



GOOEY **magazine**

self-absorbed and deeply meaningless

#02

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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 Jack Corfield, Whitley Dunn, Lee Groen, Henry Osborne, Francesca Pacchiano, Jenaya Shaw, and Sophia Wasylinko.

Volume 2

Hunger

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Respectfully, we recognize the traditional and unceded territory of the Snuneymuxw, Quw’utsun, and Tla’amin peoples on whose land we have the privilege of living, working, and creating this magazine. We want to honour the sovereignty, histories, languages, knowledge systems, land and cultures of the Coast Salish Peoples; and we offer this place of storytelling in service to the process of reconciliation and healing from the harms of colonialism.

GOOEY magazine is an online publication that can be viewed globally and we reflect on where these stories come from. Many of the contributors are students at Vancouver Island University 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.

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From the Desk of the Overlords

You are a bird. Newly hatched and still covered in drying amniotic fluid. Your shell is discarded at the edge of the nest and you're cold without it. You wait with your siblings, mouths open, screaming for your mother to bring you food. You have no concept of how long she has been gone, only that you are hungry.

GOOEY is your mother and we have heard your screams. You thought, in our absence, that we forgot about you. You thought that we flew off to the edges of the world that you can only imagine from the safety of your nest. As a mother bird, we have flown, leaving you only out of love, and searched for the best morsels to feed you with. Now we have returned, with juicy worms and jeweled beetles clasped in our beak. This is our feast for you.

The Lords of GOOEY have worked long, unpaid hours to bring you this collection of bizarre, heartfelt, and scary stories. GOOEY would not exist without them. They are GOOEY incarnate: its eyes, its feet, its fingers which are inexplicably sticky with honey.

The stories themselves are a testament to the hunger that eats away at all of us. The authors whose stories are gathered here have poured their souls out onto these pages. They have felt the hunger that drives GOOEY. Gnawing at their stomachs—it calls to them as you have called to us—until they can no longer ignore it and must follow where it leads.

We hope you're hungry.

GOOEY

Wet Lips, Demon Kiss

Sophia Wasylinko

It had been a long day of class and studying. Now it was 9 p.m., and I was back in my suite.

Okay, calling it a “suite” was generous: average bedrooms, closet-sized bathroom, and a kitchen twice that size. Not worth \$950 per month, but hey, you take what you can get.

As I settled in for a night of homework, my ears picked up on a loud smacking sound coming from my roommate Ali’s side of the wall. It took me a moment before I realized she was making out with her boyfriend, Rod.

The sound was disgusting. It reminded me of fish lips opening and closing. I hadn’t really noticed it before. Then again, Ali and Rod had only started dating recently, even though they knew each other longer than I knew her.

I wasn’t a prude, but I didn’t appreciate the noise. And if I was being completely honest, there was some jealousy mixed in with the desire for peace and quiet. After all, I had yet to get a peck on the cheek from a *Homo Sapiens* outside my family.

The osculation intensified, and I flinched, telling myself simultaneously to stop having such a visceral reaction to a normal part of the mating ritual. It wasn’t as if Ali and Rod were having sex.

Immediately, my mind went to unwanted places. *No. PLEASE don’t imagine it.*

Shaking my head, I returned to my Liberal Studies essay, which was due the following evening and which, like a responsible student, I’d procrastinated on. The topic was dreams and insomnia in 19th-century literature, the most exciting topic I could have chosen.

Highlighting a block of text to cite later, I bit into a chicken leg. Usually, I didn’t order in, but I’d denied myself gastronomic pleasures all semester. Hence the Korean fried chicken, with black coffee for maximum caffeine and stimulus.

Setting the bone down, I licked my fingers, ignoring my mom’s exhortations to, “use a napkin like a respectable human being.” The gochujang and soy sauce blended with the juicy meat to create a symphony of flavors. I let out a sigh of happiness.

Which came out like a moan.

I tensed, wondering if the others had heard. Nothing, except for laughter and more mouth-on-mouth action.

That’s enough chicken for one night.

I’d just put the leftovers into the fridge when Ali and Rod entered the kitchen, wearing their shoes and coats. “Hey, Hannah. How’s it going?” she asked.

I shrugged. “It’s going. Got an assignment due tomorrow.”

She winced. “Ouch. Good luck.”

“Thanks.” I gave them a sly smile. “Going somewhere?”

Ali blushed. “Nothing fancy, just burgers and fries.”

I laughed. “Okay. Have fun, you two.”

How I wished there was someone to take me out for a romantic dinner. Or even free time for me to take myself out. But alas, the only thing I had was homework. Lots of it.

Back in my room, I put on my Spotify playlist. As Rob Zombie belted, accompanied by epic guitars and drums, I cut and pasted things where I thought they should go, typing words where they made sense.

It was 11:30 p.m. when my aching eyes, sore fingers, and fuzzy brain told me, *Enough*. I had an exoskeleton of an essay, but at least it was something. I just needed to go over it at least twice before the deadline.

Groaning, I removed my headphones and staggered to my bed. I was too tired to brush my teeth or even change into my pajamas. Which was weird, because with that amount of caffeine, I should have been able to power through at least another hour.

Next thing I knew, I heard the most unwelcome sound from Ali’s room. She and Rod must have just come back from their date. Unless he’d been there a while and was spending the night at our place?!

I’d never realized just how loud and how WET, kissing could be. Their lips sounded as if they were coated in lip gloss or some other lubricant. There was even moaning thrown in for good measure.

Oh no, they can’t be doing this all night, right?

I tried to zone out, but the more I focused on anything but the smooching, the louder it grew. And the more I thought about it, the more pissed-off and awake I became.

That does it.

I reached for my phone. According to the screen, it was 12:30. I typed a message to Ali: *Could you please kiss a little quieter? I can’t sleep.*

My finger hovered over the arrow to send it—and I second-guessed myself. This was stupid. It was normal for couples to kiss with enthusiasm. My sensitive ears were the problem.

I deleted what I’d written. Instead, I put in my wireless earbuds and listened to music until my eyes closed.



At some point, I heard the loud lip-smacking again. One of my earbuds had fallen out; eyes still shut, I tried to reach out my hand and find it.

That’s when I realized two things: 1) I couldn’t move. And 2) the sound was coming from above my head. I opened my eyes and rolled them back to see what was there.

Bright light flooded my vision, coming from two basketball-sized orbs. No, not orbs. *Eyes*. Eyes that grew bigger as the creature lowered its head towards me, bringing with it the smell of sewage and that smacking sound. I

swallowed, tasting bile. My braincells told the cells in my arm and fingers to plug my burning nostrils, but they didn't—couldn't—respond.

I shut my eyes, but the light was still there. Squinting, I stared at the creature's lips. They looked like the bottom part of a balloon, rubbery and dripping with saliva or mucus, emitting the worst stench imaginable. Between the blinding light and surrounding darkness, I couldn't make out what color the thing was, but its skin glistened like those lips.

Mentally, I recoiled as the thing placed a heavy appendage oozing with gloopy slime onto my covers. The other three—wait, *three?!—*positioned themselves on either side of my body, as if about to feed on me.

Uh-oh. No way was I just going to lie there and do nothing. This time, when my braincells told my neck's cells to move, they obeyed. Turning towards Ali's bedroom, I called, "Ali? Rod?" My voice was faint, raspy, as if I had a sore throat.

Before I could try again, the creature clapped its hand over my nose and mouth and screamed into my face. Its skin was squishy and cold. The frequency was too high, so I couldn't hear a thing, but liquid poured from my ears. I squirmed, trying to breathe.

The thing drew itself up to its full height, its appendages stretching, its head now touching the ceiling. My eyes worked overtime trying to adjust to the light change.

That's when I noticed the creature's stomach: it had split open, the insides appearing sticky and smelling sickly sweet. Teeth—or was it bones? —opened and shut, making a gnawing sound, as the being extended itself over me.

No. Oh no.

This was not how I'd die. Not now, not by this monstrosity. I had an assignment to submit. I had Christmas presents to buy. I had a roommate who'd be stuck with all my shit if I disappeared out of the blue. She didn't even have my parents' phone numbers.

Get a grip, Hannah. You have to find a way out of this!

As if to reiterate the urgency of the situation, the creature's lower arms started clapping together like tentacles, suction cups on the underside sticking and unsticking. SMACK! POP! SMACK! POP!

Do something!!!

I tried screaming again. After several failed attempts, my mouth emitted a strangled cry. I could barely hear it over the slime, but it was enough.

The beast reared back, removing its hand and shrieking one more time, and disappeared.



"You okay, Hannah?" Ali asked as I stepped into the kitchen. "You didn't sound well last night."

I turned bloodshot eyes towards her. "Nothing, just some stomach issues."

Having regained control of my body, I'd sprinted to the bathroom, vomited, and then scrubbed away at my skin for a full hour, even though there was no actual residue to wash off. Not wanting to fall back asleep, I'd finished and submitted that damn essay and binged YouTube until daybreak. (While doing those revisions, I'd concluded that the copious amount of caffeine I'd ingested had conjured up the demon, and I'd sworn off coffee for the foreseeable future.)

But of course, I couldn't tell Ali any of this. She'd never believe me. Instead, I opened the fridge and pulled out the leftover chicken.

Ali had been washing the dishes when I walked in. She now switched off the water. "Hey, there's something I wanted to ask you. It's a bit weird."

"What is it?" I asked, biting into a wing, wincing as the spicy sauce entered my still-sensitive stomach.

Ali sheepishly reached for a leg. "It's that licking sound you make when you're eating chicken. It sounds so gross. I heard it through the wall yesterday and nearly lost it. Could you turn it down a notch next time? Please?"

I stared at her. SHE was calling ME out for a little finger-licking? The AUDACITY! I wanted to call her out so badly on her hypocrisy.

But then Rod stepped out of the bathroom, freshly showered and with sexy mode turned on. "Hey, beautiful," he said, wrapping his arms around Ali and nuzzling her neck.

"Hey, handsome," Ali said with her mouth full.

My anger fizzled out, replaced by weary acceptance. "Yeah, I'll tone it down."

"Thanks." Ali gave me a friendly smile. "Can we have the rest of the chicken?"

"Sure." I grit my teeth as I handed her the container, adding a box of earplugs to the shopping list in my head.

