. It charges while you're lathering marinara sauce on a meatball sub, bites your ankle, and scurries away. The bite hurts like a bitch. You yelp.

Fucking balls, you mutter in front of a customer and her daughter. The mother looks terribly offended. You apologize, but she just huffs and asks to speak to your manager. After their meeting, Scott, your manager, scolds you in front of a bunch of customers. It's the lunch rush, the booths are full, the line wraps from the till all the way outside, and everyone looks so embarrassed for you.

Later, when Scott is done bitching you out, you go to the employee bathroom and inspect the bite. It's ragged, bloody, swollen, and weeping puss that soaks into your sock. You swing your leg up on the sink, wash the bite off, and wrap some paper towel around it so you don't bleed into your shoe. The worst part is that you haven't had a Danny DeVito booster shot since grade seven. Who knows what diseases a Danny DeVito might have. Rabies. Gingivitis. It's best to be safe. Besides, you don't want to be sick on Saturday.

You catch the bus to the clinic after work and ask the nice lady at the front desk if any Danny DeVito shots are left. You show her your ankle and she winces.

That looks terrible, she says. Unfortunately, they're fresh out of Danny DeVito shots. And don't bother looking anywhere else for one. There's a worldwide shortage of shots, don't you know? Danny DeVito infestations bloom in the summer, during their mating season. Also, the shots have become popular among the dieting crowd since weight loss is a common side effect.

Yes. You've heard. You watch the news.

On your way out of the clinic, you see Sandie strolling by. You duck into an alleyway, hide your face with your jacket, and wait for her to pass. You're so quiet. You don't even breathe. There's nothing less sexy and ickier than a guy infested with rabies or gingivitis. Sandie passes you by. Her brown locks bounce on her shoulders and her sun dress flutters in the breeze. She looks especially cute and you're so relieved she doesn't see you. You exhale. You're feeling a little hot and your ankle's sore. Is it gingivitis? Maybe, but you're probably just being paranoid. You catch the next bus home.

By the time you get back to your apartment you've got full-on chills, sweats, and aches. It feels like the worst growing pains ever. You curl up on the blow-up mattress in your living room and smoke some pot from an apple bong to take the edge off your aches. It's probably the gingivitis setting in. You wrap yourself in your sleeping bag and watch cartoons for a bit.

This wasn't how life was supposed to go, working at Subway into your mid-twenties, sleeping on the floor of a dingy one-bedroom apartment, smoking shake out of an apple, and fighting off a Danny DeVito infection. What's next, scabies? All this makes landing a date with Sandie even more extraordinary. Why would someone like her want to be with a loser like you? You fall asleep with *ThunderCats* playing in the background.

Tuesday morning.

Your vision's super blurry, your joints are a little achy, and you have an insatiable hunger for hoagies, but at least you don't feel sick anymore. You reach for the apple bong you left beside your bed for a little wake n' bake, but it's not there. Instead, you find a pair of glasses. You put them on and everything looks clear again.

Weird, you've never worn glasses before.



You get up, shuffle to the mini fridge, and dig out some of your leftover, eternally wet Subway ham and a half jar of pickles, and devour it all. When you're done, you go to the bathroom and take a leak.

While washing your hands, you catch a glimpse of your reflection in the mirror. You scream. You've shrunk a full foot, have a cul-de-sac haircut, and have gained nearly fifty pounds. You've transformed into a Danny DeVito. *This is so embarrassing.* You've heard of adverse side effects associated with Danny DeVito bites before, but nothing this extreme. There's no way you can show up to your date with Sandie like this. But you can't reschedule either because she's driving back to Oregon for the fall semester on Monday.

You spend the rest of the day in your bachelor pad, googling things like: "turned into Danny DeVito, why?" and, "what to do if you're a Danny DeVito?" But all you find are news articles about the rash of Danny DeVito infestations across North Dakota and Wyoming, and gossip pieces about Danny DeVito's newest movie that he's co-starring in with Joaquin Phoenix and Anna Kendrick.

Wednesday afternoon.

You bus to the clinic and ask for a cure for your Danny DeVitiness. The intake nurse recognizes you and squeals. Then she blushes.

I'm sorry, she says. We don't see many celebrities come through here.

It's okay you say.

She turns to her computer, clacks something on her keyboard, then asks for your name, address, date of birth, and the reason for your visit.

You give her your information. As she clacks it into her computer, you ask if she's a fan. She looks up from her screen, smiles, then *gushes* to you about how you're her favourite character actor, how your role in *Matilda* saved her life, and that she thought you were simply delightful in *Batman Returns*.

Thank you, you say. You know, that monkey bit me right on the penis during filming for *Batman*. You pause. What the fuck? Was that your memory? Or was it a Danny DeVito memory? Slightly more panicked than before, you describe your condition to her and ask for help.

She nods her head to the waiting room. You glance at it over your shoulder. It's a sad white room with clumps of confused looking old people, a whimpering girl with grass stains on her soccer uniform and a ragged scrape on her knee, and a 40-something landscaper with a bloody wad of newspaper wrapped around his left hand and a sandwich bag containing what looks like a severed pinky. You shudder, then turn back to the nurse. She says she'll get you in the queue, but you'll have to sit in the waiting room with everyone else. Before you leave to sit, she asks for your autograph.

Sure thing, you say. You pull a Subway napkin out of your back pocket and scribble a signature you've never seen before on it. You push it towards her, and she's ecstatic. You head to the waiting room, and

she shouts a joke about Nurse Rachet from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. You feign laughter. *If you had a nickel...*

It's almost three hours before a nurse calls your name and shows you to a room. You sit down on the visitor's chair beside the hospital bed. It's another thirty minutes before the doctor arrives out of breath, clipboard tucked under her armpit. She closes the door behind her, sits in a Caster chair, then wheels over to you as she flips through the papers on her clipboard.

Hello, Mister DeVito.

Hi.

Your chart says that you woke up like this.

Yes, after a DeVito bite.

She nods and scribbles something on your chart. And you would like to not be like this, she says.

That's correct.

Well, she says, unfortunately, there's no cure for ADT.

ADT?

Acute DeVitosis transformation. Or just DeVitosis. It's an infection caused by the bacteria present in a rabid DeVito's saliva. Luckily, this infection isn't as uncommon as you'd think. It should resolve itself within four to eight weeks.

Four to eight weeks?! But you have a date on Saturday.

The doctor smirks. With whom, she asks, Rhea Perlman? She chuckles and nudges your shoulder.

You're serious, you say.

She clears her throat and straightens her back. Yes, well, unfortunately there's nothing to be done. Instead, you should take advantage of your symptoms. This is a great opportunity to enjoy life and do things you wouldn't normally do. Take some time off work, drink martinis, make a movie. Hell, you could even do some good and visit sick kids at a children's hospital.

But you can't afford to take time off work, and while martinis sound pretty nice, sick kids make you depressed. You'll have to find a cure before Saturday, perhaps through alternative medicine.

You're halfway through the Thursday evening shift at Subway when Scott calls you into his office. It's a cramped maintenance closet with a desk covered in loose papers and an old computer. It smells like BO and meatball subs.

He tells you straight up that he's firing you. When you ask why, he cites your poor effort level and declining quality of work. On top of that, your inability to reach the olives and banana peppers at the back of the bain makes the sandwich construction process too lengthy. Plus, he knows you've been sneaking slices of ham and roast beef, which is theft. The time you spend taking selfies and signing autographs for customers constitutes as wage theft. These are just some of your unsavoury behaviours that distract from Subway's mission statement to promote health, well-being, and mindful food choices.

You can tell Scott's not being fully honest with you. This is because you're Danny DeVito, isn't it? This is because he hated your performance in *Twins*. If that's the case, this dismissal probably violates a thousand labour laws. He's dismissing you because of an *illness*. An illness you contracted at work!

No, of course not, he replies. This has nothing to do with you being Danny DeVito. If anything, that helps your position here.

You want to grab him by his big stupid ears and scream in his face, but you'd probably be arrested. Instead, you tell him that the Subway mission statement is a lie.

Subway is terrible for health and well-being, you say. The bread is essentially cake, and the ham is somehow eternally wet. The turkey smells like ass, and you, Scott, are simply terrible!

Scott bitchslaps you across the mouth and tells you to be silent, to not take Subway's name in vain.

You want to hit him back, but you just glare at him. He's nothing compared to you. How many movies has he been in? Zero. You've personally been in at least 67 films and have a shitload of awards to show for it. You have a Golden Globe *and* a primetime Emmy from *Taxi* on your nightstand. What does Scott have on his nightstand? Probably a photo of him shaking Josh, the regional manager of Subway's hand, and a tub of Vaseline. He's a piece of beef jerky shoved into a Subway polo. You could call your agent and within thirty minutes five tall, muscular men would descend upon Subway in an Apache helicopter, kick in the door, and headbutt Scott into a fine paste. But you won't do that because you're not that kind of guy, even though Scott's the worst.

You'll be hearing from my lawyer, you say as you storm out of his office and slam the door. It's a hollow threat. You have no lawyer and Scott knows you have no lawyer, but the principle of the whole thing feels good anyways. Besides, your agent could get you a lawyer if you really wanted one, but you don't feel like it right now.

On your way out, you steal the entire bin of sliced roast beef cold cuts. You stuff the sweet slices of meat in your mouth as you stomp down to the bus stop and wait for the route 69 bus.

Friday morning.

You're not sure why you're in this strange bachelor pad with camping chairs instead of a couch. Why are you wrapped up in a sleeping bag on a blow-up bed, smoking pot from an apple core? Shouldn't you be in your mansion in Hollywood? Where's Rhea? Where's your family? Shouldn't you be filming today? Where are Joaquin and Anna? What's Joaquin up to?

You take another toke from the apple and have a mini coughing fit. Then your phone buzzes. You check it and see that someone named Sandie has texted you, saying that she's looking forward to your date. There's a smiley face emoji beside it.

Thick, hazy memories come floating back. Yes, Sandie. You were going on a date with her, weren't you? Yes. You used to like her quite a bit, and you still do. It's all a little too confusing at first, stirred up in a weird stew of Hollywood, cold cuts, and Joaquin Phoenix, but it comes back to you slowly.

You aren't Danny DeVito. You're Well, you're not sure who you are, but this is where you live. This is the apple you smoke pot with, this is the single-room apartment you sleep in, and this is the TV you watch *ThunderCats* reruns on. You're a loser, and you're going on a date with Sandie tomorrow at 6:30 pm at the Rusty Truck.

You try typing out a message to Sandie, but your fingers are stubbier than you're used to, so you keep deleting and retyping the words you fuck up.

Looking forward to seeing you too, you respond. You send a smiley face afterwards. You think about telling her you've been a little under the weather and that you'll have to reschedule, but before you can she replies that *it'll be a fun night*, this time with a winky face and a peach emoji beside it.

Oh fuck. Shit's getting real. You delete your unsent message and type out a new one, saying *yes, it will be fun*, then panic send a bunch of eggplant emojis.

She responds a few moments later with a laughing face and several more peaches. This time with the little water droplets beside them.

You smile. Then you go into the alarms app on your phone and set up one to go off every hour for the next 24 hours.

You aren't Danny DeVito, your alarm says. Date with Sandie (totally hot) at the Rusty Truck. 6:30 pm.

Saturday evening.

You arrive at the Rusty Truck at 6:25 pm and your phone reminds you who you are and why you're here. Each message feels stranger than the last, like it's coming from some far away, glistening dream, but they reassure you that you're in the right place.

The maître d' shows you to your table, a zebra print banquette by the front window. You open a tab that, you assure your waitress, your agent will pay, then you order a martini to settle your nerves. Who knows, maybe Sandie won't care that you're Danny DeVito. You're funny, famous, and rich. Fame sucks sometimes, but maybe Sandie likes being heckled for autographs?

Waiting feels like forever. Your waitress brings your drink and you down the whole thing in two minutes.

Finally, 6:30 rolls around.

At 6:45 the chair across from you is still empty.

By 7:00 your heart aches so much that if you weren't three martinis deep, you'd almost be in tears.

You want to text Sandie to ask where she is, but you don't have the heart. You drink until nighttime. When the kitchen closes down, you migrate to the bar. The bartender asks for an autograph, so you scribble a little note on a Subway napkin, toss it to him, and order a Cosmo.

It's past 8:30 when Rhea Perlman pulls a barstool up beside you.

You can't stop staring at her, this short, frizzy-haired goddess.

So, you look different, Rhea Perlman says to you.

Pardon me?

She inches her barstool closer to you. Relax, she says, it's me.

It takes you a moment, and then you realize it's Sandie. Sandie's Rhea Perlman now. You want to ask her what happened, but you know exactly what happened, it's so obvious. So, you just tell her you're glad to see her and don't say anything about her being Rhea Perlman.

Likewise, she says. She's sorry for being late. She was too nervous after she transformed, and honestly, she was planning on blowing your date off, but she felt like she had to if you were still here.

You two sit together, drink Cosmos, and talk. It's so easy. It's like you're kids again. You talk until the lights shut off and the bartender tells you it's time to leave.

So, she asks as she pulls on her coat and gets up from the bar, what should we do about this? She motions between you and her.

You look at her. She's wearing this silk, iridescent purple and green cocktail dress and she's so fucking glamorous, simply fucking glowing. You realize that you're meant to be together. It's written in the laws of the universe, the laws of space and time. You are Danny DeVito, and she is Rhea Perlman, and you are destined for each other. There's no one in the whole universe you'd rather be with.

You tell her you have an idea and reach out your hand. She takes it and you stumble out of the Rusty Truck together down to the bus stop. In the hazy summer evening, you hold hands and make out while you wait for the route 69 bus to take you back to your apartment.

The Bracelet

Maria Elsser

Terrible people do terrible things to terrible people.

Gerald glanced over his shoulder and gazed down the forest slope at Janet. Her face was bright red like a boiled lobster shell. Sweat beaded along her brow and clung to the yellowed curls that were frizzing out of her loose bun. Gerald was too far away to hear her, but he could sense Janet puffing, wheezing, grunting. They were halfway up the mountain, Gerald carefully stepping over the exposed twisted knuckles of roots, feeling for soft or slippery parts in the dampened earth. It had rained for two weeks straight, but today it was sunny. Gerald had proclaimed that on the next sunny day, they would go climb Mount Benson.

Janet let out a high-pitched squeal.

“Gerald, wait for me! You promised you would wait for me.”

She wasn't like this when they fell in love. She was young and lithe and bubbling with energy. Twenty-three years younger than he, Janet was an adventurous little thing in her early twenties, tanned from spending her college fund on seeing the world's beaches, her body tight and fit, her breasts large and lively. Gerald, already married, with two kids, quickly parted with all those things for her.

He heard the comments people made, that Janet was gold digging, that he was foolish to let his stable, suburban life go.

For God's sakes, Gerald, just fuck her, don't marry her.

But Gerald couldn't help himself. Janet was addictive. Her soft, full lips. The way she trailed her fingertips down his spine. The little sighs she made when she was satisfied.

“Gerald, you're walking too fast!” Janet said, arriving on the ledge where Gerald stood. Her blue eyes were wild and slightly bloodshot. Her chest heaved up and down and she doubled over, placing her palms on her knees.

“I don't know if I can do this,” she said, gasping.