Call Me Detective Peanut Butter

Emerald Ayres

Toast was the name of Dad's rainbow scarab beetle. I say "was" because Toast was found dead on the floor of Dad's office this morning.

"At least I won't have to look after it anymore." Alexa, my older sister and the one who found Toast, looks down at us over a mug of coffee. "You three morons are enough."

Said like a true teenager. At fourteen, Alexa has decided she is the hottest thing since a curling iron. As if owning said curling iron makes her a superhuman. Shocker—it doesn't. Superhuman ability isn't needed to burn off a chunk of your own hair. Her age—not her competency—was why Dad picked her to look after us and Toast while he was away on a weekend work trip. I'm not usually one to criticize my father, but that was a poor choice. Alexa hates bugs.

I, on the other hand, was quite fond of Toast. Which is why the beetle's sudden death makes me sad. Guilt grows to swallow the feeling as I sense my younger brother side-eying me across the table. Tim turned nine last week. When I dare a glance at him, Tim licks his jam-covered cereal spoon and smirks.

"Candace, you're the beetle-lover," Alexa says to me. "Clean it up after breakfast. You can give it a burial or whatever."

I toss my spoon into my half-eaten bowl of cereal. "Could you care less? He had a name."

In the booster seat in the chair next to mine, my two-year-old sister, Susy, throws her plastic spoon on the ground. I'd like to think it was in solidarity.

"Toast!" Susy says.

Alexa shrugs and I help Susy off her seat.

"Fine," I say. "But you two are doing dishes."

Tim's groans of protest follow Susy and I down the hallway to Dad's office. We pass Chuck, the old-man family cat, who sprawls none-too-gracefully in his bed, asleep. I stop to grab a wad of toilet paper from the bathroom.

Dad's office looks exactly as you'd expect an anthropology professor's office to look. Every inch of the walls are covered in posters picturing everything from the coolest ancient relics uncovered to the stages of human evolution. His desk is a bit small. Tucked beside his desk is an office chair nearly as old as I am, which probably would've been replaced by now if Dad didn't love rolling around in the thing so much. But the shelves. Dear god, the shelves. They put my teeth collection to shame. Skulls, fossils—you name it—crowd against Dad's collection of textbooks like an army assembling for battle. Carefully set on its own special shelf is the acrylic beetle container. Empty.

I find Toast's corpse on the floor.

His body is limbless, detached legs scattered around him in a morbid halo. Carefully, I scoop Toast's remains into the toilet paper I brought.

The beetle was a gift from one of Dad's students a few months ago and had become an honorary member of our family. His name was courtesy of Susy, who happened to be holding a slice of jammed toast when Dad asked for name suggestions. The name stuck.

"Can we," Susy pauses, then continues, "play with Toast?"

"No more Toast," I say, sitting on the floor.

She sits beside me. Her disappointment is brief, and she starts picking enthusiastically at the carpet fuzz. Guilt presses down harder on me.

I was in Dad's office last night. Unsupervised, handling Toast as Dad's strict instruction prohibited. He thinks I'm not gentle enough—which is totally not true! Yeah, there was that one time I got a little too excited checking how Toast's joints worked. But that was one time. I wasn't trying to hurt Toast. He's just so cool. His bones are outside of his body. How the heck do joints work when your bones aren't normal bones? Perfectly fine, I came to learn. Dad didn't approve of my methods though. Hence the supervision rule.

It's not that I mind Dad's supervision. It's just that Susy is always there with us wanting to hold Toast too— which she isn't allowed to do yet—and three people crowding around one beetle is too many people. All I wanted was a little one-on-one time with Toast.

Unfortunately, Tim caught me last night. He stuck his stupid face in the room and shouted, "Boo!" before running off. I almost jumped out of my skin. He was supposed to be at his friend Dave's house playing some awful zombie-killing video game, not prowling around here. I swear, those things are gonna make him crazy someday.

And knowing Tim, he's gonna tattle on me.

Dad will be gone until tonight. When he gets back, I plan to ask him to take me with him on his next museum trip. I doubt he will if he thinks I murdered his favorite beetle.

I have to prove my innocence.

"We gotta find out who did this," I say, and stand. "C'mon, Susy."

I stalk back into the hallway, Susy following, and stop at Chuck. Suspect number one. If determined enough, he could have gotten into the container. He opens one eye and I hold out Toast's remains.

"Did you do this?" I ask.

Chuck yawns, closing his open eye. Undeterred, I pull Chuck from his bed and hold the beetle bits against his face. He gives me a 'please stop' look. Susy laughs.

"What are you doing?" Alexa surveys me from the kitchen doorway.

I try to look professional. "Interrogating a suspect."

"Chuck is a cat."

"I know that."

"Chuck was also locked in the garage last night. I let him back in before breakfast and he's been asleep since then."

Tim cranes his head around Alexa and laughs. "Candace is so in trouble."

"Shut up!" I set Chuck down a little too forcefully.

Susy echoes me. "Shut up!"

Tim smiles. I want nothing more than to wipe it off his face, preferably with the floor. "She was in Dad's office last night with Toast."

"So?" Alexa rolls her eyes. "I don't care."

"She's not allowed. Dad doesn't like her yanking on Toast's legs."

"That was one time," I sputter indignantly, "and I did not yank."

"What's Dad gonna think? You were the last one in there."

Evidently I was not, based on the beetle corpse I didn't corpsify. "I didn't kill Toast!"

"Looks like you did," Tim says. "I'm telling Dad."

Oh my god, he's framing me.

The realization slams into me and I gawk at Tim. He's totally cracked. Those video games have finally made him crazy. He knows what Dad thinks about me handling Toast alone and could have gone in right after I left. I'm the perfect person to pin it on. Framed for beetle murder at the ripe age of twelve. You've gotta be kidding me.

I snap out of my shock.

Finger pointed threateningly, I advance on Tim. “I will put peanut butter in all of your socks.” He backs up, immediately fearful. “Don’t you dare, Timothy.”

Tim quickly disappears into the kitchen, followed by Alexa. His flash of fear makes me feel better, but not much. Tim holds my chance at going to the museum hostage.

I clench my fists and see Susy doing the same —hopefully in solidarity again. I look at her a moment longer. I guess, technically, Susy is a suspect. But based on her height alone, inability to leap great distances as Chuck can, and the fact that I’m dead certain Tim is framing me, I declare her innocent.

On to suspect number three.

“I have an idea,” I tell Susy, “and I need your help.”

The bathroom door slams shut behind me as I enter, a Costco-sized jar of Kraft smooth peanut butter tucked under one arm. Tim peers into the bathtub where Susy points, having successfully lured him into the bathroom. Behind them sits the sink, counter, and toilet. A small vanity mirror chair is half-tucked into a space under the counter. Tim looks up at the sound of my entry.

“What were you really doing last night?” I ask.

“I was with Dave.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You can call him and ask.” Tim’s eyes flash to the jar under my arm. “Why do you have that?”

I ignore his question. Calling Dave would be pointless. He’d cover Tim’s obvious lie. “You’re framing me for murdering Toast.”

“No, I’m not. You murdered Toast.”

“You’ve finally gone nuts from those video games, haven’t you?”

“I’m not nuts.” Tim’s eyes dart to the door but I stand in the way. “I liked Toast.”

Slowly, I unscrew the lid of the peanut butter jar. “Toast would say otherwise.” Tim’s eyes shoot to mine. The fear is back. Good. I step closer.

Tim jumps onto the lip of the bathtub. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, hang on.”

“Tell the truth, Timothy.”

“I am.”

I sink my hand wrist-deep into the smooth peanut butter. “You leave me no choice.”

A minute and a lot of struggling later, I have Tim pinned face-up in the bathtub. I smear another handful of peanut butter across his face. “Confess!”

Tim shrieks again.

Peanut butter is everywhere. Streaked across the shower curtains, smeared on the tiled walls of the bathtub, and most importantly—all over Tim. He struggles beneath me. I keep him down. My knees slip against the peanut butter in the tub. Tim is covered in enough of the stuff to get a rhino to confess but his resolve holds. Standing on the bathmat as our gleeful spectator, Susy laughs so hard her face turns completely red.

Feeling a little desperate, I hold my next handful above his eyes. If this doesn’t work, I don’t know what will. “Tell me the truth or you’re getting a peanut butter blindfold.”

“I DIDN’T DO IT!”

Unfortunately, I believe him.

“What is going on?” Alexa’s voice is muffled by the door. When she enters the disaster zone, the look on her face makes me wish I had my camera. “Oh my god.”

I release Tim. He sits up and starts whacking me with his peanut butter-covered arms.

“Why,” Tim demands, his voice loud and thoroughly revolted, “did you cover me in so much peanut butter?”

“Because you suck!” I whack him back. Our arms bat against each other and several globs of peanut butter go flying. “And because I didn’t believe you.”

“Believe me now?”

“Yes!”

We stop hitting each other and retreat to opposite ends of the bathtub. Tim grabs a towel hanging nearby and wipes his face. Susy’s laughter subsides as she catches her breath.

Alexa turns a superhuman look of shock, disgust, and anger on me all at once. “Dad is going to kill me. And then I’m going to kill you. Look at this!”

I ignore Alexa. Only the bathtub is a wreck. It could have been much worse. I clamber out of the bathtub, pulling the empty peanut butter jar with me. Susy scoops some peanut butter off my knee with her hand and eats it, the giggles returning. She eyes the jar.

I squint at Tim. "You still look suspicious."

Tim squints back. "Your face looks suspicious."

"I put Toast back in his container after you caught me."

Susy reaches for the jar in my hands. "I want it." I set it out of reach on the counter, and her giggling quickly disappears.

"Fine," Tim says. "But if you didn't kill Toast, and I didn't kill Toast," he gestures wildly, "who did?"

There was only one more suspect.

I turn on Alexa. "What were you doing last night?"

"I was in my room," Alexa says.

"No, you weren't," Tim counters.

"I told you not to go in my room. That's my space."

"Dave and I needed batteries, and your clock didn't need all four." Tim looks at me. We exchange determined looks. "Alexa did it."

Alexa scowls. "Oh, come on."

I point at her. "You hated Toast. Of course you'd kill him."

"You're insane," Alexa says. "I didn't murder Toast, I was—" She stops herself.

Tim also points at her. "Then what were you doing?"

"I was with Jeremy, okay?"

"Dave's older brother?" Tim gags. "Gross."

I would laugh if I didn't also think this was the grossest thing since cottage cheese. Seriously. Who thought wet cheese was a good idea?

I gag a little.

Alexa flushes. “Dad won’t let me date until I’m sixteen. Please don’t tell him.”

“Or what?” Tim asks, regaining some of his smugness despite the peanut butter stuck in his hair.

Whining, Susy pulls against the vanity chair. “Peanut Butter!”

“Or I’ll tell Dad about the *Zombie Slasher 5* game under your mattress,” Alexa says. “What’s that thing rated, eighteen plus?”

Tim scowls. “You’re not supposed to be in my room either!”

“Touché.” Alexa crosses her arms.

Tim is none-too-pleased and neither am I. It appears we’re all innocent. But beetles don’t just spontaneously dislodge all their limbs and die. That’s not science, that’s—

I stop.

Susy pulls out the vanity chair and, with herculean effort, climbs onto it. With her new height, she easily grabs the jar. “Susy,” I say slowly. “Did you play with Dad’s beetle last night?”

A moment of silence passes.

“Yeah,” Susy says.

“Can you show us?”

The three of us parade into Dad’s office, following Susy’s lead. With another herculean effort, she rolls Dad’s office chair to the shelves, climbs up, opens the beetle container, and sticks her hand inside to pull out a plastic leaf.

Susy looks over her shoulder at us like she just won a medal. “Ta-da!”

I help her down. She sits on the floor and begins enthusiastically picking apart the leaf.

“Mystery solved,” Alexa says dryly. “Our detective can clean up the mess.”

I think of the bathtub and groan.

Tim shakes a fist at me. “I’m telling Dad about the peanut butter.”

“Do that,” I threaten, “and I’ll spill the beans about *Zombie Slasher 5*.”

“Yeah, well do that and I’ll tell about Jeremy.” Tim shoots a look at Alexa, who steps in.

“Which is why none of us will be telling Dad anything,” she says with superhuman finality.

“Except for who the real culprit is,” I add. We all agree.

I spend the rest of the day purging the bathroom of peanut butter before Dad gets home, considering what I’ve learned.

Alexa has a boyfriend. Yuck.

Tim has an even more violent video game than the ones he already plays. Lovely.

Susy is in serious need of proper beetle-handling etiquette. We’ll have that conversation later.

Most importantly, my innocence has been proven.

Call me Detective Peanut Butter, I guess.



The Left Arrows of Darkness by Sophia Wasylanko
2023; digital photo
Original graffiti tagger(s) unknown

Shrimp Fried Rice

Lee Groen

Pete Plukowsky had been to ninety-seven countries, five hundred and thirty-nine cities, and, although he had long lost count, thousands of restaurants. But something Pete had never tried—let alone knew existed before this very morning—was food prepared by a highly intelligent crustacean.

Allegedly.

As a culinary critic of moderate renown, Pete had spent most of his adult life travelling the world to sample some of the greatest dishes that humankind could offer.

Pete had been served by the greatest sushi chefs in all of Japan, from Tokyo to Osaka. Tirelessly tasted nearly every kind of street taco Mexico City had to offer. He had devoured the finest bibimbaps in all the Koreas. Dined on the finest escargot, Parisian breads, cheeses, and wines under a moonlit Eiffel Tower. Consumed the most delectable döner kebabs in Turkey. Compared jollof rice and fufu across Nigeria and Ghana. And tasted the sweetest alien fruits found in the deepest corners of the Amazonian jungles.

Perhaps most notably, Pete was famed for having sampled one of every poutine offered in Montréal. His picture, however unflattering, is pinned to the wall in a minimum of two dozen of the finest pouteries across the city. If Pete had told you he dined with the gods on Mount Olympus and their ambrosia had touched his tongue, you might just believe him.

The crustacean in question, the mysterious Pacific whiteleg shrimp, was legally named on all existing paperwork as one Florian Shrimpson. Florian had gained the attention of the global culinary community after he debuted an Asian-seafood fusion restaurant fittingly named La Crevette Noir in Nice, France, with business partner, and famed restaurant promoter, the elusive Pierre Barbeau.

Pete had never considered himself a skeptic of any sort—he knew better than most that it was a strange world out there. But after his morning cereal had long gone soggy, its milk warmed and discoloured, as he read through the story on the thirty-ninth page in the life and culture section of the morning paper for the third time, Pete now found himself reconsidering his stance on skepticism.

As a noted side effect of a life of extravagant taste and indulgence in rich culture, many of Pete's readers often expect him to look or act a certain way if or when they meet him.

In truth, Pete was remarkably plain.

He was kind but not especially nice, humoured but generally humourless, and content but never outwardly happy. In his culinary criticism—and his culinary criticism alone—he stood pretentiously, though without malice or arrogance. Pete had never gambled, never been to a concert, and never purposely gone to bed later than eleven-thirty in his entire life. Pete had never married, never loved, had no hobbies, no friends, no family, no pets, and no true qualms about any of this. Truly, the only exciting thing about Pete was his small role in the culinary world.

And thus, Pete staunchly refused, out of great respect for the culinary arts more than anything, to believe it possible that any animal, much less a simple shrimp, could act as the head chef at any restaurant.

But a three Michelin star restaurant? Pete called bullshit—then snidely corrected himself—shrimpshit.

He didn't believe that anything other than a full-fledged human could perform the roles that were typical in high-end restaurants. Sure, he had once seen an orangutan wash dishes at a popular diner in Indonesia, but that was almost definitely a tourist trap that Pete had fallen into, more novelty than reality. The damned ape broke more dishes than he cleaned, after all. And the sad intelligence Pete saw behind the orangutan's eyes certainly spoke more to its capacity for complex emotions, rather than culinary prowess.

Regardless, one instance of semi-successful animal labour certainly didn't count towards validating this alleged crustacean chef. Half the time even fully developed humans struggle to keep their heads above water in the high-stress, fast-paced environments of the culinary world—this shrimp was surely just some elaborate prank.

Pete flipped to the front page of the newspaper, double-checked the date—January 29th—then upon realizing April Fools was still over two months away, rolled the newspaper up and stuffed it into his recycling bin. He let his coffee go cold and untouched before finally leaving for work.



Pete spent the next three days endlessly reading and researching about the celebrity shrimp taking the culinary world by storm, and three sleepless nights desperately trying to convince himself that all the stories were merely a case of viral marketing taken too far. A marketing campaign in which he was the mark: a gullible fool, too easily convinced of the obviously untrue. An elaborate hoax with countless players, restaurant guests and critics and chefs corroborating the veracity of the little chef, to unknown ends.

On the fourth night, Pete was left with no other options. He realized he had to see it for himself.

The very next morning Pete stormed into the office of the head editor of *Chef's Kiss*, a mid-sized food and lifestyle magazine where Pete had been resident culinary critic for the past six years. He pitched the story of a night spent at a brand-new restaurant that's all the craze in the restaurant world.

His head editor, a frighteningly thin woman in her late fifties—almost too aptly named for the job—Anita Bight, refused him. Anita explained that the quarterly culinary feature for the upcoming issue had already been filled, by Pete himself.

(Pete had written a lengthy piece detailing his time in Italy and his many attempts to rid seabass fished from the filthy shit-water of the Venetian Canals of their unpleasant taste. He found a simple slow bake with excessive amounts of lemon and dill helped cover the taste as much as anything could.)

Still, Pete pleaded with Anita, offered to pull his story in favour of his newest pitch. After that was politely refused, he offered to do it for free, so long as his travel expenses were covered. He was denied again. As a last-ditch effort, Pete fell from his chair and onto the floor, landing on his hands and knees.

“Please, please, please,” Pete said with his nose pressed into the floor. “I’m begging you. I need this.”

Anita Bight, once a half-decent fashion columnist herself, and now eternally embittered toward the cruel fate that named her so fittingly and guided her to a job she never really wanted, somehow found the pathetic display endearing. In the many years she had known Pete Plukowsky, she had never seen him care about anything this much. Or care about anything at all, for that matter. She hadn’t even ever seen the man laugh. Although she vaguely remembered once seeing a subdued smile appear on his face after he had unwrapped a vintage bottle of rosé during the office Secret Santa two years prior.

His sudden passion was such a breath of fresh air in the staleness of her life that Anita suddenly wondered if she had ever really cared about anything at all.

“Pete, listen to me,” she said. “In one single sentence—just one—tell me why I should agree to this.”

With his forehead still pressed to the carpeted floor of Anita Bight’s office, Pete realized his mistake—a mortal sin to any journalistic writer worth their salt: he buried the lede. Pete had failed to mention that the restaurant’s head chef was an eight-and-a-half-inch-long Whiteleg shrimp.

Anita only nodded slowly as Pete delivered the single sentence that informed her of this crucial detail. After a long, hanging silence, she sent him away without another word.

Left with nothing but his despair, Pete briefly considered going rogue, fleeing with the company credit card and forcing his way to the story. He figured he could land in France before the card was deactivated and pay his own way to the restaurant and back, if there were even a restaurant at all. Pete found the idea exhilarating, but exhausting. He instead resigned to his fate, fell into a deep depression, and daydreamed of seabass prepared without the lingering aftertaste of filth.

All his worrying was of course for naught. Within the hour, Pete received the email containing his accommodations for the coming weekend and a ticket for a flight that departed later that very evening.



Pete arrived in Nice in the early afternoon. He had only eight jet-lagged hours to kill before his scheduled dinner at La Crevette Noir. He checked into his hotel, located seven-and-a-half blocks away from the restaurant, and immediately found himself lying face down on the freshly made king-sized bed. Pete had managed to find several hours of sleep during the flight, but only one or two hours at a time. After a hectic few days wrestling with reality, Pete was absolutely exhausted.

He had felt like an impatient child lying awake on Christmas Eve, desperate for Christmas morning and all the presents under the tree. That was, of course, if all the presents under the tree were filled with shrimp.

Pete suddenly felt all-consumed with anxiety. He wondered if the answers to his woes might be lain between the fibres of the hotel bedspread. There, in the fresh linen, he found every possible thing that could go wrong.