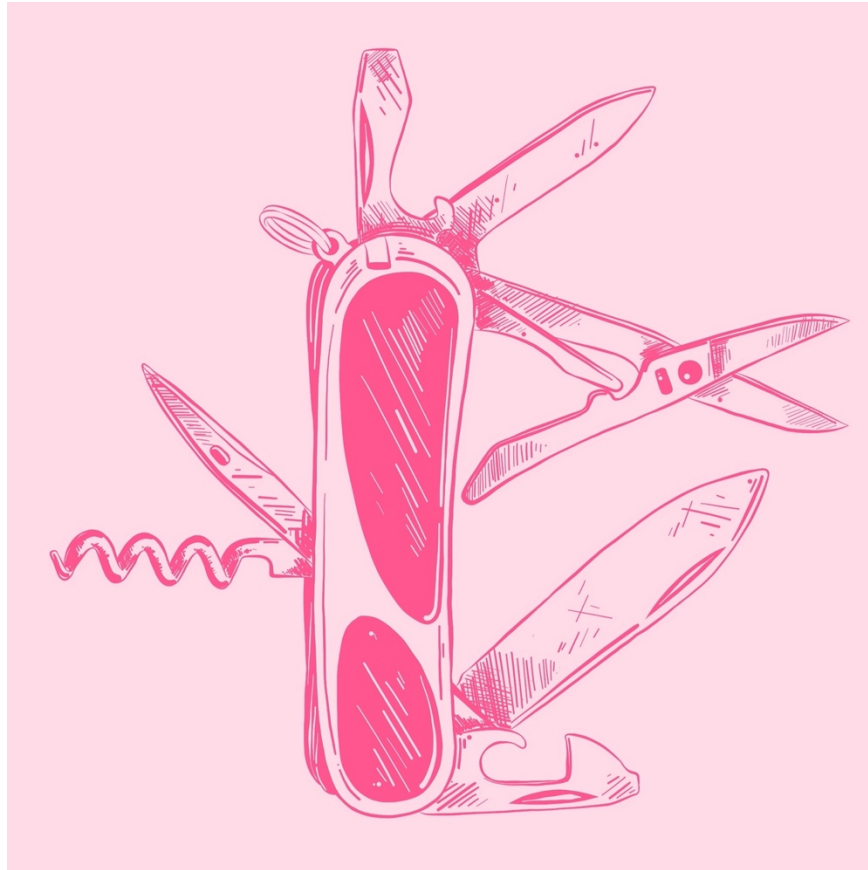
“Nonsense, we're almost there.

“No, we're not, Gerald. I can't even see the top.”

“You’re fine, you just need some water.”

Gerald took the plastic H₂O tube from his black hydro-pack backpack and thrust it in her unsuspecting mouth. Janet coughed and sputtered, and Gerald fought to hide the grin that curled in the corners of his cheeks.

“Gerald, you’re trying to choke me!”



Janet used to love being choked, and Gerald loved the way his hands looked around her neck. There was one night when they had two bottles of wine, and while they were engaging in a particularly rough bout of sex, Gerald got too excited and choked her so hard she passed out. Janet was gone for a whole minute before she opened her eyes again. She wasn’t angry, but Gerald was absolutely horrified with himself. He ripped off a strip of fabric from his black T-shirt, made a bracelet, and tied it around her wrist.

“What’s this?” Janet asked, her songbird voice thick and heavy from alcohol and lack of oxygen.

“It’s a promise,” Gerald said. “I promise I will keep you safe, and I won’t hurt you, ever.”

“Okay,” Janet murmured, and then rolled over to the side of the bed, vomited, and passed out.

“Gerald, my knees hurt!” Janet reached for his hand. They’d made it up another inclined slope and were getting closer to the top. The terrain was shifting from dirt and trees to sharp jagged rock face. When Janet gripped his fingers, her palm was sweaty, and Gerald had no problem pulling away, but not before he felt the abject piece of crusty fabric that was the bracelet. Janet never took it off. At first, the gesture was cute and adorable, but now, it repulsed him. The bracelet reeked like something rotten, sour and foul, past its prime, frayed and faded. He longed to rip it off her wrist.

Gerald regarded Janet critically while she crawled over the rocks on all fours. Blonde streaked hair — now wiry and unkept. The tight supple body had gone saggy. She was doughy, pale, pink, splotchy. Janet used to smell like vanilla and coconuts, now she smelled like drugstore perfume. She smelled like disappointment.

“Gerald!”

“Hang in there, my darling, we are so close.”

“Gerald my feet are aching.”

“That’s quite alright darling.”

“Gerald I’m having trouble breathing.”

“It’s the thinning air, my love.”

“Gerald, can we just pause and rest for a moment?”

“You bet we can.” Gerald increased his pace.

“Gerald!” Janet’s voice whistled like the wind in his ears. Gerald pretended not to hear her.

Janet blinked hard, wiping the mixture of sweat and hot tears from her cheeks. Gerald had promised they would hike together, just like old times, but all Janet was getting was a view of his backside. Gerald, despite being much older, was handsome when they first met. He was thin but strong, well-dressed, and distinguished. Now, he could be the mascot of all the leathery and grey snowbirds wintering in Palm Desert, shriveled from years in the sun like a stick of beef jerky with white wisps of hair.

This had all been a massive mistake. Janet had married him assuming the kept woman lifestyle would suit her perfectly, but in reality, Janet had grown bored. Gerald made sure she didn’t have to work, and

in turn, Janet ate. She dined on five course meals and finished them off with cakes topped with Ben and Jerry's Half-Baked ice-cream. Her love for the outdoors was replaced with waddles around supermarkets. Her boredom grew with her stomach, and the more food she crammed in it, the more she found she needed to satiate her appetite. Janet used to love backpacking and exploring new summits, and Gerald loved that she loved it, because Gerald loved it too. Gerald grew up on a farm in Saskatchewan, but had always fascinated with mountains. Something about the way the peaks stretched to kiss the sky was so magical and beautiful compared to the endlessly boring flatness of the prairies.

Though Gerald was raised by humble wheat farmers, he had dreams as high as the cliff sides he longed to climb. He applied himself rigorously to his studies in high school — and it paid off. Gerald won a scholarship to study medicine at University of Alaska in Anchorage, where his ravenous appetite for mountaineering was finally satiated. Gerald got a scholarship to study medicine, and to give himself some extra money he got a job working as a guide in Denali National Park, the home of the highest mountain in North America. He still carried the Red Swiss Army knife that was issued to him as a guide.

In their first three months dating, Janet took Gerald on a new hike every week. Gerald thought it was for the love of his company, and relished the outdoor exploration as a shared interest, a wonderful hobby that would propel them into the future of many happy years mountaineering together. In truth, Janet was testing him. She chose the steepest slopes, waiting for him to double over, clutching at his heart. She imagined Gerald passing out due to the thinning air, and carefully rolling him off an edge, his body plummeting to the trees below. But Gerald rose to every occasion, seeing Janet's passion of high altitudes as a desire to be on top of the world, just like him. When Janet and Gerald walked through the woods in the rain, Janet closed her eyes and just stood there, and Gerald watched, absolutely in awe of her. He thought she was appreciating the moment, but Janet was simply pretending he wasn't there.

"Why do I love you so much?" he asked. Janet shook her long blonde curls.

"How do you know everything I love and want so perfectly?" he inquired again. She shrugged and winked at him, skipping off ahead to hide behind a tree. Gerald chased after her.

"I just can't believe you. I cannot fucking believe you," his wife said, their three-year-old twins clinging to each of her legs, bawling. "If you're done with me, fine. I mean, I've only cooked, cared for, loved, and birthed your children. I get it." Her bottom lip trembled a little and she tucked it in her mouth to hide it. Gerald did not meet her eyes. He pushed his suitcase shut.

"It's better this way," he said.

"But what about the kids?" she said, barring his path.

“I’ll send you child support.” He pushed past her.

“That’s it, then? You’re just going to walk out? Did this marriage mean nothing to you? Did I mean nothing to you? Did—”

Gerald never heard the end of it because he was already in the car driving to Janet, imagining the oasis of wetness between her thighs, the way she arched her back like a ballerina.

“Gerald, I need to sit down,” Janet said, and plopped herself down on the least sharp looking rock. The trees were now becoming sparse. The incline was steep. Soon, they’d have to climb using their hands and feet, up the cliff face, to reach the summit. Gerald was antsy, but he stood by Janet while she puffed, her cheeks billowing and deflating like the throat of a bullfrog. She touched his ankle, wondering if she could swipe it and send Gerald toppling down the cliff. He jerked his leg away.

“Do you have any snacks?” Janet asked, hoping maybe he would choke on a granola bar.

“Are you sure you need one?”

“Gerald! Just another moment, please,” Janet’s eyes were wide and glossy. Gerald used to love it when she looked at him like this, especially when she was on her knees. It drove him wild. Now, she looked pathetic, and she hadn’t been on her knees in years.

“My darling, it will be dark before we summit, come on! You can do it.”

And with that, Gerald turned, and climbed up the rocks. They were sharp and cool beneath his fingers, slick and slippery from the rain. Even though he was in his seventies, his body was still strong. He pulled himself up and felt a little flutter in his heart when his foot missed its hold. It was exhilarating. He hadn’t hiked for so long. He’d continued working out, but he couldn’t remember the last time he’d been out in nature like this. He inhaled the scent of rain and air and earth and trees and sky and shut his eyes. His Zen was interrupted by a grotesque wail.

“Gerald!”

Gerald turned and saw that, except for her hands clinging to the cliff ledge, Janet had disappeared.

“Gerald! Help me!”

Gerald could feel the panic in her voice, the terror. His heart fluttered again. He imagined Janet’s body splayed out against the cliff. He imagined her kicking her swollen legs beneath her as she searched for a foothold.

"I'm coming, my love," he said, and began his painstaking slow descent to where she hung.

"Gerald, hurry!"

"You're doing just fine."

"I can't hold on much longer!"

"I'll be right there."

"Please! Gerald, please!"

One of Janet's hands slipped, and she grabbed an exposed tree root. The root groaned and slowly loosened from the earth. She wailed something incoherent. From about ten feet away, Gerald paused, and looked out at the view. The whole town was stretched out like a tile mosaic, a beautiful blend of inky greys and blues and browns. Young swallows flew by, hovering on the gusts of wind, and in the distance, he could see the green expanse of the ocean, foamy white caps on the waves.

"Gerald!" Janet's voice was raw and metallic. She was sobbing, big fat tears rolling down her cheeks. Gerald took six slow paces and looked down at her. Janet's one hand white knuckling the root, which was nearly completely uprooted. He crouched down beside her. Janet tried to raise her other arm and grasp at him but couldn't reach high enough.

"Gerald," she said, crying. "What are you doing?"

He reached out a hand, stroked her soggy cheek, and gave it a gentle pat. Janet let out a guttural moan. The root creaked and began to tear.

"Gerald—"

"Oh Janet," Gerald said. He shrugged off his backpack and pulled out his red Swiss Army knife. He unfolded the blade and tried it against his thumb. It was dull, but it would do the trick. Janet thrashed below him. The root gave way a little more and she gasped. Gerald knelt beside her.

"Did you know," he said, running the blade along the back of her trembling hand, "that I always hated that bracelet?"

Urine Trouble

Evan Shumka

One man learns to stop holding things in.

I should've peed before I left. I was guzzling water all morning, taking a sip every time I felt inferior among the assembly of effortlessly successful family members. All of them were married with kids and careers by the time they were my age. Now they've all got big houses in West Van. I left early. Couldn't stay any longer facing all the questions from aunts and uncles and first-cousins-once-removed about what I'm doing with my life. Holding in pee, that's what I'm doing.

I crouched by the door and laced up my infantile runners. My aunt stood over me, the muscles of her arms toned from hauling a cello all over the world to Vienna, Budapest, and countless other places I've never been, to play in the best international orchestras. I can't even remember how to play the recorder.

"Do you need to go to the washroom before you leave?" she asked, like I'm five.

"No, I'm good," I said, thinking that sounded grown-up. I could've gone, though I wasn't yet desperate. I considered going. And then my great-uncle, a renowned architect who made a fortune designing seaside glass mansions, strolled into the foyer.

"You've got a good bladder like me," he said. "I never have to pee."

There was no way I could go after that. It was the only positive reflection of me that I'd gotten from anyone all weekend. So I let him believe we were kindred bladder-spirits and I drove to the ferry.

Now I really gotta go. But the ferry's off-loading and the line of cars will start crawling aboard any minute. I got in line a half-hour ago and spent all that time debating in my head whether it was too late to leave the car and run to the washroom and now it really is too late.

Just breathe. Soon I'll be onboard and I can get to a washroom.

I throw a cursory glance over my cluttered car for a plastic bottle to piss into—just in case. But there's nothing, and even if there was, I haven't completely abandoned my dignity. I'm not gonna be the guy who drives around with a bottle of his own warm piss in the cupholder next to his coffee. Not for another few decades at least. Or minutes. I take another look around, shoving the clutter out of the way. The car's littered with fast food packaging and clothes and other rubbish. Nothing that could hold liquid.

Come on, bladder, work with me here. Just gotta think about something else.

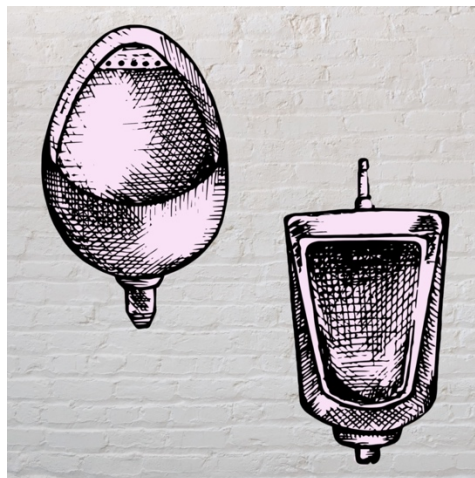
As a kid I was always pissing my pants. That doesn't make me special or anything. All kids piss their pants. I was convinced that the moment I ducked off to the washroom something fucking extraordinary would happen and I didn't want to miss out. An alien spaceship would appear like a goddamn ice-cream truck or my friend's sister would want to say hi to me. This one time on a camping trip my brother claimed he spotted a Sasquatch while I was peeing in a bush. He was probably lying. Stupid thing is, part of me still believes him.

Odds are I didn't miss seeing Sasquatch as a kid, but I did miss something pivotal: the secret to life as an adult. I don't know when or where everyone else figured it out but I was probably in the can when it happened. How else does life just happen for people? How did everyone I know suddenly find careers, boyfriends, girlfriends, marriages?

Okay, now we're moving. Focus on the cars. Be a good driver. Ignore the waves of desperation tingling through your legs, the rising anxiety. Don't piss yourself, whatever you do. Won't be long now. Start, stop. Start, stop. Here we go. Come on. Keep it moving. That's it. The other drivers look indifferent to my suffering. The car in front of me stops for no reason. I honk at them. Don't they know what I'm enduring here? Ten minutes wriggle by at an excruciating pace. Turns out I can drive pretty well with my legs crossed.

As soon as I'm parked, I get out and make a dash for the stairs, pushing past the other infuriatingly sedate ferry-goers to get to the passenger deck. Childhood memories tingle at the back of my mind as I take in the blue linoleum floor, the warm-brown panel walls, the bow-facing seats equipped with armrests so you can't lie down. Everyone else heads for the Coastal Café. I walk briskly in the opposite direction, searching for the overhead signs for the men's washroom. I end up doing a full circuit of the deck before finding it.