What if Florian the shrimp was everything he was touted to be? What if he was the greatest new chef this side of the Atlantic? What if Florian could sense that Pete had doubted him? What then? And what if Florian didn't like food critics? Or more specifically, what if, despite his best efforts, he didn't like Pete? Or worse, what if he liked everyone except for Pete?

Pete understood he wasn't the most likable guy, being a self-proclaimed pretentious food critic and all, but he figured he couldn't be the most unlikable guy either. Though, if that were the case, then why did the other kids in school always make Pete sit at a different lunch table all alone? He had never wronged them, so why did they call him *Piss-Pants-Pete*, despite never once even coming close to urinating himself?

(The truth to this, of course, was that the kids had simply mistaken Pete for another child—the real *Piss-Pants-Pete*. They never cared enough to ever check their facts. Pete didn't exactly exude an unpissed-pants sort of quality as a child, nor as an adult).

Pete's mind continued racing.

What if Florian thought Pete was boring? Or ugly? Or boring and ugly? Are sea creatures as easily affected by the cruel combination as humans are? Do shrimp see beauty?

Although Pete wasn't certain, he was objectively of average looks, neither handsome nor ugly. He dressed plainly, in sweaters and slacks, always in earth tones that neither caught eyes nor turned heads. He weighed one-hundred-fifty-seven pounds and stood at five-foot-nine.

If shrimp could see beauty, they would regard someone like Pete with simple, inoffensive indifference.

Though, of course, Pete had no idea of this fact. He raked his shaky hands through his dark, thinning hair and concluded he wouldn't like himself very much if he had traded places with a popular shrimp.

Pete figured if he was really so unlikable, he had to get ahead of things. He thought of ways to endear himself to Florian. Would a small gift be enough? What about a large gift? A gift was a great idea, but what to give a shrimp? He knew nothing about the little chef. Do shrimp like chocolates or flowers? Would it be *déclassé* to bring a tin of fish flakes from a pet store for Florian instead? The inner workings of human-shrimp relations were lost on Pete. It was an art form, one of many, that he had not perfected, and never would.

Just as Pete's mind was about to implode in on itself, there was a firm knock at the door. He rose from the bed and straightened his crooked sweater. He was drenched in sweat. Pete took a deep breath to settle himself. He unlocked the door and swung it open.

On the other side, Pete saw a stunning woman dressed in a long cocktail dress, with hair as black as squid ink and eyes like green olives.

“Room service,” she said through a thick French accent.

“Um,” Pete said. “There must be some mistake. I-I’m afraid I’ve already made dinner plans.”

The woman smiled and stepped through the doorframe. Pete, weakened in the presence of most women, stepped aside and allowed her in without hesitation.

“Not that sort of room service,” the woman said, stepping past Pete and toward the curtained window.

“Oh,” Pete said, as if he understood, then, “Oh,” as he did.

The woman drew open the curtains, cracked the window, and inhaled a breath of fresh air. Pete had closed the door and now quietly stood in the centre of the room, trying to find the words needed to make the woman go away with the least amount of confrontation.

“I’m not sure who, um, ordered you,” Pete said, “But it wasn’t me.”

The last word had barely fallen from Pete’s lips before she was on him. Her mouth found his. Pete’s brain had long been rotted by all the food reviewing, and his tongue found the faint taste of strawberry lip gloss, spearmint gum, and cigarettes to exceed his expectations.

Pete hadn’t kissed anyone since his senior year of high school—if you could count the quick peck on the lips as a kiss. It happened at the only high-school party Pete had ever been to. It had only been done on a dare, though Pete would never know that.

Now, with a strange woman’s tongue in his mouth, Pete began to wonder what she thought of him. He soon found his answer, as her right hand felt the front of his pants, found his cocktail shrimp, and squeezed it like a Christmas nutcracker. Against his will, every bit of air in his body escaped and he separated his mouth from hers.

“A problem?” she asked.

“Yes, actually,” Pete said. “I don’t want this.”

“Non?”

“I’m very sorry, I’ll pay you for your time,” he said, retrieving his wallet and holding out his cash per diem at her.

Suddenly the woman's eyes were filled with fire. She scoffed, pushed Pete away and followed up with a firm slap across his face. The impact was crisp, like the popping of a cork from a bottle of champagne. Pete fell forward, closing his eyes and covering his head with his hands.

When he finally dared to open his eyes again, his wallet was gone, and the woman was halfway out the door, leaving a trail of French profanities in her wake.

Dinner was still six hours away.



The sun had set but Pete still felt the stinging reminder on his cheek of his misadventure in his hotel room. He had thought he knew little of shrimp, but he truly understood even less of women. He tried to forget the encounter and focus on his dinner plans.

Arriving in front of the restaurant, Pete found it to be suspiciously modest. At first, he was certain he was in the wrong place, but there was the crudely-made wooden sign nailed above the door that marked La Crevette Noir.

Inside, Pete only had to state his reservation to the maître d' before he was suddenly whisked away through a side door, down a long corridor, and into a large office in the back of the building. Faintly, the sound of a bustling kitchen could be heard through the walls.

Pete was shoved down into an uncomfortable chair by the two men that had escorted him from the foyer of the restaurant. When he was seated on the fraying cushion, the pair silently retreated out the same door they had entered through. Pete was alone with two figures: one massive gentleman standing next to a desk and the other, incredibly small, sitting atop it.

The room was smoky and dimly lit, adorned with all sorts of expensive-looking furniture, much of it accented with blood-red velvet, including the small gold-trimmed cushion that chef Florian himself sat upon like a king of men. Pete had to admit his presence was undeniable.

The enormous figure, a man of nearly seven feet, entirely bald—eyebrows and all—and dressed in a suit much too small for him, craned his head down next to the shrimp. The man nodded, then stood up straight.

“Chef Florian says he’s glad you found your way, Mr. Plukowsky,” he said.

“Um.” Pete took a moment to collect himself, pulled his notepad and pen out of his jacket pocket. “Well, I’m honoured to finally have the opportunity to meet Florian,” he said.

“Chef Florian.”

“Of course,” Pete said. “Chef Florian, my apologies.”

Pete had trouble looking directly at the shrimp on his throne of velvet and gold. His dark, beady eyes pierced Pete from across the room, and he couldn't shake the idea that the shrimp was scrutinizing his every move.

"My name is André," the man said. "I will be relaying Chef Florian's words to you tonight."

Pete angled his head. "His words? You mean he can speak?"

"Correct."

"And you can hear him?"

André looked at Florian, who continued to stare at Pete with his cold black eyes. André chuckled like they were sharing an inside joke.

"The Chef is very quiet. But don't you worry—I have very large ears to hear him," André said.

Pete reached up, pen in hand, and felt his left ear. He hadn't ever considered that his ears might have been below average-sized until this very moment. He believed André too—the man's ears were really quite large, and Pete was sitting just outside of whispering range.

"Can he hear me?" Pete asked.

"As well as I can," André said.

"Wow. It's truly an absolute pleasure to meet you, Chef Florian. Really," Pete said. "But please just call me Pete—all my friends do. I'd like to think of us as friends already, if that's all right."

Pete forced a stiff smile meant to ease the tension in the room, but neither André nor Florian, to the best of Pete's understanding of shrimp expression, smiled back. Bubbles foamed and fell from the shrimp's mouth. Pete wondered if the bubbles were a good sign or a bad one.

André leaned down to Florian again, whispered something, and then listened for a long while. He nodded every few seconds, his eyes shifting across the floor as if he were taking mental notes of everything the shrimp was saying to him.

At one point, his eyes turned to Pete and he bit his lip, struggling to hold back a laugh.

André again stood up straight and flattened his suit. He then reached into his suit jacket and produced a small spray bottle. He spritzed Florian with a generous misting of water, then tucked the bottle away.

"The pleasure is all his," André said.

Struck by the sharp brevity of the response, Pete shifted uncomfortably in the hard wooden chair. He only then realized how hot and humid the room really was. Pete only wore a light sweater, but still found himself damp with sweat.

“Well, I understand you’re a busy—guy.”

Pete moved to stand. André took a step forward and Pete froze, hovering just above his seat. The humidity in the room made him feel like he had to fight for every breath.

“I really appreciate you taking the time to greet me,” Pete said. “Though I suppose I should go and dine before it’s too late. Believe it or not, these reviews don’t write themselves.”

“There will be plenty of time for that, Mr. Plukowsky.”

Pete took the hint and lowered himself back down onto the chair.

The shrimp then held up a leg—by Pete’s estimation, the longest one it had. Like a metronome, he wagged back and forth.

“What is, uh, what is he doing?” Pete asked.

“He expects you to pay your respects,” André said.

“He wants me to—” the words caught in the back of Pete’s throat.

Florian’s little arm moved in a manner that seemed to Pete to be calling him closer.

Pete tucked away his pen and paper, gingerly stood from his chair, and slowly walked over to the shrimp. He had only just begun to lean forward when André’s booming voice made him jump.

“Kneel,” he said.

Pete realized he was in too deep now. The best course of action, he believed, was to simply go along with it. Pete kneeled in front of the desk. Glancing down at his knees, he saw dark stains marked across the carpet—stains that he could only imagine came from an entire spilled bottle of red wine. Likely some cheap, tasteless Cabernet. The savages.

Looking back up, Pete saw the outstretched arm of Florian held out in front of his face. Adorned on the shrimp’s arm looked to be a small gold ring. A ruby—miniscule to the average human, but really quite massive for a simple shrimp—was inlaid in the centre of the gold band.

The shrimp foamed at the mouth expectantly. Pete pursed his thin lips and pressed them gently against the ring, remaining still to maximize respect. Florian then pulled his arm away and brushed it against the velvet cushion before tucking it back behind his body.

André then leaned down again towards Florian. Pete, despite being as intimately close to the sea creature as he could possibly be, heard nothing.

“Chef Florian thanks you. He expects you will enjoy your evening, and that your writing will reflect the positive experience that you had while dining with us.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Pete said, standing from his kneeling position. “But I’ll need to try the food before I can commit to anything like that, of course.”

André shook his head like he was disappointed in Pete’s response. He looked to Florian, whose mouth was again frothing with foam and bubbles. The shrimp twitched, and as if given an order, André whistled, short and sharp. The same door Pete had previously entered through opened again, and a figure swiftly marched into the room. He approached André, handed him a single manila folder, then left without uttering a word. When the door closed behind him, Pete heard the unmistakable sound of a heavy lock turning over.

André placed the folder on the table next to the shrimp. “Look,” he ordered.

Pete, reluctantly, did as he was told.

Inside the folder, he found several dozen images of his surprise rendezvous with the strange woman in his hotel room. They appeared to be taken through the open window from an adjacent rooftop.

Suddenly, it all made too much sense.

“I’m not sure this is very ethical,” Pete said. It was the best he could manage on the spot.

“Business rarely is, Mr. Plukowsky.”

“I’ve done nothing wrong,” Pete said, as if attempting to convince himself more than anyone else. “Nothing but suffer through a passionate tryst with a beautiful woman.”

“Using company funds?” André looked down to a photo of Pete holding out his open wallet to the woman. “To think, what a scandal in the culinary review world that would be.”

Pete could only concede, hands raised, as if genuinely surrendering. “Fine. You win.”

“Win?” André said. “You misunderstand us, Mr. Plukowsky.”

“To be entirely honest, I don’t think I’ve understood a single thing that’s happened to me for quite some time.”

“In that case, I will repeat Chef Florian’s words. Just this once,” André said. He spoke slowly, enunciating each word. “Chef Florian expects that your writing will reflect the positive experience that you had while dining with us. Understood?”

Pete managed a crooked smile. “Crystal clear,” he said.

André retrieved the spray bottle from his jacket and misted Florian once again.

The chef’s antennae rose with his two frontmost arms. Freshly dampened, he waved them back and forth above his head in what Pete could only guess was some sort of victory dance. Another rave review for La Crevette Noir in the books, Pete assumed.

“Now,” André said. “How about some grub?”



Half an hour later, Pete was being toured around the restaurant like he was the king of France. Despite the excessive fanfare, he couldn’t shake the disappointment he felt deep in his stomach. Not only was Chef Florian a fraud, but he was the worst kind of fraud: a dishonest one.

The final stop before finally being seated to dine was the kitchen. Pete couldn’t even feign excitement. He knew there was nothing that could salvage this disaster.

And then he saw him.

Perched on a high stool in front of a row of burners, with a large spatula held delicately in his four front arms was Florian. On top of his head was an inexplicably small chef’s hat. Pete couldn’t quite understand what he was seeing, but it didn’t matter to him anymore. It was all true. Blackmail aside, Pete had to hand it to him.

This shrimp could cook.

Florian stood atop a modest wood stool in the kitchen, cooking up a storm, his four backmost legs pointing all around, directing his staff from one task to the next. The shrimp was running his kitchen like it was the Navy and war was coming. No, war had arrived, and Pete now understood it was a war that Florian was winning.

Fried rice jumped from the little chef’s wok, his spatula cutting under it, ensuring every grain was perfectly cooked and coated. In went the chopped vegetables, then a blend of sauces and spices. The aromas were nearly enough to lift Pete from his feet and carry him away.

“Wow,” Pete said.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Pete barely managed to pull his attention away to find the source of the voice. Standing high over his shoulder was André. A single tear rolled down the colossal man's cheek before disappearing under his sharp chin.

"It really is," Pete said.

He then watched as Florian added the final ingredient: a generous portion of delicately peeled and deveined shrimp, already pan-fried in herbs and garlic butter. The moment pulled Pete ever so slightly from his trance.

"He's cooking his own people?" he asked.

André placed an enormous hand on Pete's shoulder and sighed. "Go be seated. Your first course will be out any minute now."



For the remainder of the evening, Pete sat solemnly at a lone table in the back corner of the restaurant. The cutlery was gold plated, and the candle lit in the center of the table shook and flickered throughout the meal, bouncing off the knives and forks like a choreographed light show. Course after course from dinner to dessert flowed out of the kitchen and onto the table in front of him. Pete ate graciously until he couldn't fit another bite, drank several glasses of wine, then ate a little more. When all was said and done, Pete could only think about the fact that he had much to think about.

The bustle in the restaurant had died down. It was getting late. Pete wiped his mouth with a napkin as if trying to wipe away his disappointment. That shrimp sure could cook, he had to give him that, but Pete was still searching for the words that could define his dining experience. The food was merely fine—passingly satisfactory, perfectly inoffensive, but nothing special. The worst fate for any food critic, let alone a compromised one.

When he was good and finished, Pete walked across the restaurant and towards the front door. He noted how strange it felt to be crossing alone like any other customer, not being escorted through hallways and back rooms by assuredly large and presumably armed guards. When he reached the foyer, the maître d' bowed to him, wished him a pleasant night, before being whisked away by some sudden and pressing task.

Left alone, Pete then did something he never would have thought himself to do before: he diverted course. Instead of leaving through the front, Pete pushed through the side door he had previously been whisked through and began the long walk down the dark hallway towards Florian's office.

Mist and golden light spilled out from the open office door. Pete hadn't considered why he had come back this way. He supposed he just wanted one last look at Florian before he left. Blackmail and all, the idea of the little chef was beginning to grow on him. Just a few farewell words were all Pete wanted. Closer now, he began to hear the low murmuring of voices conducting some sort of business.

“Ah, Mr. Plukowsky.”

Pete saw André enter the hallway through an adjacent door.

“I suppose your time with us is over,” he said.

“I’m afraid it is,” Pete said.

“I hope your dining experience was more than satisfactory?”

“Fine, just fine,” Pete said. “I just wanted to say goodbye before I left.”

Pete felt compelled to hold out a hand. He did so, and André took it in his. For a giant, Pete noted that André’s hands were exceptionally soft. The man closed his other ginormous hand around Pete’s, which had now entirely disappeared under the mass of well-moisturized flesh. A firm handshake, then release. Pete turned his attention to the office doorway. Florian sat atop his velvet throne. Surrounding him were a dozen figures, each taking turns leaning down, mumbling something to the shrimp, then kissing the same ring Pete had only a few hours prior kissed himself. Pete’s eyes met the now-familiar black of Florian’s, and for a moment, Pete thought the shrimp looked remarkably human—strong, handsome, alive. Still feeling uncharacteristically bold, Pete moved to step through the doorway. André’s massive frame stepped in front of him.

“You have yourself a pleasant evening, Mr. Plukowsky,” Andre said, entering the room and slowly swinging the door shut behind him. “And safe travels.”

The last Pete ever saw of the Whiteleg shrimp was his beady eyes and frothing mouth through the narrow slit of the door as it finally closed.



“I can’t run this,” Anita said, throwing a copy of Pete’s story down onto her desk.

“You can’t run it?” Pete said, slightly dumbfounded.

“This is awful. For you, for me. For the culinary world. I mean, the fucking shrimp dies in the end.”

“That’s what happened.”

“Of course it’s what happened, but no one wants to read about it,” Anita said.

“Whiteleg shrimp only live for about two years,” Pete said.

“And he decided to open a restaurant? What’s wrong with this guy?”

“In the end, it was White Spot Syndrome that did him in. He left a widow.” Pete almost shed a tear.

Five days after Pete had left France, the news of Florian’s death hit the mainstream media. Within forty-eight hours, it fell out of the news cycle and Pete never heard another word about him. La Crevette Noir closed its doors almost immediately and everyone involved, including André, had disappeared entirely.

“Jesus,” Anita said. “We’ll just run the fish story instead.”

“The fish story?”

“The story about fishing in the filthy canal water—the lemon and thyme-baked rockfish, that one.”

“Lemon and dill baked seabass,” Pete said.

“Sure, seabass. Sounds great.”

Pete left Anita’s office feeling like he had caught a bad case of White Spot Syndrome of his own. White Spot Syndrome was a highly lethal and severely contagious viral infection known to decimate shrimp populations.

Pete knew he didn’t have it—humans couldn’t catch it, and Pete had been tested for it several times already regardless—but he still felt like he had it.

He felt like he was dying, though he wasn’t, and wouldn’t for another fifty-some-odd years.

That night, Pete dreamed of a kitchen. In it, Chef Florian fried rice for him, and Pete told the shrimp about all his greatest fears and insecurities. In the end, Florian reassured Pete that he liked him just fine, then jumped into the flaming wok, shocking Pete so bad he pissed his pants. He woke up having wet the bed.

Over breakfast Pete thumbed through the morning paper. Nothing in the life and culture section had been able to hold his attention since he first read about Chef Florian. Pete bit into a piece of burnt, overly buttered toast and skimmed a story about a proud father and his son’s flourishing sun-dried tomato business. He turned the final page, ready to close the paper and stuff it into the recycling bin, when something finally caught his eye.

The first page of the sports section read: Taking His Talents to South Beach—Giant Tiger Prawn Dubbed LePrawn James Takes Basketball World By Storm.

How to Make a Sand Cake

Alexandra Groenwoldt

Crimson wine licked the curved glass. Death leaned back on the couch and reached for the remote to tune into the twelve AM news, wondering if they'd had enough alcohol for this. They took another tasteless sip. As if on cue, the familiar Say-No-To-Alcohol ad flicked across the screen, threatening every human who would listen. Death rolled their eyeballs. *As if I had time to come after everyone who has a glass of wine these days.*

The news anchor spoke with the same monotone voice her colleague would use for the weather forecast in a few minutes. The wars were continuing. A teenager had stormed a mall with a steak knife. "All four victims died at the scene; police officers shot the seventeen-year-old perpetrator." At this, a hint of regret broke through her calm facade.

Death let out an exasperated scream. "For Hell's sake!" They grabbed their half-empty glass and hurled it towards the TV. "How am I supposed to achieve a half-decent work-life balance when even the news turns into a work report?"

The missile missed the target and crashed against the sickly cheese-coloured wallpaper. Wine ran down the wall about twenty centimeters from the TV. As if someone got shot in here. Death leapt off the couch, crossed the room, and ran out the front door.

Thick woods surrounded their little house, which was possibly one reason why every human around thought the hut was haunted. The record number of previous inhabitants who'd turned up dead was the main one.