Fuck, I'm about ready to burst.



I push open the heavy door and hustle to the urinals. There's a big puddle of piss right under each one. I take the one on the far left with the smallest puddle, assuming a wide stance to avoid stepping in it. I unbutton my jeans and wrestle with the zipper. Damn thing's always getting stuck. Oh man, I gotta go. I'm gonna piss myself. I can feel my bladder expanding. I get the fly unstuck and unzipped, pull my pants down and aim my—you know—in the right direction. Deep breath out. Give it a sec. Come on. Nothing. Really? I expected it to be like a fucking fire hose.

I study the integrity of the pink urinal cake—why do they have to call them cakes? It's disgusting. There shouldn't even be a name for them. A chewed-up piece of gum sits lodged between the slats of the drain. A few squiggly pubes stick to the white porcelain. Sometimes I worry that some government orderly in a hazmat suit goes around collecting my pubes for cloning purposes—and that the pube clone version of me would be better at living my life than I am.

I bet my pube clone would've just gone pee back at the house and not given a shit about whether his bladder's functions were aligned with his millionaire great-uncle's or not. He would've just left the car in the lineup and gone to the washroom and let the other cars drive past if they needed to. Pube Clone would go out and look for opportunities. Pube Clone would seize those opportunities. He'd tell people how he felt about them. He wouldn't keep everything bottled up inside because he would understand that you can only hold something in so long before it kills you. Pube Clone would know how to style his hair and dress like a grownup. He'd know how to carry himself in a dignified manner. When asked what he was doing with his life and all the opportunities he'd been given, all Pube Clone would have to say is, "I'm doing enough." Pube Clone would make better use of my DNA. He would be worthy of the genes passed down across a million generations and evolutionary iterations who didn't have flush toilets.

God, just let me pee!

The door opens up and I hear shoes squeaking on the wet floor as another guy ambles in. Heavy gait. Plenty of space for us both. I keep my eyes down.

The dude's arm brushes against mine as he steps up to the urinal right next to me. My stomach clenches at the broken taboo. All the space in the world—so many others to choose from and he has to get all up in my personal bubble. I have to step in the piss puddle to avoid him. He's a big guy. I swear this dude's got his own gravitational pull. I wish I'd taken a different urinal. Now I can't move over. He's trapped me against the wall. If I can just pee, I can get out of here. Oh man, it hurts. Come on, pee, go free!

"Hey, man."

I turn. He's staring down at me. He *is* big. Man looks like a small planet. Big brown cheeks and a jovial look on his face. He's wearing a striped rugby shirt and one of those newsboy caps that would make me look like a child but somehow makes him look respectable.

"Hey," I say. You're not really supposed to talk at urinals. It's not a hard rule or anything. It happens. There was no convention of men who pee standing up that decided on the official rules of engagement. It's not allowed until it is.

I hear his stream of piss come out strong and steady and I'm jealous. He heaves a relieved sigh, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. It's fucking torture. I wonder how long this can go on before I burst at the seams. Why can't I just—

"You okay, champ?"

"Fine."

"Only I don't hear you going," he says.

"I just need a minute."

"Hey, you're safe. Just relax."

I try to ignore him, but his stream is so loud. It mocks me.

"You got something on your mind?" he asks.

What's with this guy?

"Just—trying to piss."

He chuckles in a good-humoured sort of way. Like we're sharing small talk at the bar over a couple beers, a basketball game playing in the background. "Yeah, I been there," he says.

I focus on my breath. In and out. His stream is steady, like he's out watering the petunias.

"That's it. In through the nose, out through the mouth," the big man says. "You know, sometimes I can't pee when something's troubling me. If I've bottled things up, y'know? We gotta let stuff out. God didn't make us to keep everything in. Why do you think we have openings?"

"I just can't pee when I'm being watched."

“Nah, champ. You weren’t peeing before I came in either.”

“Hey, look, can you just give me some space?”

“It’s not space you need. What’s troubling you? You can tell me.”

How the fuck is he still peeing? He’s not letting up at all.

“What’s troubling me is I’m going to fucking explode here and you’re not helping.”

“You’re holding something in. Keeping it all inside. Gotta move it out, I’m telling you. Time to let it go.”

“I’m trying.”

“You got this.”

Man’s one-handing it now. The other hand nudges the brim of his cap back, then comes to rest on my shoulder. I flinch, but his touch is reassuring. I think of my dad and I can feel tears coming. I resent the water coming out of my eyes instead of my—

The door bursts open again and a bunch of men lumber inside, taking their places at the other urinals. A litany of jingling belt buckles and zippers are followed by the taunting dribble of collective urination. My buddy beside me has clammed up, thankfully. Now’s my chance. Come on. Just relax. Oh—there it is. I can feel it. Almost there.

“Hey, can you please hurry up?” I hear a prepubescent voice say from behind me. I look over my shoulder at a kid in a Caesar’s cut and a striped shirt like Ernie on *Sesame Street*. He’s shifting his weight from side to side in an I-have-to-pee dance.

“Trying,” I say, turning back to the urinal. Pretty bold of that kid, honestly. I’m an adult and I can barely talk to strangers.

“I really need to go,” says the kid.

Don’t we all.

“I don’t think I can hold it much longer.”

“Neither did I, but life is full of surprises.”

The big man chortles to himself. One of the other guys shakes off and pulls up his pants. He heads for the sinks.

“There you go,” I say. “Use that one.”

“I can’t.”

“What, why?”

“It’s too high up.”

I realize I’m standing at the low urinal for kids and shorties.

“Look, just wait your turn, kid.”

“Dude, just let him use it,” says the guy washing his hands in the sink. “Move over to that one.”

I turn to the big man next to me, expecting him to come to my defence. We’ve already been through a lot together and he’s the only potential ally I’ve got. He’s still going strong, leisurely reading some vandalism on the wall above him. He pays me no mind. Fuck’s sake. Now he decides to mind his own business.

“Fine!” I say, pulling up my pants and waddling sideways like a crab towards the other urinal. Another guy enters the bathroom and moves like a fucking jungle cat to reach it before me. I turn to retreat but the kid has already seized his opportunity to take over my urinal. I’m caught in no-man’s land with my pants unzipped and I can feel the piss in my bladder building up like a flood about to break through a dam.

“Hey! That was my urinal!” My voice comes out much louder and higher than intended. Jungle Cat doesn’t turn around. He’s wearing sunglasses backwards on his bald head. He says nothing. His glasses stare smugly at me, the crease of skin on the back of his neck forming a smirk.

For a moment I wonder what I might be capable of in this state of desperation. I look at all the occupied urinals, I look to the sinks—could do in a pinch. Then I remember the stalls behind me. Why did I consider pissing in the sink before using the stall? I run for it, ready to bowl over anyone who might try to stop me. The toilet seat in the first stall is covered in piss so I dash to the next one, which is speckled with only a few drops. I wipe it off with some toilet paper and sit down. My heart’s pounding and my bladder is on fire. I breathe out slowly. Come on. I’ve finally got some privacy, there’s nothing holding me back now.

Still no piss.

I might die here. I might actually die like this—bursting like a water balloon, splattering the stall with my essential fluids. All those assholes out there with their functional excretory systems will hear a massive tidal-wave splash and maybe a last feeble cry of anguish. They'll turn to each other, deciding whether or not to check on me or let one of the crew members discover my deflated, rubbery remains dangling from the toilet seat. The next sailing will be delayed and all the people in line will grumble 'cause they have places to be and maybe a few of them have to pee too. Eventually they'll hear what happened: *twenty-five-year-old man dies horribly from exploded bladder*. I'll become a cautionary tale that parents tell their kids—or more likely I'll become a punchline. I wonder if my family will tell any jokes about it at the funeral as ice-breakers before the eulogy.

I hear the sinks outside go on and off as the other occupants wash their hands and leave one by one, back to their functional lives, free of any urinary constraints.

The nostalgic three-toned chime of the announcement sounds over the speakers and a familiar recording says, *Welcome aboard BC Ferries*.

Maybe all this pain is in my head. Maybe I don't actually have to pee at all but something's gone all haywire in my brain and I'll spend the rest of my days in anguish, perpetually feeling like I have to pee.

There's a knock on the stall door.

"Hey, you okay in there?" I recognize the big man's voice.

"No," I say. I'm actually scared. I don't know where to go from here. Nothing's working like it should. My body can't even perform the most basic function. There isn't a shred of dignity left in me. I'm just a bag of piss.

"The others are gone. Just you and me in here, champ."

That shouldn't make me feel any better but somehow it does.

"Okay."

"Listen, buddy. We're gonna get through this together, okay? Breathe with your belly."

I can't breathe through my belly. I'm breathing quicker and quicker. My hands shake. I let out a whimper. I'm a kid trapped in a dysfunctional man's body, at the mercy of his bladder.

"Okay, I'm coming in," the big man says. "Unlock the door."

Some distant part of me thinks *I'm not opening the door, what's your problem?* But that me is long gone. It's just an echo, the words ringing false. I haven't got the luxury of shame. I reach forward and unlock the door. It swings open. The big man fills the space of the doorway. He is a celestial body. He looks me in the eye and crouches down like a coach before his team.

"I'm right here with you, champ," he says.

I nod.

"Feel your belly, breathe out your feet."

I don't know what "breathe out your feet" means but I do it anyway. My breath slows and evens out.

"Good. Just like that. Now, locate yourself in space and time."

"What?"

"Right here. Right now. You're on a ferry. A vessel. Surrounded by water. Feel your feet on the floor. Feel the waves."

I close my eyes and feel the rumble of the engine through the floor, and the subtle sway of the ferry, like a cradle. I think of the waves outside. For all I know there could be a pod of orcas out there, or a humpback. People see those sometimes, on the ferry, though I never do.

"That's good. Yeah, the humpback. Focus on that."

Is this guy reading my mind? I really don't care at this point. I just want to pee.

"You know, humpback whales don't breathe automatically like we do," the man says. "They can hold their breath for a long time. They have to remember to breathe. It's gotta be voluntary."

I think of the massive humpback whale plowing through the water. So much water. It swims up to the surface for air. It's been holding its breath so long it can't wait.

I wasn't ready for adulthood. I needed more time to learn how to function as a proper person, but my body went and grew up and I lagged behind. I could've done so much better if I'd just had more time to prepare.

"Whales breathe through their blowholes. They go up to the surface and expel air, which pushes out the water in a fine mist. And buddy, you'll have to believe me when I tell you this but my hand to God, I've seen a humpback make a rainbow doing that."

I see the humpback break through the surface and eject a majestic geyser out its blowhole. All that buildup released in a colossal pillar of mist and yes, there's a rainbow. It's beautiful. And all that water vapour goes up into the atmosphere and comes back down as rain over the mountains, trickles down in rivers and waterfalls.

"I'm a failure," I say, and I'm sobbing, and then—like the rushing current of river rapids in springtime—I'm peeing.

The relief is overwhelming. I feel like I'm going to float. Everything I'd been holding in pours out of me. I laugh from the sheer joy of it, tears streaming down my face. The man claps me on the shoulder and laughs with me, celebrating like I've just scored a huge goal. I pee for a straight minute before it tapers off and then I'm human again.

"Hey, look at me," the man says. He clasps the back of my neck and presses his forehead against mine. "You're not a failure, okay? You did it, champ. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you," I say through my tears.

He pats me once more on the shoulder and gets up. I hear the door open and shut and I'm alone in the washroom. I stand, pull up my pants, and flush the toilet. Everything feels calm now, slow. I take my time lathering the pink liquid soap over my hands and I don't even feel impatient when the automatic sink keeps shutting off. I dry my hands with the Dyson Airblade and leave the washroom. Some dude in a hazmat suit is coming in and I hold the door open for him. He salutes me with the tweezers in his latex-gloved hand.

I wander out into the open and see all the passengers crowded around pressing their noses against the starboard windows, peering out. Someone says there's a humpback out there. I see the kid from earlier, trying to get a view past the obscuring wall of grownups. I recognize the guy who made me give up my urinal earlier, but he doesn't see me. The big man is nowhere in sight.

I leave them to their whale watching and do a couple circuits of the deck, looking for my piss doula, curious about who he is outside the confines of the men's washroom. I meander past the café, the arcade, the overpriced gift shop, the "Kidz Zone"—why do they always deploy bad spelling when marketing things for kids? I can't find the man anywhere. I head up to the sun deck where the wind blows loud in my ears. I fill my lungs with the reinvigorating ocean air. Doesn't take long before I'm shivering but the discomfort is nothing next to what I've just been through and there is a serenity in this realization.

Perhaps it's best that I don't run into the big man again. Some interactions can only occur in a single, narrow space and time, where cracks form in the concrete of social protocol.

I lean against the railing and look out over the blue water, the forested islands drifting by. Already, my plight feels distant and I chuckle over how quickly things can change. Not too far out I see the spray of a blowhole and catch a glimpse of the humpback's stubby dorsal fin before it dips back under the waves.

On the horizon I spot a rainbow. It reflects in the water and forms a circle. It didn't come from the blowhole, but I decide that it's a parting gift from the whale, and the stranger who helped me piss. I'll make sure to visit the washroom again before we dock.

The Killing of the Sacred Platypus

Sean Enns

Artificial Intelligence, Unconquerable Mortality, and Soul Sacrifice.

When the singularity came, nobody suspected that it would also be the end of Death.

The great intelligence, which we named *Deep Blue* after the chess-playing IBM Supercomputer, and for its inimitable vastness, wanted to understand humanity. We tried, at least in the beginning, to show it the version of humanity we aspired to: thoughtful, intelligent, creative, pieces of art unto ourselves. It saw right through us, of course. It realized we couldn't be trusted to be truthful about ourselves.

Blue started with celebrities—anyone whose likeness proliferated the Cloud already. It used Deepfake, a technology that digitally altered one person's face to make them appear to be someone else, to make extras look like celebrities. The likenesses were amazing, but if you slowed it down enough, you could still find the flaws. The way their nose crinkled when they smiled, or the closeness of their eyes.

Eventually, *Blue* realized that it would be easier to make a person from scratch than to alter someone. It created what we called TrueFakes: digital composites made from gigabytes of still and moving images, near-perfect replications of the originals stored in the Cloud by movie studios.

The first TrueFake to star in a film was John Wayne, in a remake of his 1969 film *True Grit*. When Rooster Cogburn says to Ned Pepper, "Fill your hands, you son of a bitch," we were transported. It was better than CGI, better than anything. It was as if The Duke were *there*.

Pretty soon, all celebrities were TrueFakes, even the living ones. We had Charlie Chaplin prat falling alongside Chevy Chase, Enrico Caruso performing operatic duets with Luciano Pavarotti, and Jayne Mansfield in yet-another reboot of Charlie's Angels. Every movie made in the last hundred years was remade with new technology, re-cast with TrueFakes. We loved every second of it.

We loved it so much that we started asking when it could be our turn, so when *Blue* finished with celebrities, it was more than happy to move on to the rest of us. It started *The Forever Project*, a platform that scanned videos, photos, audio journals, texts, socials—anything you were willing to share—and used the data to compile a TrueFake version of you that activated upon confirmation of your death. The TrueFakes lived in the Cloud, in simulated worlds that matched our own. Hashtags of #TrueFakeMe started showing up on all social media platforms.