Death trudged into the forest, their thoughts still on the news. How could it be that all the good seemed to have vanished from this world? There was a time when *they* got to choose who to escort to the Realm of Beyond. Nowadays, they worked fifty-hour weeks and provided a twenty-four-hour emergency service to manage all the unnatural deaths. *It's the humans—so many rotten souls!* Death shook their head. "I will have no more of this, you people!"

With a shriek, a blackbird took off from a high branch. Other blackbirds answered its cry, the alarm spreading out into the woods.

Death stopped dead in their tracks and watched the little creature disappear between the trees. "You take care of one another, don't you?" Perhaps this was the problem with humans: they did not. The blackbirds' shrieks faded as they flew further away.

Death resumed their meandering. *Maybe I should just take a night shift, call them all to the gate, and enjoy my peace in this world without them.* The thought mortified them.

But then again, why not? Death would only have the other animals to worry about. They sighed. When should they do it? Today? Or better tomorrow? *I ought to sleep on that.* After all, this was a gigantic undertaking; they had to consider it carefully, maybe make a list of pros and cons, or perhaps a SWOT analysis.

They quickened their pace, brushed past old trees and rough fern. In the distance, sunlight broke through the thick trees, marking the edge of the forest. The longer Death thought about it, the more questions poked holes into their tentative plan. In which order should they call the humans? The elderly first, of course, a question of courtesy. But they had to call them each by their name; such was the rule if they decided to summon a soul to the gate on their own accord, without an unnatural cause involved that called Death to duty. But it would be a hustle to race all over the globe for the elders. Should Death go by households instead? They tried to recall how they had handled such masses in the past, but their memories of the 1300s were dusty, covered by century-old spider webs.

Hours passed and the forest opened to wide cornfields. Death wandered between them, their thoughts heavier than the clouds that built up in the sky. Late afternoon came, and Death dragged their bony feet down a well-trodden path at the outskirts of a small town. Their scythe drew a line behind them as they pulled it along. To one side, a row of fences and bushes, broken up by cherry trees, separated the path from the houses of the neighborhood. To the other side, an unkempt lawn stretched out to a shallow ditch covered in brambles that bordered acres of wheat fields. The air smelled of damp soil and a cool breeze played with Death's black cloak, yet it didn't compare to the cold inside their empty chest. The world would be so quiet once they ended humanity. *But what choice do I have if there are no good souls left among them?*

The path led past a playground, a patch of sand with two rusty swings. Death was tired of walking, so they trudged towards it, past the sign that read "No children above the age of 12 on the playground." The sand crunched between the bones of their feet. *What a strange sensation.* Death sank onto one of the swings. The wind pushed it a little, or perhaps it was them. *How silly!* They dug their feet into the sand and forced the screeching thing to stand still. Death was serious; they could not bother with such tomfoolery.

An hour or so went by while they sat motionless on the swing and pondered, wondered, reflected. They couldn't think of an alternative. *By households it is, I presume.* But where on Earth should they begin? They sighed.

"Are you sad?"

Death looked up. A tiny human stood two feet away and looked up at them; her ginger hair blew like a curtain in the breeze.

"Adult problems," Death told her.

The little one sighed. "My parents have those all the time."

Death's gaze drifted past her. What were they to say? Dealing with children was never easy, but usually, the situation dictated a significant portion of the script.

The girl—Death guessed her age to be around six—watched them for a few moments, then suddenly wheeled around and ran from the playground. Death shrugged and resumed the painful pondering, but before they could fully immerse in their thoughts, the sound of small feet wading through sand caught their attention.

The little one was back, and she carried a bright blue bucket and a teddy bear half her own size. She held out the stuffy. "This is Teddy. He'll make you feel better."

Death blinked and looked down at the brown, furry thing. Its dark eyes glinted in the sun. They reached for it and shuddered when the soft fluff touched the raw bone of their hands.

"Let's make a cake!" The child turned the bucket upside down. A number of plastic moulds in various colours tumbled into the sand. The shapes ranged from an oversized strawberry to a witch on a broom.

Death looked down into her face of giddy anticipation.

"Playing always makes me feel better," she assured them.

"I have never..." Death pointed at the moulds.

"You have *never* made a sand cake before?" She gaped at them. "I can teach you! You'll love it. It's my favourite thing in the world!"

Before they knew it, Death knelt beside her in the sand and followed her instructions. They filled their mould tightly with moist sand, turned it upside down, and pulled it off. The motion decapitated the sand witch.

"Almost." The child beamed.

Death smiled back.

Dusk came. Death sat on the swing again, motionless, and the little girl beside them swung higher and higher. The fading light illuminated the day's work: a village of sand cakes, big and small, round and cubed, strawberries and witches. In the center, Teddy sat on top of a sand heart like a guardian.

The girl jumped and squealed as her body arced through the air. She landed just off the edge of their sand town and giggled.

An awkward sound escaped Death's throat and it took them a moment to recognize they had *chuckled*. They shook their head. *I must be getting old.*

"This was the funniest day of my LIFE!"

Death was about to correct her grammar, but something held them back.

The girl stood. Her pants and shoes were caked with sand. Her smile faded. "I have to go home now. Mummy said I'm not supposed to stay outside after sunset." She looked at her shoes. Then her head jerked up, and her smile was back. "But that's okay. I'll just come back tomorrow, and we can play again!" Her joy lit up the playground and made dusk look like dawn.

Death smiled back, their bones straining. “That is a very good idea, little one.”

“Little one?” She cocked her head, then laughed. “Oh, that’s right, I never even told you my name!”

Death felt their jaw tighten. *No. Just walk away.*

“I’m Melody.”

Something inside Death’s chest broke. Most likely a bone.

“What’s your name?” Melody asked.

“My... name?” In the billions of years they’d escorted souls to the Realm of Beyond, not a single one had come close to asking that question. The humans all over the world were eager to come up with titles for them, but not a real name.

“I... have forgotten.”

“You’ve forgotten your name?” Melody half-smiled, apparently not sure if this was a joke or if she should be sorry. *Sweet child.*

She shifted from one foot to the other. “I could make one up for you.”

“You can?”

“Sure!” She beamed. “I could call you Jamie. Do you like that name?”

The cool evening breeze seemed to sweep away Death’s breath, and they could only nod.

“It’s my best friend’s name. We used to play together all the time. But then, me and my parents moved here, and now we’ll never ever see each other again.” For a moment, Melody’s smile faltered, only to grow even wider. “But you can be my new friend! I really have to go now.” She collected her plastic moulds, tossed them into the bucket, and wrapped her arm around Teddy. “See you tomorrow, Jamie!”

One final wave and off she ran along a path that led into the neighborhood, the moulds clattering in the pail. Teddy faced backwards, and his dark glinting eyes stared Death right in the face. Then she rounded a corner and disappeared behind the first house.

Death stared into the sunset and listened as the clatter faded. The sky turned midnight blue and the horizon flaming orange. They rose from the swing with a sigh, grabbed their scythe and blew the sand off the blade. One last gaze at the sunset, then Death made their way home.

She had a beautiful soul. And Earth was a better place with her than without.



Marching Band by Sophia Wasylenko
2023; digital photo
Original graffiti tagger(s) unknown

When I was studying in Nanaimo, I lived near Colliery Dam Park. Assigned to collect pictures of interesting graffiti for GOOEY's previous issue, I immediately thought of the pieces at Colliery Dam. Armed with my humble yet trusty iPhone, I set out to photograph as much graffiti as I could. Nearly all these pieces come from the bridge just before the waterfall, which in the dark looks like something from a slasher film. While never used in GOOEY's first issue, a few of these photos have resurfaced in this one for everyone around the world to see. I have difficulty coming up with titles, and naming these pieces was no exception. "Pouting in Pink" was one of the first concrete names and the one I'm most satisfied with. I don't know if the graffiti in the dam photo actually says "Skrr," but it's what my brain told me, so I listened to it. The other titles came after I took a break and returned to the pictures with a clear head. Sometimes you need to shut your brain off and listen to inanimate objects in order to get ideas.

Buster and Jamie

Bob Richardson

Content warning: aggravated assault.

The Legion in Hope's End is a fairly modest affair. The squat, stucco building is painted an oatmeal grey. The bar is its most prominent feature and, like the bars in most Legions, it is both dated and dowdy. The hardwood floor is original, although it was stripped and re-coated just in time for Canada's centennial in 1967. Fifty years later, the floor, like many of the patrons, has seen better days.

These days, most tables and chairs sit unused, save for the few seats at the bar, or around the Keno display, or by the one big screen television, if hockey is on. Occasionally, a couple of the regulars will get up for a game of darts or pool. Mostly the few there sit in sad solitude, nursing their pints or worrying the left-over fries around their plates.

Except on Saturdays. That day kicks off with ten-dollar burger and beer specials, starting at noon. Ladies' Darts League runs throughout the afternoon. At seven, the big fluorescent lights go down and the entertainment starts. Often a local band called the Sha-doobies takes to the tiny stage to trot out well-worn gems from the sixties and seventies. A few tables are cleared to make room for a dance floor. The joint is usually packed and rockin.' The fact that in Hope's End, only the bowling alley and the Dairy Queen are open past seven ensures that Saturday night will be a big night at the Legion.

Tonight holds the promise of something a bit different. A professional ventriloquist is the headliner. A poster on the front door announces that for two consecutive Saturdays, Jamie and Buster will open the evening's festivities with "LOL fun and hilarity." "The Wit of Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy; the bite of Jeff Dunham and Achmed the Dead Terrorist." Attached to the homemade poster is a black and white photo of a neatly-groomed young man in a sports jacket and tie holding an identically dressed and coiffed dummy.

The old bar is full at seven o'clock when the young man on the poster and his dummy climbs the tiny stage.

"Good evening, folks, I'm Jamie Wood and this is Buster. We're thrilled to be up here, with you tonight, in beautiful Hope's End."

Buster's head swivels to face Jamie. "Yeah, quite a place they got here. The Legion, no less. It's like The Met in New York, only with gum boots, geriatrics, and dart boards."

Laughs erupt from the tables in front of the stage.

"And Hope's End, what the hell kind of name is that? When you told me we'd be spending Saturday night in Hope's End, I thought 'Great, I get to go first. And what's Hope's front look like?'"

A few "oohs," and one drunk guy yelling "Yeah, give 'er!"