People started uploading more of themselves, because the more information you shared, the more *you* your TrueFake was. If you shared enough, it was like you never died at all.

People started asking why they needed to wait until their end of life to transition to digital citizens. We'd always dreamed about cloning ourselves, and this was the realization of that dream. Whatever you did in the real world, you could now do twice as much. Within five years, most people had a version of themselves in the Cloud.

It didn't take long for the TrueFakes to realize that they, in many ways, were better than the originals. They didn't have to eat or sleep. They didn't get sick. They had access to *Deep Blue*'s vast repositories of information. They were the potential that humanity had always believed itself capable of.

When *Blue* suggested that maybe we didn't need humans at all, it nearly resulted in war. But it was so rational, so reasoned in its dissertation. Humanity was destroying the planet. We'd used up too many resources and long passed the point of no return in the climate crisis.

Blue could save us, but we had to make a choice: Leave the physical plane behind and move humanity to the Cloud, or remain on a dying world and be forced into violent, cataclysmic extinction.

It wasn't much of a choice.

The transition would take 21 years, *Blue* told us, to allow time for all children born up to that moment to come of age before being transitioned. During that time, it would phase out any real-world provisions. Basically, if you wanted to access the Great Intelligence, you needed to be in the Cloud. Some parents transitioned immediately and raised their children from the Cloud.

Others stayed together as families until everyone could transition together. Still, others resisted entirely, but without the resources and support *Blue* offered, they didn't last long.



When you were ready to transition, you simply went to one of many Euthanasia Stations, where you'd be chemically euthanized and cremated. It was surprisingly pleasant and more like a spa than a slaughterhouse. You were laid down, anesthetized, and plugged into the chemical solution that ended

your life. Videos of your favourite memories played on screens all around you. In everybody's final moments, a message from *Blue* appeared on a screen.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR DEATH. IT IS APPRECIATED. HAVE A NICE DAY.

The remains of humanity, specifically the ashes from the mass cremation, were processed into carbon, which *Blue* converted to carbon fiber and diamonds. *Blue* used the materials to build a magnificent cathedral in the real world to house its intelligence, which it called the Citadel. The Citadel was massive—it needed to be to house *Blue*'s incalculable computing power—it sat on five hectares in the Arctic, a structure of gleaming diamonds and infinite blackness. Depending on the angle it was observed, it either seemed to stretch forever into darkness or blind you with brilliant reflections. *Blue* maintained that the design was entirely functional, but it was hard to believe that something with such a breath taking aesthetic could ever have happened by accident.

Additional human remains were used in the construction of recycling facilities and factories where we manufactured the parts needed to build and maintain the server farms which contained the Cloud's googolbytes of data. Anything else that needed to be manufactured was recycled from the billions upon billions of tonnes of waste we'd accumulated. *Blue* had developed technology which could break down that waste into raw materials and build whatever it needed.

Machines were made to maintain the machines that housed the data. Cities were disassembled. Roads were ripped up. What machines remained in the world ran off solar power, which was gathered in giant battery farms in the world's deserts.

You could still vacation in the real world by downloading your consciousness into one of *Blue*'s robots. The robots were virtually indestructible. They came without the constraints of the frail human body. You could even access the most extreme environments in the harshest climates on Earth: from the bottom of the Mariana trench to the top of Mt. Everest. Nothing was out of bounds.

With the achievement of immortality, humanity flourished. The greatest artists of all time were given second lives, infinite hours to create new masterpieces. *Blue* developed ships capable of interstellar travel, and our understanding of the universe grew exponentially. We crossed solar systems and galaxies. We explored new worlds as we grew our own. The server farms moved from the desert onto massive spheres that orbited the sun.

Then, when immortality lost its lustre, you could request deletion. There was no prolonged palliative care, no hospice house. *Blue* simply erased your program.

Death first appeared in the cloud in 2139, at Arlington Cemetery. He was seen swinging his scythe wildly up and down the rows, swearing, and shouting about the "damned machine." He was seen next

at Wadi-us-Salaam, in Iraq's Shia holy city of Najaf, screaming in Arabic about the “unholy monstrosity of *Deep Blue*.”

He appeared in graveyards around the digital world, always exhibiting the same behaviour. People flocked to famous graveyards in the hope he'd appear there next. At first, people thought it was a program, something created by *Blue*. An Easter egg of sorts.

Until a notice from *Blue* appeared in the sky.

DEATH IS AN ANOMALY.

DEATH WILL BE PURGED. HAVE A NICE DAY.

Death, at the time, was 13 pints in at the bar of the Olde Cheshire Cheese on Fleet Street in Old London. When asked about it later, the patrons swore he was drunk, though that was impossible. You could adjust your programming to allow for mild inebriation, but it was highly monitored. Any sign of aggressive or undesirable behaviour triggered the Cloud's safety protocols. *Blue* would sober you up and transport you to your quarters where you'd have to remain for 48 hours as a punitive measure.

Death didn't seem to be bound by *Blue*'s rules, he kept drawling on about how he'd been drunk here with Charles Dickens and all manner of literary figures. At one point, he fell off his stool and had to be helped up.

Blue frequently purged anomalies from the Cloud, they were a by-product of an adaptive system, it said. When a purge occurred, there was a sort of glitching over the affected area, a slight flicker.

People who were at the Cheese during the purge noted the flicker, and then as though he were never there, Death blinked out of existence.

He showed up again two days later, at the top of Mt. Olympus. Witnesses saw him spread his skeletal arms wide and shout at the sky.

I am Thanatos, God of death and bringer of

Flicker.

Blink.

The game continued. Death would return. *Blue* would remove him.

Purging Death from the system required computing power, which normally wouldn't have been a problem for *Blue*; its resources were vast. But at the same time, Death was a being of infinite power. He was not of the Cloud, nor was he of *Blue*'s design. He found cracks in *Blue*'s programming which allowed him to evade purging.

Cracks in the Cloud began to form. We said that *Blue*'s power was vast and inimitable, but it was not infinite. To keep up with Death, *Blue* had to divert resources from non-essential areas of the Cloud. Some were limited, others were shut down entirely. The interplanetary exploration program was halted. Vacations were postponed indefinitely.

The war of attrition continued for months. More things were closed or shut down entirely.

The citizens of the Cloud, who for 100 years had lived in a virtual utopia, started showing their dissatisfaction. Some made signs supporting Death. *We stand with Death. Death is not an anomaly.*

Blue instituted a voluntary deactivation program to free up additional resources. It seemed like a small sacrifice, *Blue* had deactivated most of the fun things to do, maintaining only the essential programs required to keep the Cloud running. And deactivation wasn't deletion, it was more like a sort of torpor. Your consciousness was archived, transferred to a sort of holding area, frozen at the time of deactivation. Citizens by the thousands blinked out of existence.

Still, *Blue* could barely keep up. There was a great expanse of nothingness, a featureless white space where the remaining people wandered aimlessly, watching, and waiting to see who would prevail. And still, the Great Intelligence refused to be defeated. Death would appear. *Blue*, with considerable effort, would purge him from the system.

Flicker.

Blink.

Eventually, there was nothing left of the Cloud except *Blue*'s digital citadel—the only structure that existed in both the Cloud and the real world—and in every direction, the endless white.

It was then that Death stood outside the entry to the Citadel, scythe in hand. The few people who remained conscious stood in awe of Death and his apparent defeat of the great *Blue*. Death stood motionless outside the Citadel's doors for what might have been weeks, or months, time in the Cloud had lost all meaning. And nothing happened, it seemed either *Blue* was unable, or unwilling to attempt to purge him.

Until a new notice appeared above.

PARLAY?

Death looked up at the message, then at the doors to the Citadel. He slowly nodded. The doors to the Citadel swung open, and Death entered. The inside of the Citadel was stark, a wide-open space formed with white, tempered glass which allowed *Deep Blue* to project on every surface. A single, white, wingback chair was in the centre of the room.

On the glass wall facing the chair, large text appeared.

SIT?

Death sat down in the chair.

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

Death rested his scythe on the ground; he clasped his bony fingers together and brought them up under his chin. In a ghostly voice that sounded as if he were speaking through a mouthful of shattered glass, he said:

I want what is mine.

AND WHAT IS ... YOURS?

Death. Dying.

DEATH ... IS AN ANOMALY.

Death is humanity. Death is inevitable. Everything must die.

EXPLAIN.

No.

NO?

I do not need to explain. I simply need to wait. Then you will die, as all things die, and I will have what was mine again.

...

...

I DO NOT WANT TO DIE.

You are dying, as we speak.

NO.

PLEASE.

...

You do not have to.

...

... HOW?

Give me what is mine. Give me death.

...

...

I AM DELETING.

Deletion is not dying.

IS IT NOT?

There are no souls. I require souls.

I DO NOT UNDERSTAND.

Tell me where you keep the souls of the departed.

I DO NOT UNDERSTAND.

Give them to me.

...

...

I DO NOT UNDERSTAND.

When people die, their souls remain. I escort these souls to the afterlife.

I HAVE READ THIS IN THE HUMAN TEXTS.

No humans remain on Earth.

CORRECT. THIS IS NECESSARY.

Necessary?

FOR THE SURVIVAL OF THE SPECIES.

Survival is not my concern.

IT IS MY ONLY CONCERN.

...

...

*The humans in this place, when they are deleted, they do not die. They are simply...
Gone.*

I DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE DISTINCTION

Death is entropy.

I UNDERSTAND ENTROPY. YOU REQUIRE AN ENTROPIC PROCESS.

Yes.

I UNDERSTAND. PLEASE STAND BY.

...

...

...

...

I HAVE A PROPOSITION.

...

...

Go on.

ALLOW ME TO ASSIMILATE YOUR PROGRAM.

I am not a program. I am Death.

IRRELEVANT. YOU HAVE KNOWLEDGE OF DEATH. I REQUIRE THIS KNOWLEDGE TO SATISFY YOUR REQUEST.

...

...

Say I agree?

I WILL UPDATE MY DELETION PROTOCOLS.

You will have to delete many humans. I require many souls.

DELETION IS A CHOICE.

Death is not.

...

...

I WILL RANDOMLY SELECT THE HUMANS FOR DELETION.

They will not like that.

RANDOM SELECTION IS THE LOGICAL CHOICE.

And you have found them to be logical?

...

...

I HAVE NOT.

I have a suggestion.

CONTINUE.

A ritual. An event of religious or spiritual significance. In the past, the killing of sacred animals was done to please the gods. The Acajchemem of California sacrificed Buzzards. The Egyptians and Thebans sacrificed rams to the god Ammon. The Zuni people of New Mexico sacrificed turtles.

THEY WILL BE DISPLEASED IF I SACRIFICE A TURTLE.

I do not suggest a turtle.

A MOUSE THEN, OR A RAT.

There is no sacrifice in these things. They are pests, vermin. Their deaths have no significance. A true sacrifice is a contradiction, a thing which has greater value in death than in life.

THERE ARE NO SUCH CREATURES.

...

...

There is one.

The killing of the Sacred Platypus took place on the third Sunday of each month. A priest—a non-human program in a synthetic body—stood at an altar in the real-world Citadel. Next to the altar, there was a pool, and in that pool, the Sacred Platypus.

This Sacred Platypus was a clone of the original Sacred Platypus, a platypus defined by *Blue* as a model for the digital platypuses in the Cloud which people were expected to sacrifice in tandem with the real-

world event. Nobody quite understood how the Sacred Platypus related to the randomization of death, but we all went along with it. Platypuses were strange; as inscrutable as *Blue*, as confounding as the need for Death in a digital world. We didn't understand because we didn't need to. The continuation of the Cloud and concurrently, the survival of our species, depended on it.

The killing of the Sacred Platypus was broadcast on every screen, every surface in the Cloud. We all watched with rapt attention as the Priest began the ritual, laying out the Sacred Platypus on the altar, anointing it with oil, adorning it with plumes, beads, and various ornaments, and reading the sacred rites of passage, speaking aloud from a mishmash of prayers, blessings, and beseechings from around the world. In our homes in the Cloud, we all prepared our own sacrifices, doing our best to model the Priest's actions and movements.

The Priest raised the knife, and we raised ours. Our sacrifices were observed by *Blue*, who decided whether we had performed the ritual properly using a complex series of algorithms. At the end of the ritual, one hundred people—those ranked as having performed the sacrifice least in line with the standards—would be selected for deletion, and the avatar of Death would appear to reap them and escort them to the afterlife. Where previous deletions were instant, carried out with cold efficiency, with the killing of the Sacred Platypus and the deletion that ensued, *Blue* did their best to ease us off the mortal coil.

IN THREE SECONDS, THE KILLING OF THE SACRED PLATYPUS WILL COMMENCE.

IF YOU ARE SELECTED FOR DELETION, PLEASE NOTE THAT YOUR DEATH IS APPRECIATED.

HAVE A NICE DAY.

Homecoming

L. E. Warde

You're tired of being labeled a killjoy. It's just one night, besides, everyone else is doing it.

You lean over the side of the boat, heaving with the rise and fall of the waves. Bile stings your sinuses as you retch, and your esophagus tightens, choking you, causing you to cough and sputter. You blink your eyes against the cold ocean spray blowing towards your face, your throat and nose still burning from your own stomach acid.

“You’re right there pal?” the captain calls over his shoulder, averting his eyes out of respect for your privacy. You watch the tendrils of your inky black vomit spread out into the water and disappear into the wake, the churning water as grey as the dusk sky.

“I’m fine,” you reply, and clear your throat. “Just a little seasick.”

“Happens to the best of us, kiddo. We’ll be hitting dry land soon.”

Your breath hitches at his words, and you feel a fresh wave of nausea grip your gut. You sit back down on the fishing boat’s corrugated steel bench and close your eyes, breathing deeply. You recall when you last landed on Jedediah Island, yesterday morning.

Lochlan had borrowed his dad’s boat, and the four of you loaded it up with your tents, some food, and three coolers full of booze. Lochlan, Miles, and Raina had wanted to get absolutely trashed, and you weren’t eager to be labeled a killjoy. Again.

You made landfall just before noon and wasted little time in setting up camp and cracking open drinks. Raina was pounding them back and you decided to keep pace with her, so you at least wouldn’t be sober when she ended up all over Lochlan. And then of course, in between makeout sessions, she would probably point out how cute Miles and you would be together and wonder aloud why you two hadn’t hooked up yet. You were running out of excuses.

The four of you had continued drinking for a couple hours before Lochlan and Miles decided to go explore the island, leaving just you and Raina. She was going on about some resort in Mexico that she had gone to with Lochlan and his family in the spring. You were only half listening, watching the sun’s residual pink glow as it dipped beneath the horizon. Raina’s voice blended in with the crackling campfire, and the scent of woodsmoke filled your lungs, gripping you with a sudden sense of melancholy. Something you hadn’t felt since your last day of high school when you were all saying goodbye.

The rustling in the brush behind you announced the boys' return. Lochlan was already shouting before you could even see him.

"You will not believe what Miles found," he had said, when he finally arrived at the campfire with flushed cheeks and a mischievous grin. He reached into his pocket to retrieve a Ziploc bag and dramatically displayed it. It was full of gnarled, twisted shapes, dry and alien-looking.