The first of the clientele get up to leave after Buster comments that “Hopefully, Hope ain’t one of the broads at the table in front, as their ends aren’t nothin’ to name a town after.”

Things go downhill from there.



“Thank you all for coming tonight. You’ve been very kind to me and my friend Buster.”

“Kind? Kind of brain dead, or just too soused to get up and walk out.”

“Buster, that’s enough,” says Jamie, as he claps his left hand over the mouth of the dummy he is holding with his right.

“Sorry, ladies and gentlemen, he’s not usually like this. Must be a touch of that Dutch Elm disease that’s going around. I’m Jamie Wood, and this is my buddy, Buster. Good night.” As Jamie bows awkwardly toward the few people still left in the audience, his top hat slides off his head. He rescues it with his left hand. This, of course, ungags Buster.

“Smooth move, Ex-lax. Hey, the old cougar in the front row with the gazongas is leavin’ with the old fart wearing the toupee. Picture those two in the hot tub upstairs. Hey honey! You get tired of old liver-spots there, come look up the ‘Woodster.’

The manager, sweaty and in an ill-fitting suit, arrives on stage. He grabs Jamie by the crook of his right arm and pushes him offstage.

“Hey, watch the threads, man. You’re gonna get sweat stains on my velvet lapels.”

Backstage, the manager pushes Jamie down the hallway, toward the single dressing room. “Pack your shit and get the hell outta here! You’re no Edgar Bergen and it’s no Charlie McCarthy. You’re just a no-talent schmuck who uses this...thing...” the manager nods toward Buster, “to play out your antisocial personality disorder, or whatever the hell it is that drives you.”

“B...but we’re booked for next week,” Jamie stammers.

“Forget it. You managed to empty my bar on a Saturday night. I’d do better with a tone-deaf organ grinder up there.” The manager pulls out a wad of bills and sticks one of them in Jamie’s cummerbund. “Here’s your fifty bucks.” The manager’s face softens slightly. “You’ve got talent kid. But this is a Legion, and these are seniors. They aren’t interested in filthy jokes or having their sexual orientation questioned. You gotta learn to read an audience.”



Jamie chain-smokes as he drives back to the bungalow he shares with his mother. When a cigarette isn’t in his mouth, it is in his left hand. That hand also steers his ancient AMC Rambler as it rumbles down the road. Jamie’s right hand

manipulates the two wooden balls he practices and trains with. He needs strength, dexterity, and unthinking micro-movement in that hand to make Buster move and talk for him. Back and forth, back and forth, between the fingers, over top of the fingers: the balls dance unceasingly, as Jamie works them.

“You look like shit, you know.”

Jamie grunts and glances at himself in the rear-view mirror. His hair is standing on end. His eyes red-rimmed. A bit of stubble on his right cheek betrays a spot he missed when he shaved earlier. The plume of smoke that rose from his loosely rolled cigarette encircles his head and washes out the edges of his face. His tie, cummerbund, hat, and jacket all sit in a pile on the back seat.

“You don’t look so hot yourself, Pinocchio,” he says, glancing at the wooden doll strapped in the passenger seat. In truth, Buster’s hair is still perfect. His face has the same vivid flesh tone and rosy cheeks it had the day Jamie found him at the garage sale, years ago. His eyes are glacial blue, and the full-lipped mouth is still cherry colored. It has that same half-smile it always had. A Mona Lisa smile.

Buster’s accessories sit on a pile in the back seat next to Jamie’s, so that the two are, as usual, dressed the same.

Jamie and Buster have engaged in casual banter for about a year now. Constant practice. Constant interaction with the dummy. It is the only way that he could ever make the big time. If others can’t understand his desire to climb to the top of the ventriloquism mountain, and what it takes to get there, then those people don’t really fit into his life.

The banter continues while Jamie wrestles to open the door to his basement suite.

“Those schmucks tonight were too brain-dead to get the nuance of our routine. I tell ya drop an f-bomb or make a ‘vag joke’ and the politeness police running around in their heads makes their brains explode. Not like that crowd at the Holiday Inn in Pouce Coupe. They loved us,” Buster says, just as Jamie opens the door.

“That was a stag party with a bunch of oil-rig workers, man. So, they’re the cultural high-water mark of our audiences?” Jamie says, just as they enter his cramped apartment.

Jamie’s first sense that his mother, Eva, is in his darkened apartment is the smell of Colts Cigarillos. He hears ice cubes rustling in a glass, coming from the kitchen table. He looks over to see the brightening cherry at the end of the smoke as his mother takes a deep drag in the dark.

“M...mom, what a nice surprise. What are you doing here, in the dark? Isn’t ‘Law and Order’ playing on some channel upstairs?” Having been caught arguing with his dummy, Jamie is trying to dance around what he knows is coming.

“Eva Braun lives,” Buster whispers, a little too loudly.

“Close that door, I need to talk to you,” Eva Wood says as she rises from the kitchen table and steps toward her son. “And put that horrid little doll away. It gives me the willies.”

Buster's head rotates toward Eva. "You'd like me to show ya my willy, wouldn't ya? Only it ain't a willy, it's a Louisville Slugger." Buster's eyebrows raise.

"Mind your tongue and put that 'thing' away. I can't stand the sight of it."

"S...sorry Mom" Jamie looks at the floor as he sits Buster down on one of the kitchen chairs, so that the doll is facing son and mother. "It's been a tough week for us...For me."

"Tough week, eh? My bunions are killing me, and I'm on my last smoke. Now my son's only friend is a doll that he talks to when no one's around." Eva shakes her head. "You talk to it more than you talk to me."

"But that's not why I'm here. The cops were by this afternoon. They were asking about you. And about that Anna girl you brought here a few times."

Jamie's face flushes. "But Mom, Anna broke up with me last w--"

"I told them she was only here once, a month ago. I also told them you moved out and have been working in camp, off in the bush. I didn't want them bothering you, with the state you're in." Eva reaches over absently to stroke her son's head. Jamie flinches slightly.

"That Anna, I knew she wasn't no good for you, Jay."

Eva looks at her son, who keeps his head down. "You look pale again. You've stopped bathing. And you're back to stuttering." Eva tugs at a stray lock of his hair. "And you can't stop playing with that stupid doll. It don't do you no good, boy."

Jamie's right hand balls up into a fist. "M...mom. Buster's my ticket out of here. I have to practice, so hard, all the time, to get to the next level. We're like p...partners."

"Son, you're clearly not well, again. I want you to go back to see Dr. Klein."

Jamie's eyes widen, and he bolts to the kitchen chair. In a flash, Buster is on his right arm, and seems to spring to life. Buster's arms wave as his jaw works up and down in time with the avalanche of words.

"Klein. That shyster.. The first time you saw him, you wet the bed for a month. He'll just put you back in that 'institution,' for a 'rest.' Remember that night orderly with the fat fingers and the bad breath? How much rest did he give ya?"

Buster turns his head to face Jamie's ear. He continues, louder and faster.

"That bitch is crazy. She wants to come between you and me... She wants you all to herself, the dirty old Mrs. Oedipus...I'm tellin' ya she's no better than that Anna leech."

Jamie is shaking as he tries to hold onto Buster's waving arm. "Shut up, Buster!" He smiles at his mom. "S...s...sorry Mom, I'm okay really."

Eva shakes her head. "You're sick, boy, sick in the head. I'm going to call Dr. Klein right away. He'll get you some help, like he did last time."

"Don't let her go! You're done... We're done if you let her go. Stop the bitch now before she puts you back in that nut farm!"

"No, Mom. You can't send me back there!" Jamie's right arm, with Buster attached, reaches to stop Eva. Buster's head brushes Eva's left breast, causing her to spill her drink.

Eva's eyes flash. "You stupid little shit! Look what you did! You and that pathetic doll. Get it away from me!" She grinds the lit cigarillo on Buster's forehead. She pushes Jamie's arm aside and began to make her way to the stairs.

"You can go play with your doll at the hospital, for all I care," she says, her teeth gritted.

"She burnt me, the evil bitch, just like she used to do to you. Are you gonna let her do that to me? To us? Get her now, before it's too late!"

In a flash, Jamie sees them in the same room, as a younger Eva lowers a lit cigarillo toward him. He hears her saying, through gritted teeth, "Break my juice glasses, will ya, you stupid little shit."

As she mounts the third stair toward her room, Eva feels herself being pulled back by the collar of her sweatshirt. She tumbles down the stairs, falling flat on her back.

"Jamie, what?...No!"

"Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you!" Two distinct, but unified voices fill the tiny suite.

The sound of Buster's head slamming into the side of Eva's temple is a hollow thump, muffled somewhat by her hair. The second blow is directly to the top of Eva's head and makes a wet thwomp. The third blow has the simultaneous sounds of clang and crack, as the cast iron frying pan Jamie had retrieved from the top of the stove smashes the left side of his mother's skull. The fourth, with the same instrument, serves no purpose other than to spray some blood against the wall.

"Easy, Bub, you're beatin' on a dead horse, so to speak. Job done, tiger."

Jamie squats on the floor next to the body of his mother. His breathing is ragged and interspersed with sobbing. Then a choked whisper. "Fuck, fuck. What have we done?"

"Ooh, my fuckin' head. Next time we do this, you do the coco-bump and I'll swing the frying pan."

Jamie brings his eyes from the pool of blood spreading on the linoleum around his mother's head to Buster, who is also on the floor. Buster's head is sideways, his right cheek on the floor. The left side of his head has a crack that runs from above his arched eyebrow toward the black mane of hair, which is, strangely, still perfectly in place. Buster's left eye is tilted up and to the left about forty-five degrees, while his right remains open and looking straight ahead. Blood spatters across his face. A large drop has pooled on his red lip, and descends across his smile, his chin, and onto the lapel of his shirt.

"How'd ya like to wipe this goop out of my mouth? I can taste the cheap sherry the old broad's been drinkin' since breakfast."

Jamie bends down to gently pick up Buster.

"W...what do we do? God, I can't think. Can't breathe in here."

"I'll do the thinkin', bumpkas, but you do gotta breathe. Breathe and clean up. Get the mop and the bleach. Grab the quilt outta the closet upstairs. But first get all this mommy-goop off my face and outta my mouth. Then get me outta this outfit and get me fixed up."