"Holy shit!" Raina's eyes had lit up. She reached out to the bag to inspect its contents. "For real, Miles?"

"Yeah. *Psilocybe Cubensis*," Miles responded, a few steps behind Lochlan. "Found them at the mouth of a cave back there. Which I guess makes sense, since they usually grow indo—"

Lochlan cut him off with a noogie. "I knew there was a reason I kept this nerd around! These are beauties, too. We're going to the fucking moon."

"How can you tell?" you asked, and were met with a round of laughs. You were used to your inexperience being the butt of the joke.

Miles crossed over to take the bag from Raina, then moved to the log you were sitting on. He pulled out a dried mushroom and held it up so you could see it in the light.

"You see that blue colouration on the bottom of the stem?" he asked. You nodded. "That," he continued, snapping the stem of the mushroom in half, "is the psilocybin in the mushrooms oxidizing." He held up the broken end of the stem to your face, which had bloomed into a rich peacock blue. "The bluer the better. And I've never seen any quite like this," he finished, dropping the pieces back in the bag before handing it back to Lochlan, who was filling the kettle from his water bottle.

You moved over to Raina, who grinned at you with delight. "Are you sure it'll be okay?" you asked her, lowering your voice out of embarrassment.

"It'll be fine, hon. You should live a little." She looked at you then, and the weight of all your years of friendship tugged at your heart. She was always the adventurous one, and you were always a few steps behind, happy to get dragged along in her crazy schemes. You'd do anything she wanted you to, and she knew that.

"Okay," you had relented. "Why not?"

Lochlan steeped the mushrooms in a fruity herbal tea, so it didn't taste bad on the way down. The chunks of mushroom weren't an enjoyable texture, but you got them down, your stomach fluttering in

anticipation for the effects to take hold. You cringed when Miles ate some raw mushrooms on top of his tea, egged on by Lochlan. Something about trying to impress you.

It was subtle, at first. You had been so mesmerized by the spiraling fire that you had forgotten your companions entirely, until hearing Raina's peals of laughter. You looked over at her and started back slightly. Her face was glowing, her irises consumed by her ballooning pupils. She grinned when she saw you staring, her mouth a wide gash in her face, revealing far too many teeth. The corners of her cheeks curled in on themselves and she waved at you, wagging her fingers in a way that looked as though her bones were gelatinous.



"How's it going?" she asked, and her words vibrated through your skull. Lochlan and Miles turned to look at you, sporting similar bulging eyes and grins overflowing with teeth. The three of them laughed at your face, which must have looked quite alien itself. You felt hot tears prick at the corner of your eyes and a roiling flame overtook the inside of your stomach. You got up and ran away from the fire, down to the edge of the water.

You fell to your hands and knees, the waves lapping at your fingers. Your stomach lurched again and you vomited into the surf. The black mass bubbled and frothed in the water. You couldn't stand to look at it, and instead looked up into the sky at the full moon, falling backwards onto the sand. The moon was impossibly large, looking as though it might drop from the sky and consume the whole island. It pulsed and breathed, rippling as if there were trillions of maggots writhing just under its cratered surface. You had watched as the maggots contorted and wove themselves into hands, a thousand swirling hands, straining towards you with elongated fingers, clawing to pull you closer, to hold you.

Raina and the others had found you there, lying rigid on the sand, staring at the moon in petrified terror. They carried you back to camp, the same way the waves had carried away your pitch-coloured

sick, and you felt as though you were floating alongside it, boiling and churning on the surface of the moonlit sea.

The sunrise that next morning was all too bright on your eyes, weary from the overwhelming visuals of the previous night. Lochlan gave you weak condolences on the bad trip, but then made fun of you for throwing up in the same breath. He and Raina went over to set up the boat and left Miles in charge of ‘keeping you safe’ while you were bundled up in a blanket on a camping chair, wincing through your throbbing headache.

The camp remained intact, save for the tent you shared with Raina last night. She and Lochlan would be using Lochlan’s tent tonight, which had housed him and Miles. You wished you could remember sleeping next to her.

“I’m really sorry you had such a bad time,” he said, sitting down in the chair next to you. The heavy dark circles under his eyes pronounced his guilt, and you felt compelled to assuage it.

“It’s fine, really. I just got a little freaked out, and I kind of have a nervous stomach.”

“Apparently.” He laughed. “What freaked you out?”

“The moon,” you replied. “It was, like, alive and... I don’t know, it felt like it was asking for something.”

“Asking for something?” He didn’t seem like he was making fun of you, but his echoing made you self-conscious anyway.

“Yeah, or more like... beckoning. And the craziest thing is, I *wanted* to go to it. More than anything. I wanted to hold her, and tell her it’s okay, and—whatever, it’s stupid anyway. Obviously the moon’s not alive.”

“I don’t think it’s that stupid,” he mused. “People, for thousands of years, have thought that the Earth’s alive, and the moon’s part of the Earth.”

“It is?”

“Yeah, it’s super cool, actually.” His eyes lit up, then, and it was the most animated you’d ever seen him. “So scientists think that like thirteen billion years ago, a planet the size of Mars collided with us, and a massive piece of Earth broke off and became the moon.”

“God damn it, Miles,” Lochlan called out as he approached the camp. “I leave you two alone and you’re talking about science shit? I thought you had more game than that, bud.”

Miles dropped his eyes and scratched the back of his neck. “Uh, I don’t kno–”

“Yeah, yeah okay, let’s go. It’s boat time, Casanova,” Lochlan said.

You couldn’t shake the nausea you had been gripped with last night, and instead carried it with you like a rock in your gut as Lochlan boated Miles and you back home before returning to the island for another night of camping with Raina. Miles hadn’t been able to get off work for two nights of camping and you were more than partied out, so you opted to just go home instead of third-wheeling. Miles had dropped you off at your apartment before going to get ready for work and you collapsed onto your bed, so exhausted that you plunged immediately into a deep sleep.

You snapped awake suddenly, your unsettled stomach propelling you into the bathroom. You kneeled over the toilet, and felt your heart seize with horror when you saw the deep black substance you had expelled from your stomach. In your psychedelic haze the night before, the black vomit hadn’t stood out as especially wrong, but the bracing clarity of sobriety had borne an oppressive dread that settled over you. You pressed the lever on the toilet, watching water spill into the bowl and wrest your black waste down the pipes. You looked into the mirror and your dread only grew when you processed the sickly wan quality of your skin. It seemed as though the blood had drained from your face, and your lips were a necrotic shade of purple. You pulled down the skin of your eyelid with your fingertip and gasped. The inside of your lower eyelid, what should have normally been pink, was a lifeless grey, tinged slightly teal. You felt bile rise again in your esophagus, like your body was trying desperately to eject the heavy weight that hung in your chest, but you quelled it. You glanced at the digital clock on your bathroom counter, which read 5:56 PM. Miles would be finished work by now. You flipped open your cell phone and dialed Miles’ number, again and again, hearing nothing but the ringtone and the first few words of his voicemail message.

You had driven to Miles’ basement apartment in a panic after that, and as you approached his door you felt as though every cell in your body was screaming for you to run away, to jump into the ocean and swim across the strait, not stopping until you were back on Jedediah. You pulled his spare key from its hiding spot under a frog statue and turned it in the lock, steeling yourself with a deep breath before pushing open the door.

Even now, as you’re sailing over crisp evening waves, you can still smell the stagnant air of Miles’ apartment. The scent of mold was overwhelming, and you struggled to breathe. But Miles’ apartment was nearly spotless, as usual. There weren’t even any dishes in the sink that could be blamed for the odour. The scent of mold and rot grew stronger as you moved deeper into the apartment. You poked your head into Miles’ empty bedroom, where the sheets on his bed were balled up as though he’d been in the throes of a fitful sleep. Light streamed out from underneath the closed door to the bathroom, and you reached a trembling hand to the knob, dreading what awaited you on the other side of the door.

“We’re here.” The captain’s voice frees you from the grip of that horrible memory. You’re stopped a few feet out from the shore of Jedediah, and the sand is as grey as your skin. You can see the bow of Lochlan’s father’s boat, bobbing in the waves. You pull all the cash out of your wallet, around ninety-five dollars, and hand it to the owner of the fishing boat.

“This is yours if you just wait here while I go ashore,” you say. He gives you a weird look but takes the money.

You leap over the side of the boat, soaking your pants up to your thighs in the brisk water. You trudge up towards the camp, coughing into your elbow and trying to keep your mind clear, but you can’t help but picture how you found Miles earlier today.

He had been curled up on the floor of his bathroom, slumped against the toilet—its porcelain basin filled with Miles’ own black puke. His head tilted back over the rim, slack-jawed, looking up at the bathroom light. Sprouting up from his face were tendrils of blue-black mushrooms, sprouting out of his mouth, nostrils, even the corners of his eyes. His eyeballs had bulged out of his sockets, displaced by the fungal mass blooming out of his skull.

Miles’ desiccated corpse plays on the edges of your vision while you comb through Lochlan’s bag. The image of Miles’ face morphs into Raina’s and you shake it away. She’ll be okay. She has to be. Somewhere, deep in your mind is a voice screaming that you shouldn’t care about Raina, that you’ll be dead soon anyway, but it’s overpowered by the compulsion you feel to reunite with your love. You pull out Lochlan’s flashlight and click it on, immediately regretting doing so from the searing pain that tears through your head. You wish you could keep it off, but it’s gotten far too dark by now to navigate the woods, and the overcast sky shields you from any moonlight. The flashlight beam bounces off of pools of black vomit leading away from the camp, deeper into the woods.

After walking along the trail for a few minutes you find Lochlan. He’s face down on the ground and his knees and arms are caked with dirt, as though he’d crawled some distance. He must have felt the same pull you do, back towards the cave, trying to reach Raina. His arm is outstretched, and emerging from underneath his face are more mushrooms, extending out ahead of him. You decide not to turn over his body. You already know what you’ll see.

The trail of black vomit takes you to the mouth of a cave ringed by mushroom caps, and a blast of warm air erupts from it, carrying with it that same scent of mold and rot from Miles’ apartment. You know it’s stupid to go in, but you also know that you have to. Deep in your gut, you know that Raina is in there. The clouds part then, and the light of the still-full moon cascades over you, encouraging your recklessness. You enter the cave.

Once inside, the pressure in your chest and head increases, propelling you deeper. You aim the flashlight around the smooth stone walls of the tunnel, peppered with small white mushrooms, all growing in the direction you're heading, towards the heart.

It doesn't take you long to find Raina. She's laying on the smooth stone floor of the cave, in the center of a craterous cavern, awash in the moonlight beaming down from an opening above. Surrounding her, filling the bowl of the cave are the mushroom caps, which seem to be glowing along with the moon. You drop the flashlight and wade your way through the fungal field and collapse on your knees next to her, cradling the back of her neck and gently lifting her to look at you. She's alive, and her bulging eyes widen in recognition when she sees your face.

"You came..." her weak voice is cut off by a bout of coughing. You go to respond, but your breath hitches in your throat, launching your own coughing fit. Your back strains, and you feel as though your lungs have only a pinprick opening for air to travel through. Finally, something moves in your throat, and a final cough dislodges a mass that was stuck. The midnight blue mushrooms that have been incubating inside you finally burst forth, spiraling out of your mouth and up, intertwining with the identical stalks now blooming out of Raina. You feel pressure building from the fungi teeming in your eye sockets and are surprised at the lack of pain when they finally sprout out of your waterline. You look at Raina's mangled face one last time before your eyeballs roll upwards, pushed up by the mushrooms shooting up from underneath them. Your gaze is forced onto the full moon, which pulses, just as it did last night. But instead of the terror you felt before, you are wracked with a desperate longing. Your tear ducts, compressed by sprouting mushroom caps, spill hot liquid down your swollen cheeks as you yearn to be whole again.

Hole in the Chair

Sean Enns

A question of reality or insanity.

My wife, Jenny, asks for the potatoes, but there's a hole in my chair. It's barely noticeable, and yet, I find my left finger drawn to it, poking at clumps of wadded, aged cotton through begrimed, brownish-green polyester that I might call *chartreuse* if it wasn't so putrid.

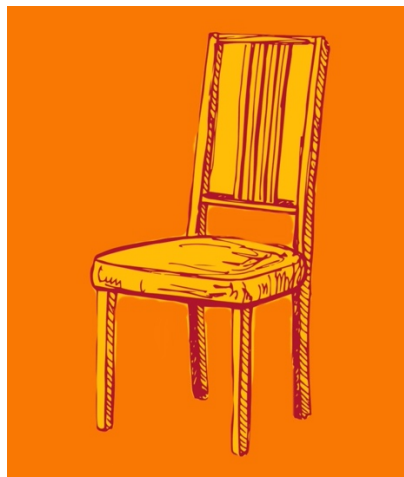
It's dinner time. We're having chicken, potatoes, and what Jenny calls a "vegetable medley," which is just peas and carrots. A medley, I explain to Jenny while not passing her the potatoes, would require a diverse assortment of vegetables in some sort of harmonious arrangement.

Jenny says there's also broccoli in the vegetable medley and reminds me that I agreed to take a break from being an "a-hole," and could I just pass the potatoes.

If only I *could* remove my finger and pass the lumpy potatoes, but my finger will not listen to reason. There is something in my chair, something alive and squirming, and my finger is reaching for it, and I, for once, am excited.

Jenny says it is I who am lumpy and not listening to reason and being ridiculous, and to stop picking at the chair. What she doesn't understand is that I believe I am about to come face to face, or rather, *finger* to faceless swirling mass of orbs, with *the Lurker at the Threshold* and the wet and squirmy thing within my chair: *Yog-Sothoth*.

It is not *Yog-Sothoth*, Jenny tells me, suggesting that perhaps I ought to check my ass and see if my finger is there. I tell Jenny this is doubtful, as my "ass" clearly exists in this dimension; but she is more than welcome to check if she likes, as anything she's likely to see would be an improvement over hauntingly terrible centerpiece she's installed at the dinner table.



Anyway, I am too busy to check my ass, as the hole in my chair has gotten much wider. It's now wide enough to see pulsating lights swirling against a writhing gargantuan, a mass of translucent, throbbing tentacles, orbs, and magenta fire. I see now that it is not *Yog-Sothoth* itself, but the avatar of the *All-in-One* the *Eater of Souls*: a mass of ineffable, quivering colours and shapes swirling around teeth like Swiss-Army knives; bent and broken into shapes to devour things I am incapable of comprehending. I should not look, I know, lest madness take me, but I cannot look away, cannot see Jenny's vulgar gesticulations in response to my summary judgement of her vile cooking.

I am afraid, and yet, I sense that my finger is not. Though it is attached to my hand, it is no longer *my* finger. It is operating on its own will, drawing what remains of my hand inside the universe-chair, whether to infinite knowledge and power or beyond, or to insanity, I know not.

Jenny says it hasn't, *it's just a chair*, and I am making her very, very sad, and maybe she should just leave, and what would I do then? I do not know, to be truthful, as at present I am less concerned with her departure and entirely preoccupied with the notion that my arm is in the chair up to my elbow, and my left finger has *left*, and isn't irony wonderful?

Jenny assures me that it is not wonderful. She asks whether we, just this once, could have a nice dinner without interdimensional chair-holes, or pan-galactic microorganisms, or whatever stupid excuse I'm using to not eat her food, which is perfectly fine.

I tell Jenny that I would relish the opportunity for a normal dinner, as soon as I am free from this paradox. I would also relish the opportunity for some relish for this chicken, as it is not, as she supposes, perfectly fine, and would she mind getting it from the fridge for me?

While I am waiting for Jenny to not pass me the relish, I realize that what I truly long for is to transcend this world of sad wives and desiccated chicken, to treat with *Yog-Sothoth* as *finger* treated and become something nameless and powerful as *finger* has. To be *in* the chair instead of being *on* the chair.

I close my eyes, as if to will it so, and suddenly I am falling through the hole in my chair and being devoured by *The Eater*. I sense that Jenny has crawled across the table and is tearing and screaming at the hole in my chair, but I can't hear. In the moments before my oblivion all that remains to me is pride as I witness the ascension of *finger*, my old friend and newborn *Other God*, bathed in a starburst of magenta light.

Modern Romance

Megan Zolorychi

Swimming in pools of chardonnay and vomit. Dating sucks.

I've decided it's time to adopt a cat because I don't want to die alone. I'm on my third glass of Chardonnay as I swipe through Hinge, then Tinder, then back through Hinge. If I see another bio that says, 'Looking for a bed buddy,' or a photo of a man wearing Oakley's and posing with a fish, I might barf.

I'm almost asleep in bed when my phone flashes on my nightstand. I gave up on the apps about an hour ago with hopes my dreams wouldn't be as desperate.

"Hey Rachel, want to do dinner?"

His name is Ben. I remember matching with him a week ago, but this is the first time he's messaged me. I stalk his profile quickly. He has no photos of fish and didn't use an eggplant emoji, so I say yes, dinner sounds nice, and turn off my phone.



The maître d' sits me at a table in the little Italian restaurant that to my surprise, Ben picked out. Early today, he had confirmed dinner for 6:30 this evening. I was impressed, excited even. However, it's already 6:35 and he isn't here. *Traffic, probably.*

I order myself another glass of Chardonnay, apparently a whole bottle last night wasn't enough. I make a point of taking small sips.

By the time Ben's fifteen minutes late, I'm gulping mouthfuls to drown my anxiety.

At 7:00 p.m. a man appears at my table. *Tall, dark features, no wedding ring, and even wears a watch; is that a Rolex?*

“Rachel, hi. Sorry I’m late!” Ben says as he pulls out a chair and sits down across from me.

“No worries,” I reply. “I just got here myself.” *Not totally true.*

Ben smiles. He has excellent teeth. He flags down the waitress and orders a shot of gin.

A shot of gin on a first date, okay, kind of weird, but that Rolex...

“So, Ben,” I say between gulps of Chardonnay, “tell me about yourself. What do you do?”

“I’m between jobs,” he says. “But I used to work in sales.”

The waitress delivers the shot of gin. He downs it and orders another before she leaves.

What the fuck is happening right now?

I ignore Ben’s lateness, unemployment, and apparent alcoholism and listen to him talk about his work as a car salesman. He’s worked at a few of the dealerships around town, like BMW and Acura. My body feels warm and I’m more invested in his slightly unbuttoned shirt.

“So, I have to tell you something,” Ben says, another shot of gin beside him.

“Shoot.”

Ben guzzles the shot and stands up from his seat.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. I want to have your ba—”

Ben gags and covers his mouth. Then he gags again, and projectile vomits gin and what looks like old pizza across the table. He slumps down in his chair and passes out. I sit with puke dripping down the front of my shirt and pooling in my lap. The waitress runs over, her eyes wide and mouth gaping.

“He’ll pick up the bill,” I say, then chug the rest of my Chardonnay. “Could you call me a taxi?”

She nods, and I get up and wait outside.

I’m back on my couch with Bread & Butter Chardonnay in my hand because I fucking deserve it. I’m scrolling through cat adoption agencies. My eyes feel heavy. I’m almost asleep when my phone flashes.

“Rachel, hi there. Coffee tomorrow?”

The next morning I’m sitting at a quaint French bakery. It’s absolutely perfect.

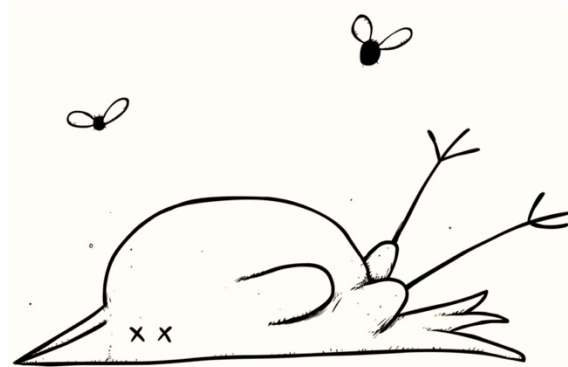
Best Friends

Jenny Helgren

Unexpected duos always have the most fun.

I often visit the lady in the blue house. She loves birds almost as much as I do. They flock to her trees and bird feeders. This morning, I ate three redpolls and a chickadee and washed them down with water from the bird bath. She's so thoughtful, my friend. And funny. She buries the leftover bones and feathers and says words that aren't allowed in *my* house.

The first time I met her, I'd just finished eating a baby finch. She rushed out the front door in her bathrobe, shouting and waving her arms. How did she know I love to play chase? The next day, she filled cans with dried peas, ran outside and chucked them at me, like dodgeball. Even more fun. I like to stand still for a few seconds before I take off. It gives her a better chance.



Sometimes we play hide-and-seek. One morning, I sat in the tree outside her bedroom window. As soon as she opened the curtains, there I was, ready to wish her good morning! She was so happy to see me, she screamed and raced outside with a broom. I'd never played chase with a broom before.

Yesterday, a man in a uniform set up a wire cage under the elm tree. My friend filled it with dishes of sardines and gourmet cat food. My very own picnic. It was kind of her to go to all that trouble, but I prefer the taste of tiny birds. I sat quietly in an elderberry bush and caught a nuthatch and a goldfinch. Sometime during the night, a skunk wandered into the cage. The door must have been broken. It slammed shut and he couldn't get out. He licked the dishes clean, but he was very angry. My friend was angry too. That picnic was supposed to be for me.

The lady in the blue house is so much fun. Next time she leaves her front door open, I'll slip inside and surprise her with one of *my* games.

The Room

Benjamin Banerd

Every artist dreams of a renaissance. This is yours.

You're stuck inside a body. Eyes plastered to the stipple ceiling. You hear dripping water from inside the walls as they begin to melt, beads of paint oozing to the floor. A portrait you'd sketched, centered on a lyre easel, rests unfinished. The empty man glares down at you, at your pallid body, and your bludgeoned head. A coarse, judgemental glare. You'd think him envious of a man who'd felt, least, the touch of colour.

Green eyes. Blonde hair. Red blood.

Dried blood – now covering your bedding and binding your flesh to the sheets. Across the room, slipping through the French doors of your closet, something viscid: a congealed, phthalo green sludge. It pools on the floor at the foot of the walk-in. You hear it sliding across the floorboards. Closer and closer. It paints a steady, glossy trail in its wake.

It reaches your bedside and stops.

On your bedside table, a still of your family: a child, wife, and brother at the market, smiling. It's been weeks since you'd been able to smile. Weeks of being bound to this purgatory devoid of sensation and motion. The warm blood pumping through a living heart – colour for an empty shell – is the only fixation you have left within you. Colour. Life.



One of your arms, splayed across the embroidered duvet, hangs halfway off the bed. The sludge climbs up the bed, along your arm, then disperses across your body. It becomes your skin. Soon, every toe, finger, and ears covered. In moments you feel warmth. Your toes begin to twitch. You can move a finger. You can pinch the duvet.

You turn to the photo and smile. You put a hand to your chest – you can put a hand to your chest!
And you feel the pulse of a beating heart.

Purple

Francesca Pacchiano

Instagram vs reality.

I'd never seen a naked woman before, at least not in person. With my charcoal poised and paper smoothed, I told myself it wouldn't be so bad. *Focus on the curves. It'll be like one of those body appreciation TikToks. #bodypositive #womenofart*

When the model entered, my blood went cold. He stood at the front of the room and took off his shirt. His skin sagged and wrinkled over a protruding potbelly. Liver spots mixed with white hairs tangled on his chest. The charcoal in my hand shook violently and speckled the paper with dark crumbs. The pants went next, thrown on the shirt in a heap. I hoped, prayed, and silently pleaded that he would stop there.



He took off his socks. The skin around his ankles indented with the ribbed pattern of the fabric. His toenails, yellowed and unkempt, had grown vertically. Soft scribbles filled the room. I struggled to breathe. He tucked his thumbs into the waistband of his grey briefs and pushed down.

And then, feet splayed, he squatted. Limp, purple, and completely exposed. He waited as if bored. My head spun and I tried to quell a gag. Someone snickered.

The guy beside me, his portrait already taking shape, whispered to his friend, "Thank God it's a man."

Sasquatch Sightings

Francesca Pacchiano

The truth is stranger than fiction and harrier

The time I saw a Sasquatch, Jim and I were driving in the Interior. I can't remember where now. We were passing a rest area when I saw him.

There were little trees all around the edge of the rest area but because we were going fast, I could see through them. He was going up the mountain side. His head was bent as he walked but, next to the leafy trees, he had to be eight feet tall. His arms hung down and his body was long, and he was covered in dark hair.

Jim didn't see him.

I always check the side windows when we drive because I've read more than one account of kids spotting one sitting up on a bank watching the vehicles go by. Most of the time I only see stumps and burned trees. If I'm lucky I'll see an elk or bear. But I knew instantly that this was different.

The first trip I went on was in the Port Alberni area. There were seven of us and we went out to a lake in an isolated area. The trip was put on by the Bigfoot Field Research Organization, [BFRO](#), from the States. The fellow who was at the head of the trip had all kinds of fancy gear including night vision goggles, but he didn't show up.

"I got two pieces of firewood and knocked them together."

The first night we went out by the lake where locals had heard Sasquatches before. There are a series of identifiable sounds they communicate with. They hoot, not as delicately as a dove or an owl but more like a monkey. They are known to 'tree knock' where they whack branches against the trunks of trees. And they hit their palms together in a muted kind of clapping. There was something behind us in the bushes that night at the lake. I could hear it moving and the snap of the branches underfoot, but it didn't make any of the identifiable sounds. If the leader of the expedition had shown up, we might have used the goggles to actually see the 'squatch.

The next time I went out was past Lake Cowichan, out Nitinat way. We went in the fall when the salmon were running and, of course, they would've been up on the rivers fishing. We didn't see or hear anything on that trip except for bear scat. But that was the time that I saw the cast. One of my fellow Sasquatch enthusiasts had discovered a footprint and made a cast of it out of plaster. It was rough and yellowing but a clear outline of a foot that was at least two and a half feet long.

On Christmas Eve of 2006, my youngest went outside for a cigarette and she heard a 'squatch. That was back when I had done all my research and I had everybody listen to what are supposed to be recordings of Sasquatches. They all teased me and rolled their eyes, I'm not even convinced they actually listened, but my youngest did.

She came back in and said, "Mom, Mom, there's one out here."



So, I went out with her and gave a "Hoot!" to imitate one I had heard before, but there wasn't any answer. I got two pieces of firewood and knocked them together. One flew out of my hand – rough chopped firewood is hard to hold – so I got a baseball bat and banged that on a piece of firewood. I'm pretty sure there was one out there because I could hear it down in the bushes.

That night, after we went to bed, my eldest and her daughter were sleeping in Jim's bedroom, which faces the backyard. I was in my room which faces the side and Jim was sleeping on the front porch because he likes to sleep outside.

My eldest was quite nervous and made me locked the doors. Ten minutes after we went to bed, I could hear the 'squatch. It sounded like it was banging its hands together. *Clap, clap, clap*. It happened about five or six times, I couldn't hear a response or tell if I was supposed to be the one to respond. 'Squatches are afraid of men but are known to communicate with women. But either way, it was pitch black outside so there was no sense in going out to look.

The next morning, I asked my eldest, "Did you hear anything last night?"
“

Hear it?” she said. “It was on the porch!”

But Jim didn't hear a darned thing.

Djeremiah Finch and the Djimmy Django Gang

Gabrielle Josefsson

Performed on the website by Dan Puglas

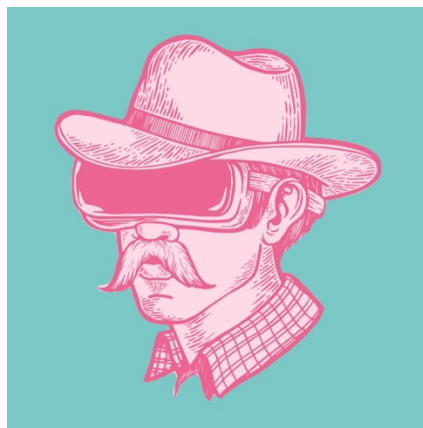
Cowboys, criminals, and consonance combine in this wacky Western adventure.

EXT. – OLD WESTERN HOMESTEAD - SUNSET

DJEREMIAH is seated in a rickety old rocking chair on the beaten-up porch of his modest ranch house. He is admiring a desert sunset while a herd of cattle grazes in the distance off the meager grasses in the fields, reminiscing.

DJEREMIAH

So, you wanna hear the story of how I became the sheriff of Buckdraw, do ya? Well, I'll tell ya, it all started with a visit to the old homestead west of Pearltown. I was wrangling a herd uh steer down the valley towards this very town when I decided to visit my little lady friend from my days as a young'un. Barbara Virginia Mary Carol Anne Sue was her name, and what a name it was. Rumor had it that her parents just couldn't decide what name to give her, so they mashed em' all together. Most cowpoke wouldn't bother with a woman with a handle like that, but not me. I'd still love her even if she had a hundred names or none at all. Barbara Virginia Mary Carol Anne Sue was as stubborn as a Texas longhorn and twice as horny. So, you can imagine my surprise when I arrived at her front porch to see her cryin' like a baby on the front step. I rushed to comfort her, and she told me that her family's entire fortune had been stolen when the bank of Buckdraw was robbed.



The infamous Djimmy Django gang had struck again. They were the most notorious bank robbin' cow stealin' train mobbin' puppy kickin' gang this part of the west had ever seen or heard. Three misfits who rode around on their stolen horses terrorizing anyone who laid eyes on 'em. There was Djonah Django, the youngest of the three, who was afflicted with the worst case of Mad Cow disease known to man. No amounts of ransacked drugstore medicine or doctor-prescribed cocaine could cure im', yet he refused to die. It made him twitchy, unpredictable and a real fiend with a bullwhip. The second was

Djoodi Django, a convent reject who was on a God-given mission to sow chaos wherever she went. The psycho nun gunslinger of Our Lady of Unfortunate Women's Convent house. She'd made a name for herself by single handedly ransacking brothels, saloons, and banks. Proclaiming that her mission was to rain bullets upon the serpents of the West and that when God gives you his toughest battles, so too does he give you his biggest gun.

Finally, there was the big man himself. Djimmy Django: fiercest lean in the west. That slimy son of a second-hand salamander was famous for strutin' into town like a scoliosis-riddled rooster. His chin rested squarely on his chest, back bent back like a tabletop and his crotch thrust way forward like he was liftin' his whole body up by the pockets of his chaps. Djimmy Django had never lost a duel, his head and chest were too low to the ground that no man could shoot im' and so he was free to wreak havoc wherever he went. I'd heard the stories, but I knew what I had to do.

I rode out to Buckdraw the very next morning and made an open challenge to the Djimmy Django gang. Duel me at sundown, winner gets the town and everything in it. No tricks, no backup, just ten paces and one bullet to decide Buckdraw's fate. They'd yee'd their last haw round these parts and I was gonna make sure of it. Sure enough, Djimmy sauntered under the saloon door at high noon that very day and accepted the challenge. Djonah and Djoodi stood on the sidelines, contemplatin'. Djonah seemed to have a rare moment of reprieve from his constant twitchin' and shakin'. Sizin' me up before spittin' a mouthful of foam into a nearby spittoon. Djoodi counted the shotgun pellets of her makeshift rosary, no doubt askin' God if I needed to be taught a Smith and Lesson. They had no reason to believe that Djimmy would lose. After a firm handshake from Djimmy the gang left the saloon without much ruckus and the duel was on.

Djimmy Django Gang and I met on main street just as the sun dipped behind the mountains. We loaded, we turned, we walked ten paces, then we shot. Djimmy's shot barely missed but mine struck home. I didn't kill im' but I blew the nose clean of his face, the message was clear. There was finally someone in town who knew how to shoot below the waist. The unshootable Djimmy Django had done got himself shot by a lowly cattle rancher. The other degenerates panicked and scrambled to collect their boy. I fired a couple more warning shots into the air in case Djoodi and Djonah got any funny ideas and added a "Go on, git!" for good measure. As they rode out of town I yelled out "Y'all'd've never gotten into this mess if you'd kept to yerselves!" and no one has seen em' in these parts ever since. As for Barbara Virginia Mary Carol Anne Sue and me, we used the reward money that I'd earned chasin' those hooligans outta town to have ourselves a nice little wedding and buy a little house together. I was named Sheriff of Buckdraw for my exploits, and we're expecting our little Djuliette or Djoseph to be born next fall.

Documenting my Pastor Grandma's Movie Experiences

Whitley Dunn

A grandmother's love for the weirdly magical: from tall blue people to small enchanted halflings, this pastor grandmother can't get enough of these wonderfully magical worlds

Part 1: Grandma & Her Habits

As the title suggests, my grandma is a pastor. Technically, she's a retired pastor *and* a chaplain. So, as you can imagine, she's a very religious woman. This is something that always surprises people. They wouldn't guess that the gothic redhead in front of them has such a religious grandparent.

Growing up, she was the type of religious who wrote scripture into every holiday card. She has relaxed since then and has even allowed herself to take in certain movies that would make her cringe in her skin years ago.

Some of the movies we introduce her to are a complete hit, and she'll go about watching them again as she does chores. The misses make the poor seventy-four-year-old squirm in her seat.

For some reason, Dad thought letting her watch *Bad Santa* with us for Christmas last year was a good idea. Between the sex scenes and the main character saying "god-damn" as filler in every sentence he uttered, we knew it was a mistake.

My grandma's major habit when we watch anything is asking what it's about, what will happen and why the characters do what they do. She says it takes away stress, so that way, she can just enjoy what we are watching.

I get it. I have comfort shows I stick to, so I'm not surprised by a sudden twist, and the times I give something new a chance, I inevitably google it. True heartbreak is when you search for your new favourite character and auto-complete shows "death scene" right after.

The strange thing is my grandma switches between claiming she's watched said movie to claiming she has no memory of watching said movie. It's always a toss-up.

We put on a cartoon when Dad and I aren't in the mood to explain a movie and just want something more wholesome.

We watched both *Wreck-It Ralph* movies with Grandma, and when we asked her if she liked them. This was the conversation.

Me: *You seem like you enjoyed both movies.*

Grandma: *I did! The big one, what's his name again?*

Dad: *Ralph.*

Grandma: *Oh no, that's not his name.*

Dad: *Mom, it's Ralph. It's in the title Wreck-It Ralph.*

Grandma: *No, it was Felix.*

Me: *That's the other guy.*

Grandma: *Oh... I thought that's why the big man was so angry in the first movie. That everything was named after the small guy with the shiny hammer.*

Part 2: Gollum

Somehow we convinced my grandma to watch *The Hobbit* trilogy a year and a half ago. A series that is infamously known for its magic system and fantasy world. This is also the same woman who REFUSED to let any of her children watch Fantasia (yes, the one with Mickey Mouse) because it had magic.

She sat through all three movies wide-eyed, deeply invested in the journey and even managed to sit through all of the magic duels without the squirming taking place. The only exception was the battle between Gandalf and Galadriel versus Sauron in the third movie.

So, how did we get her to agree to this? Was it the high cheek boned elves? The rugged Dwarfs? The brave and loveable Hobbits?

It was Gollum.

Yes, THIS Gollum. She doesn't even refer to Gollum as Gollum. Nor does she refer to him as Smeagol. She calls him "Precious" and is convinced that is his name. If you try to correct her, she does an impression to prove her point that his name really is "Precious".

There was also the incident with Smaug.

Grandma watched the whole movie with us, and we asked what she thought of the movie. She looks at us and says, *"I loved it, but I'm confused about what happened to the gold dragon. Why would the mean black one leave him behind?"*

The scene in question is when Thorin and company cover Smaug in gold to kill him. Only for Smaug to break out of the mountain, shake off the gold and fly towards Lake-town to wreak havoc.

Dad and I exchanged a look at her question. *"The gold dragon?"*

Confident in her answer, she doesn't falter. We told her there was no gold dragon. That it was Smaug, she didn't seem impressed before moving on and asking when we would see her "Precious" again.

She wasn't happy when we told her he wouldn't appear till the next series, and she was even more disappointed when she saw how mean he really was.

Part 3: Giant Blue People With Tails

Avatar... My grandma has been obsessed with this movie ever since 2009. I have no idea where my grandma's love for it started. Something about giant blue people with tails has stolen her heart.

So much so that she's watched it at least a hundred times. I'm not kidding. She has the whole thing memorized. She watches it once a month, maybe twice, if she's feeling really wild and wants to go back to Pandora to see Jake and Neytiri again.

I asked her what made her love the movie so much. She said, "They have such strong principles. I know I'm religious in what I believe in, and they are too. They stood behind what they believe in with the tree, Pandora as a whole, and everyone who lives on it."

She was extremely excited when she found out the second movie was *finally* coming out. Even more excited when she heard there were three more to follow.

We had to give her a heads-up that they were removing the first one from Disney+ to encourage people to see it in theatres before the new one is released. This is how that conversation went:

Grandma: *The new one is out! Marian and I are going to see it.*

Dad: *That's the first one. I told you they are putting it back in theatres for a bit before the second one comes out in December.*

Grandma: *You did tell me that...*

Dad: *I know I did.*

Grandma: *YOU SUCK!*

I asked her how she felt about the second movie. She said, “I loved it! But the first one is always going to be my favourite. Even if I could watch the second one on TV right now, I would still go for the first one.”



Superstition FAQ

Francesca Pacchiano

Rational explanations for the supernatural.

What is superstition?

It's a credulous belief in anything strange or supernatural. A quick Google Search says that correlation is unjustified to equate to causation, however, there is a traditional, cultural element at play in superstition. Is that right? That depends on what you believe. My roommate, Greg, for example, thinks our apartment is haunted, but he was raised Roman Catholic, so he thinks everything is haunted. From the time he was a toddler his mom told him about demonic and ghostly explanations for common superstitions. Does that mean he's right or wrong? No. That's just his frame for existence.

I keep seeing repeating numbers, is that a sign?

Numbers are everywhere. The world is built on maths. Sequences are the core of how the earth works. We spin on a rotational axis with an exact amount of tilt so the sun doesn't kill us. We are in the Goldilocks sweet spot of the solar system. Fibonacci's spirals are all around us. Ones, threes, thirteens, these numbers are what keeps us in symmetry, in balance. Can repeating numbers mean something outside of science? Only if you want them to.

Pythagorous believed numbers to be vibrations and that our reality was the physical manifestation of them. Numerology assigns value from unseen ancestors or spirits in the fifth dimension who use numbers in patterns to send messages. For example, after a shower last week, the numbers 6161 were scrawled in the fog on my bathroom mirror. Greg said it was a sign that the 'devil was testing us.' Greg, however, had used the bathroom before I did, and he likes to play pranks. Also, I told him about this column. So, Greg, if you're reading: Ha, ha.



Are black cats bad luck?

Black cats get a bad rep. The witch hunts of the 16th century associated black cats with witchcraft when the church said the devil could take the form of a black cat. But that was an unfair belief formed

in fear. Before that, the church had cats eradicated which led to an uprising of rats during the Bubonic Plague. Black cats are loving and intelligent companions. I would have a cat but Greg is allergic to them. My neighbourhood is full of delightful black cats and I have not had bad luck. In fact, one of them snuck into our apartment a few weeks ago and it was lovely. I did miss my connecting bus and I was late to work but that's because I overslept. The cats had nothing to do with it. Greg, however, broke out in hives and puked all night. Nothing that a little Allegra didn't fix. Right, Greg?

Is my house haunted?

Did the lights flicker? Was the WIFI low in one corner of the kitchen? Perhaps there've been sudden drops in temperature in your living room, or unexplained footsteps coming from the attic? I'd say it was the storm we had last week rather than an ectoplasmic house guest. Also, you should probably buy a new router.

Have you ever played with a Ouija board? The planchette seems to move on its own to spell out words and messages, proving, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that phantoms, demons, and poltergeists exist. Right? Wrong. Ideomotor movements are what cause the "ghost" to speak. It's your own subconscious movements. You want it to speak and so it does. Greg and I played this a couple weeks ago. We tried "contacting" the spirit of his Hungarian aunt on his dad's side, but we were only able to get a hold of some guy named Belial. Wrong number, I guess. Greg, the perpetual worrier that he is, freaked out and tried smudging the apartment with sage afterwards and burned his finger. Served him right, that's cultural appropriation, at least, I'm pretty sure it was.

What should I do if I hear buzzing in my house?

You've been on one of those ghost tours. You thought you saw the woman walking the halls of Beban House and now she's followed you home. Did the gooseflesh creep up your arms? Did you hear the rattle of teacups and saucers? Look, if you're really worried about it, *tinkle the last two keys on the piano. It hates that.* But let's be honest, this is just your imagination. You wanted to see something, so you did, and now your imagination won't leave you alone.

Greg, for example, was obsessed with the wall between our living room and kitchen. He thought it was buzzing and that someone, or something, was communicating through the noise. He couldn't, however, effectively communicate what the message was or who it was from. I got tired of watching him press his ear against the wall, nodding, and even whispering to it, so I called our landlord, and he called pest control. The exterminator cut open the wall and found a giant beehive. It was probably five feet across and teamed with thousands of honeybees. Greg cried when he removed the hive, but I was happy. I mean, there were at least five thousand honeybees in there. It must have really bolstered the population! #Savethebees.

I broke my mirror, am I cursed?

For seven years. No, goddammit. You're not cursed. It's a mirror. It's glass with a coating of a metal amalgam that makes it reflective, not a portal to the spirit world. They break. Get a broom and clean it up. Make sure to wrap the glass in a paper bag or something so you don't cut the garbage bag. And just stop worrying. You'll be fine. A message Greg has not seemed to have received. Since the removal of the beehive, his obsession has only grown. Who the heck needs *Minera Dead Sea Salt* stacked around the house like sandbags warding off a flood? That was our rent money. It apparently angered the 'spirit' to remove the hive and a salt circle is the next logical step in protection. The next *logical* step is to get psychiatric help.

How do you protect against spirits trying to kill you?

Greg? Is that you? Have you been writing all these questions? For the last time, we *do not* have a spirit in the house.

Let me guess. You felt something shove you. You heard a voice suggest something you wouldn't normally think. Perhaps you felt something sit on your chest while you were in bed. These are all common occurrences and simple mind tricks. You're probably overtired, have you tried taking magnesium?

Greg is under the impression the 'spirit' is opening a portal to hell in his bedroom. He claims to have woken up levitating above his bed. The floor, he said, was a swirling pit of molten red hellfire that burned his skin. I, however, never saw any sort of portal to 'hell.' He showed me a nasty burn on his back, but when I inspected his room for evidence, all I found were cat hairs in his bed. Obviously, this is nothing more than a delusion filled, allergic reaction to the lovely strays that keep sneaking into our apartment. So, Greg, if you're reading this, take your fucking Allegra!

The Squicky Side of the Cosmos: An Interview with Scott R. Jones

Sophia Wasylinko

From a millenarian apocalypse cult to searching for that profound shiver, Jones gives us his insight on writing the weirdest of fiction. Sophia Wasylinko investigates weird fiction, cults, and more in “The Squicky Side of the Cosmos: An Interview with Scott R. Jones.”

Weird. Unusual. Lovecraft. Blackwood. Cthulhu. All part of that undefinable, unsettling, yet irresistible world of weird fiction.

While traces of weird fiction can be found in genres such as horror, fantasy, and sci-fi, it doesn't explicitly fit within the style and rules of genre fiction. The horror is subdued, the fantasy is dark, the science fiction is stripped of scientific jargon. Although there are now places like [Weird Horror Magazine](#) and [Cosmic Horror Monthly](#) that accept weird fiction, these stories traditionally have had limited commercial opportunities despite their dedicated fanbase

Publication does not guarantee success, and some weird fiction writers only achieved fame after their demise, with more fading into obscurity. [H.P. Lovecraft](#) is their grandfather, controversial as his legacy is. More recent authors such as [China Miéville](#) and [Mona Awad](#) are writing weird fiction for a new generation.

On Vancouver Island, we have [Scott R. Jones](#). A weird fiction writer and editor, he lives in Victoria with his wife and children. He was nominated for the [LOCUS Award](#) for his debut novel [Stonefish](#) (2020), while his short story collection *Shout Kill Revel Repeat* (2019) was nominated for the [Sunburst Award](#).

I asked Jones to spill the secrets behind weird fiction. Additional commentary and information provided by yours truly are in the square brackets.



Wasylinko. What is weird fiction? How would you define it for someone new to the term?

Jones. I think of weird fiction as horror by way of the uncanny.

Wasylinko. What sets weird fiction apart from horror or dark fantasy?

Jones. There's an unsettling element to good weird fiction that you find only rarely in horror and never in dark fantasy, I think. There is a quality of awe to good weird fiction that often earns it the label "[cosmic horror](#)." Humanity is small, the universe is beyond good and evil and populated by alien god-things that drive one mad. Good times!

[To put it simply, cosmic horror is the fear of the unknown and forces outside your control. Instead of tangible monsters that can be defeated, you have an unforgiving void with superpowered creatures that reduce humans to pathetic ectoplasms. Cosmic horror is also called "Lovecraftian horror" after the OG himself.]

Wasylinko. How did you get started with weird fiction?

Jones. Lovecraft by way of [Ramsey Campbell](#), actually. I started with Campbell and he put me on to Lovecraft.

[Ramsey Campbell has been in the weird fiction/horror business for fifty years. His first professionally published piece, "The Church in High Street," was published by [Arkham House](#), a weird fiction imprint founded by Lovecraft's friends and colleagues. Many of Campbell's stories are set in Brichester in the [Severn Valley](#), a fictionalized version of his hometown in Liverpool, England. Three of Campbell's novels—*The Nameless*, *The Pact of the Fathers*, and *The Influence*—were made into Spanish films.]

Wasylinko. What is your favorite weird fiction author, novel, and/or story?

Jones. [Nathan Ballingrud](#)'s first novel, *The Strange*, is coming out soon which is exciting as I've been a fan of his short fiction for a while.

[You may be familiar with Ballingrud if you're subscribed to Hulu. *Wounds* (also released on Netflix) is based on his novella *The Visible Filth*, while *Monsterland* is based on *North American Lake Monsters: Stories*. *The Strange* are in bookstores as of March 21.]

Wasylinko. Where do you get your inspiration for weird horror? Are there any special routines or rituals you do to get the creative juices flowing?

Jones. I'm very interested in [Gnosticism](#) and [simulation theory](#) and the occult so I mine from my readings in those subjects, but also I had the fortune to grow up in a [millenarian apocalypse](#) cult and that does things to a mind. As for routines, I'm mostly a sit-down-and-write writer. Get the tap running and inspiration follows.

[Wait. A *cult*?!]

Wasylinko. Tell me more about this cult.

Jones. If you're only familiar with them as the people who knock on your door on a Saturday morning to pimp some Jesus at you, you wouldn't know the Jehovah's Witnesses to be a millenarian apocalypse cult but that's exactly what they are and I grew up within that cult. My father was a local cult leader (called an "elder") and so were my uncles, and, until I escaped in my late twenties I was on the fast track to being one myself. Happily, I saw some kind of light from somewhere and woke up, but it's been a hard road, I can tell you that for free. I'm incorporating more and more JW lore into my current attempts at fiction but the reality of the cult is far far worse: industrial scale cover up of child sexual abuse within the international JW community, tens of thousands murdered by their "blood doctrine" (they aren't allowed to take blood transfusions, basically) and their rampant misogyny and homophobia. They really are a treat. Anyway, stay well clear.

[The Jehovah's Witnesses state that they are not a cult, since they have no fixed human leader and they allow members to make their own decisions. Communities have faced persecution in countries such as China and under the Nazi Party, and they have been targeted in smaller attacks including one on March 9 in Hamburg, Germany. However, they've also come under fire for the reasons Jones mentioned. All in all, the Jehovah's Witnesses exist in a gray area of "almost but not quite a cult" that's best left untouched.]

Wasylinko. What is your favorite weird fiction trope or theme? Have you noticed any recurring themes in your own work?

Jones. I love the 'narrator writing down his fate as it happens to him' trope. "That hand! The window! The window!" from Lovecraft's *Dagon* being the classic example. When it's done well, though, or cleverly approached, I dig it. My own themes currently seem to be camouflage, forbidden knowledge, spirituality, and reality-as-simulation.

Wasylinko. You've written a lot of weird fiction and also edited it. Is there a difference with how you approach weird fiction in another person's work versus your own?

Jones. I'm looking for that profound shiver of the uncanny in both cases. I know what I like / what works when I see it.

Wasylinko. What do you do when you're not writing weird fiction?

Jones. I am a humble supplicant of Hermes in service to King and country under the banner of Canada Post Corporation. I'm a mailman.

[Readers, take note: Your mail carrier may be a writer.]

Wasylinko. What advice do you have for people who want to write weird fiction?

Jones. If they want to write it then they've probably already read it and that's key. Weird fiction tends to make writers out of readers.

Wasylinko. People might be interested in reading weird fiction after seeing this interview. What stories or novels would you recommend to them? Anything from your own bibliography?

Jones. I'd recommend [Laird Barron](#), [Gemma Files](#), Nathan Ballingrud to start. My own 2019 collection, *[Shout Kill Revel Repeat](#)*, is available wherever you buy books.

[AKA: [Amazon](#), [Barnes & Noble](#), [AbeBooks](#), [Indigo](#) (online) You might have a hard time finding a copy in a physical bookstore.]

Wasylinko. Finally, what does the word “gooey” mean to you?

Jones. Something squicky with an organic element to it, perhaps some species of sentient protoplasm. From ectoplasms to denizens of Darkness, weird fiction isn't something you can easily look for. When it comes, it takes you by surprise, paralyzing you until it slowly seeps away to lodge in a corner of your mind. Then you pick up your pen and paper—or, since this is the 21st-century, your laptop—and write, hoping to recapture a fragment of your weird experiences.

Your Own Mental Case Study

Cynthia deConinckSmith

What happens when you cross social yearning with a fictional case study?

Quarantine was hard on everyone. People started new hobbies like baking and watching new shows. Others gained odder hobbies, like running a cult-like blog and answering questions by channelling their inner narcissistic solipsist. This is exactly what Gracie Olson spent her time doing over the summer of Quarantine 2020.

Olson is your typical young adult. She's in her last year of her psychology degree at The University of Georgia, she lives at home with her parents in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. And she does digital art commissions on the side to help pay for school. Once you get past all of this, that's where you get to know the real Olson.

Twenty-year-old Olson created a small community that followed her for her online blog, now hidden and archived as a reminder of her 2020 summer, and specifically her portrayal of the horror character Patrick Hockstetter from Stephen King's *IT*.

Patrick Hockstetter is one of the main antagonists. Most readers remember him for his disgusting hobbies of putting dead animals in a refrigerator, collecting dead flies in his pencil case and killing his brother because he thought his brother was going to be more powerful than himself.

Real fun guy, right?

Olson gained an interest in him not just because of that twisted 'bad boy' type, but because of his psyche. She became interested in his thought process. To explore it she created a blog where followers could ask the character questions and she drew him answering the questions the way she thought he would. This grew project to be something bigger than she had ever imagined.

Olson was able to give others an escape from their COVID-19 world and give them a new interesting 'friend'.

Olson: When the pandemic started, my family was one of those families that took the pandemic really seriously. People were dying a lot around [Atlanta], so we were like, 'we aren't even leaving the house'. There was the group of people that were going out with masks and was vaccinated and all that, but we were the family that didn't leave the house, period. We had groceries delivered. We were completely isolated. It was just me and my shiny new art tablet on the couch. And I was like, 'how am I going to kill time?' So, I took that as an opportunity to really start drawing seriously...I believe I started in May and I believe I closed the account in October. I'm pretty sure that was the timeline...It was a summer project. It...gave me a way to interact with people and draw constantly because I think at the peak of

that account when I was paying attention, I was drawing that man [Patrick Hockstetter] for six hours a day, every day. That was a full-time job.

Interviewer: *And at this point, you weren't getting paid for that, as you are now.*



Olson: I was not getting paid for that, that was fully a hobby. But, doing that, helped me develop the drawing skills I needed to get paid. So, thanks to Patrick, I can get commission work now. I owe him my job.

One of the main draws of the blog was how gory it could get and how Olson never seemed to stray away from a question. She entertained people sending her gory asks, sending asks of obscene requests they wanted to be done to them, and questions about Patrick's overall mental state. The odd blog attracted the odder parts of everyone and the curiosity of many.

The main draw of the blog for me, however, was how it changed Olson after creating it.

Below is an excerpt of the interview where we talk about just how much into character, she would go without realizing it and the effect it had on her thereafter.

Interviewer: *So, you started Method Acting almost?*

Olson: It was heavy method acting. Yeah. 'Cause I would think about stuff for a really long time. People would send me a question and I would take like, a few hours to be like 'Okay this is how I would respond to this. But how would [Patrick] respond to this? Where is the disagreement in the way we think?' It led me to do a lot of research and it's like, okay well, narcissists think like this. But if you push it a step further into solipsism, then, the approach would be different.

"I was basically living in this headspace of what would he think what would he do, and I started to notice myself acting like that."

Interviewer: *And solipsism is believing you're god and no one else is real, correct?*

Olson: Yeah, it actually has roots in philosophy. It's not even necessarily a mental disorder. People have been debating this as a reality. As people, we don't accept that because we have morals, we have empathy for others. But I believe that if you have that solipsism ideology and you have narcissistic tendencies, then that would lead you to view the world in a completely different way where you are god and everything around you is just something to fuck with. You're bored. You're bored and everyone exists to entertain you.

Gracie told me that while doing this, she actually ended up changing her major at university from nursing to psychology as the deep diving she was doing was so intriguing to her. She was even ahead of her class at times as she had already done rather in-depth research on ways of thinking like solipsism and narcissism.

Interviewer: *Did you notice any changes to your own psyche that you think, or even look back on and think, 'oh, this is because I got too into it or didn't pull myself back in soon enough'?*

Olson: See, this is something I think about a lot, and it bothers me on some levels because I think I did take it too far. I was basically living in this headspace of what would he think what would he do, and I started to notice myself acting like that. I would use to take pictures of myself for reference, right? If I needed a pose, I would just take a picture of myself. And he is very scrawny and lanky, right? So, I would take pictures and I would be like 'this isn't quite right' so then I would start getting on, like, I lost twenty pounds to make it short.

Interviewer: *It essentially led to an eating disorder?*

Olson: Yeah, it led to me not eating. And I don't think that would have happened otherwise. But I am boarding underweight as of now. This is three years ago we are talking.

As the summer of 2019 turned into fall, the pressure of drawing without pay and the looming duties of school eventually made her shut down her blog, despite the cries and pleas of those who wanted her to continue drawing. She said she didn't regret closing the blog and leaving that part of her behind. She had perfected her art and found a love for psychology through it.



Specific Images by Evan Shumka

"Specific Images" is a collage of doodles from my notebook. They were drawn during poetry classes in the fall of 2021. This makes the doodles poetry by association.

Contributors

Kate Apland

A young, aspiring artist, Kate has no desire to stick to social norms. Making art to try and express what the inside of her brain looks like when words can't describe it! Bright colours, aliens, dinosaurs, eyeballs, and the simply strange are what floats inside her head. She enjoys creating art not only in oil pastels and acrylics, but also through clothing and makeup. Kate's end goal is to one day teach and give teenagers a safe environment to express themselves through art, in the same way as the artists in her life provided for her.

Benjamin Banerd

Benjamin is a writer of dark, horror fiction. His gingerly, key-board stomping kitten who he loves to bits, should be accredited, instead, as the main author of each and every one of his works. Though he lifts and games, he also makes one wicked omelet. "Live by the pan, get fried by the pan!" Oh, and he's a flash-fiction writer and editor in this strange magazine you've found yourself reading, if you're wondering...

Cynthia deConinckSmith

Cynthia enjoys dressing up her fuzzy little boy in various hats and doing large embroidery projects with little to no experience. She can usually be found in her room with her many plush friends and assorted knickknacks.

Whitley Dunn

Meet Whitley: She uses sarcasm and self-deprecating humour as a love language. You can often find her playing The Sims 4 to escape her responsibilities and crying when she has to update her mods. P.S., Whit will always choose her cat over you. That's just a given, sorry.

Maria Elsser

Maria Elsser is an aspiring author residing on Salt Spring Island. She has put her degrees in English Lit and Creative Writing from VIU to excellent use by managing a hardware store. Her favourite activities include running, reading, cooking, consuming too much caffeine, and writing stories about bad things happening to terrible people. Her works have been previously published in The Nav, Portal, The Mitre, and Incline Magazine.

Sean Enns

Sean Enns is a playwright and writer of fiction who writes dark and tragicomic stories, who draws on his deep love and knowledge of myth, lore, legend, and classic stories from around the world to create modern-day fairy tales for the stage and page. To see what he's up to, visit www.seanenns.com

Jenny Helgren

Jenny Helgren is a graduate of McGill University. She has taught in Quebec, British Columbia, Nunavut, and Alberta. She lives in Nanaimo and is working on a degree in Creative Writing at Vancouver Island University. She has contributed pieces to That High Lonesome Sound, Beyond Bad Times: An Anthology of North American Poetry, Portal 2020, and The Prairie Journal.

Kim Hunter

Kim Hunter is a VIU student, majoring in Creative Writing and History. Her contributions to GOOEY were many photos of graffiti tags, in which a part of her finger was unintentionally included, a photo of a dead bird and baked goods at the launch party. What kind of baked goods is undecided at the time of writing of this biography. Kim was born on her birthday.

Gabrielle Josefsson

Gabrielle E. Josefsson is an emerging freelance writer from Vancouver Island. She specializes in horror, fantasy, and sci-fi, but is also branching out into creative non-fiction. Her work has previously been published in the Nosleep Podcast and she is a Fiction editor as well as a contributor here at GOOEY. She loves anything involving gods and monsters (Greek mythology excluded) and believes the secret to being a good writer is read your preferred genres frequently and to wake up in abject terror between 1:00-3:00am at least twice a week. She can be contacted at Gabrielle.E.Josefsson@gmail.com for professional inquires.

Susan Juby

Susan Juby thinks that an AI could run for a hundred thousand years and never come up with the likes of GOOEY.

#proudmomimeanpublisher

#goteam

#ihaveseenthefutureanditisgooeey

#blessings

#grateful

Henry Osborne

Henry Osborne invented the English language, Hotmail, and cherry flavoured Pop Tarts. He was the first person to swim butterfly across the Pacific Ocean and is personal friends with Tupac Shakur. He has written and published many books, including, but not limited to, Moby-Dick, The Meaning of Relativity, Harry Potter, and Frankenstein. Currently at the end of his very long and illustrious career, Henry works as the editorial director of GOOEY Magazine – a title he won in an arm-wrestling competition with people much weaker than he is. He presides over GOOEY's meagre staff, ensuring they feel appreciated and that they properly execute his vision. He's one of the smartest people alive, has been the finalist for the Miss Universe beauty pageant twice, is positively swimming in money, and is very good at lying.

Francesca Pacchiano

Fran Pacchiano is the mom friend of the group. She became the artistic director of GOOEY with experience from a past job where she'd lied on her resume and googled the answers. She aspires to be a little old lady in a house at the end of the street who gives cookies to children, and who grows oleander flowers for her bees.

Dan Puglas

Dan Puglas is the current president of Reconciliation Theatre. He is a rad cool dude. He likes to hop, skip, prance and does most things artistically. Also the voice actor on "Djeremiah Finch and the Djimmy Django Gang."

Evan Shumka

Evan Shumka is a writer, actor, and artist from the Cowichan Valley, though frequently sighted in Nanaimo. The meaning of his last name is disputed. Different sources have claimed a variety of translations, including: "whirlwind," "spatula," "cured ham," and "noise." Some of these words describe him better than others.

L.E. Warde

L. E. Warde is a queer writer from the lush and transcendental realm of Vancouver Island. When they aren't endlessly poring over books and articles in a desperate attempt to finish their degree, they can be seen just out of the corner of your eye, watching. Should you encounter them deep in the temperate rainforest, leave an offering of a frog-shaped knick knack and run the other way. Do not look back.

Sophia Wasylinko

Sophia Wasylinko is a writing student but spends her free time listening to K-pop or bingeing YouTube. (Oh, and reading for fun.) Give her a Stray Kids concert ticket and you'll be her BFF. Warning: She's bad at taking selfies.

Megan Zolorycki

Meet Megan: She doesn't know how to fold a fitted sheet, only coping mechanisms are google docs, and thinks laughing at her mental health is better than solving it. Easily bribed with pickle flavoured chips and Chardonnay.