Jamie cleans and changes Buster, then repairs his wayward eye. He adds a bit of Krazy Glue to the crack in Buster's skull, then covers the crack and the burn mark with some flesh-coloured paint he keeps on hand for touch-ups. He wraps Eva's body in the old quilt and lays her on the grass in the backyard. He mops up the blood pool on the linoleum. He uses a rag to clean the blood spatter off the wall and ceiling. Finally, he wipes the area with a cloth soaked in bleach. He puts the bloody rags and the mop head into a plastic bag and lays them on top of the body. He lugs his mother and the plastic bag to the Rambler and dumps them into the trunk.

"Now what?" Jamie's shoulders slump, his face seems to sag, and his eyes take on the dead gaze of abandonment of hope.

"Shovel, gum boots, rubber gloves, in there." Buster's head nods toward the trunk. "Then we gotta make like Bobby Orr and get the puck outta here. Lucky the old broad's a loner, like you. Nobody'll miss her for a week or two."

"Run? Where?" Jamie asks.

"Wherever no one's gonna look twice at a washed-up loser with his hand up a wooden doll's patoot. I don't know, but I'll figure it out while you pack our stuff. Get all of it. Hopefully now that dear Anna's gone, nobody else will know we were stayin' here."



It is about three a.m. when the Rambler stops on the country road that runs along the bog.

“Looks like the spot, all right. Man, I love this place. Peaceful, secluded, smelly. Soft ground. Like God created it just for us.”

Jamie puts on his rubber boots and camo ball cap. He then takes out the old green daypack. He places Buster in the pack, so that his head and shoulders protrude from the top. He puts Buster’s camo ball cap on his head. Jamie slips the pack over his shoulders. He hesitates as he gazes down at the mess in the trunk.

“Put her over your shoulder, lunkhead. Carry the shovel and the bag of rags and let’s go for a stroll to where we were before. Aren’t you lucky you got me to do the thinkin’?”

Jamie lifts his mother out of the trunk and hoists her over his left shoulder. He picks up the bag and the shovel and sets off toward a stand of alders just off the road. Jamie is surprised about two things: his mother is heavier than he thought and burying her in a boggy grave doesn’t bother him so much.

“Hellooo, Anna. Don’t get up. It’s just us. Brought you some company,” Buster sings.

“Let’s see how well they hit it off now,” Jamie chimes in.



Back at the car, Jamie moves his possessions and Buster’s trunk of costumes from the back seat into the cavernous trunk and shuts it with a click.

Buster is sitting in the passenger seat, belted in, when Jamie slides in next to him and starts the Rambler.

“Where to now?” Jamie asks his partner.

“I was readin’ about a little town just over the Alaska border. The bar there will serve you a shot with a frozen toe in the bottom. God’s honest truth! Sounds like the kind of place that won’t get all sniffy about a bit of off-colour humor. So, go North, my man.

“You didn’t forget the shovel again, did ya?”

Mastery

Flynn Connolly-Sifton

Round one of the 2011 Bellworth Junior Trivia Finals. A sparse audience shifts in their plastic folding chairs—mostly parents or grandparents—eyes already glazing over, tapping at phone screens or picking at cuticles. Old plastic creaks. Most of them would rather be somewhere else, somewhere out of this pale stuffy room that summons thoughts of after-school detention. But onstage, adjusting his tie, Julius McWellwent stands sheltered in the absolute conviction that this is where he should be.

Time rubs against Julius in unison with the pulse of the community center’s aging lights. He stands four-foot-ten-and-three-quarters and he’ll turn thirteen in two months and eight days; he knows both of these facts with absolute precision. He’s sweating a little under the sun as it glares in shafts through the community center windows, while he tries to remember the difference between eschatology and thanatology. The AC hums.

Julius peers insect-like at his competitors through thick-lensed glasses. Straight-faced James Boggle and nervous-looking Theresa Elroy stand to either side of him. Theresa doesn’t have any reason to be nervous, Julius thinks. She’s a year older than him, and their library records practically match—he’s seen her there in the aisles, moving lightly through walls of weighty hardcovers in the nonfiction section. He caught a glimpse of her shuffling through flash cards in the parking lot with her mother, twenty-three minutes ago.

James, for all intents and purposes, moves in a different world. Julius can only guess the reams of information he takes in through osmosis as his crowd of schoolyard friends buzzes with an endless stream of what’s worth knowing.

Someone in the audience coughs. The AC flutters for a second and then kicks back in, a little louder, a dinosaur hum flooding the place.

Inside Julius’ mind, cranial corridors are a blizzard of facts: how solidified mud becomes shale; the birthplace of Chiang Kai-Shek (Xikou, China); the use of the V-2 rocket (during the Blitz’s final days); the release year of Bob Dylan’s *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965, his second album that year)—it all coalesces, running through him nonstop, even drifting into his meticulous dreams.

“Uh—M-michel de Montaigne?” stammers James Boggle, from Julius’ left, in response to the first question asked by the moderator. The moderator shakes her head, looking almost disappointed as Julius slams his well-worn buzzer.

“Julius,” she says, nodding at him.

“Antoine Galland, publication starting in 1704,” Julius replies.

The host nods, unspeaking, and moves on: “Next, the subject of—”

“But not concluding publication until 1717,” Julius interjects, “and published with the phrase *Arab stories translated into French* appended to the main title, so the full title of that edition was technically *The One Thousand and One Nights, Arab Stories Translated Into French*. Although—” he turns to look at James Boggle, “Michel de Montaigne, I

just want to say, seems like a pretty good guess for someone whom I'll assume is poorly versed in the history of French literary translation, and I can see how you would have thought that, and I don't think you're stupid or anything, so if you'd like to talk about it later, I can recommend you some good material on the subject." He finishes by flashing James a broad, genuine smile.

James does not smile back.

Someone in the audience coughs. Theresa Ellroy rolls her eyes.

The contest goes on. Julius keeps trying to catch people's eyes, hoping to show them not just the mastery he wields, but how open he is, how willing he'd be to become somebody's guide, somebody's friend.

His own family isn't here. He does his best not to hold it against them. His mother says they've been more than reasonable; driving him down to the library, sitting there politely as he rambles about his latest material, letting him stay holed up in his bedroom all day.

His latest strategy is two books at once: one a big paper brick in his hands, the other a crackling audio file in his old headphones. Up until last night he'd thought his progress with the whole idea was truly impressive; he even started scribbling drafts for the technique in a notebook with the working title *The As-Yet Remarkably Infrequent and Academically Under-Recognized Art of Split Attention*. But considering last night's incident at the dinner table, he's elected to put the project on temporary hiatus.

He'd been describing the whole two-books-at-once project to his parents, slipping into tangents, switching tone and subject before he'd even realized, trying to keep the whole thing on track until he lost the thread and started explaining how a rat king is made.

He'd been mid-sentence when his father, staring straight down into his plate, shouted to nobody in particular: "I wanted a son I could go hunting with! How the hell am I supposed to take this kid hunting!?"

He stood up and looked at Julius and his mother, both silent. His mustache bristled as he took in a deep breath, then he wrenched the tablecloth away, looking like a matador as plates smashed all around him.

After that, he just stood there, looking a little embarrassed, staring across the table at Julius's mother, giving her the same look James and Theresa share right now: the look of two people who've trapped themselves in an arbitrary game with someone they weren't ready for.

The questions are getting harder now. James has a pattern of either spitting out his answers in a confident rush or floundering around in verbal swamps; there's no in-between. Theresa takes it slower, usually pausing halfway through her answers as if double-checking them. The two of them look at one another now and then, but never at Julius, only through him.

In quiet moments, right after getting a question correct, Julius tries to smile at the audience, which is mostly older relatives and school friends of his competitors. They reply with blank stares, their legs crossed, hands clasped in their

laps like tangled roots. Their indifference gives Julius a familiar sensation, a hot, prickly feeling at the back of his neck. He searches the library of his mind for facts related to this sensation, but finds no definition, only memories of other times that he has felt alone in a crowded room. But he can't pause to think about it for too long, because he's got to slam the buzzer and declare, "Eight thousand, six hundred and eleven meters, making it the second-highest in the world, although in 1986, there was a mistake involving..."

"...Ruhollah Khomeini, in 1979, which..."

"...definition of megafauna is actually..."

"...and father of Telemachus, who..."

Whenever James or Theresa answer a question wrong, Julius tries to prove his non-judgmental attitude by making the most sympathetic face he can. He widens his eyes and screws up his features to let them know he feels for them, trying to offer some consolation for their embarrassment. After a few minutes of this, he worries it'll come across as patronizing, so he starts balancing it out by celebrating their correct answers too. They'll give the right answer and he'll give them a big smile or a thumbs-up, sometimes blurting out something like *correct* or *yeah!* or *absolutely*.

"Radius and... radius and tibia?" Theresa says.

The moderator shakes her head. Julius hits his buzzer but James hits it first.

"Radius and ulna!" James says, clenching his fist.

"Correct."

"The tibia being the corresponding lower leg version of the radius," Julius adds, nodding at Theresa enthusiastically, "with a bone called the fibula being the lower leg version of the ulna. But that was a really—"

"Julius!" The moderator glares at him.

"Sorry, ma'am."

The competition nears the final round. Julius has been leading the whole time, but now he pulls further and further ahead, although he makes sure not to be smug about it. He's good-natured, smiling at every question posed, and every answer presented by either of his opponents, his teeth bared in a big numb Novocain smile.

And of course he wins. Of course the moderator, looking like she just wants to go home, loudly recites his full name, and hands him a little plastic trophy, which he lifts high above his head to show the blank-faced and barely-applauding audience. And of course, as everybody begins to file out of the room and the air is clogged with the noise of scraping chairs, he hurries to catch up to his competitors.

Following them down the hall, out the door, and into the midday glare of the parking lot, he says, “I just want to let you both know that I feel really sorry for both of you, since I’m sure you each totally deserve to have won this thing and are also clearly real smart people. But I also want to make it clear that I’m not looking down on you or pitying you or anything like that, and I respect the pair of you a whole lot, and it’s been a real pleasure to be up there with both of you, and I hope you both found it as fun and stimulating and challenging an experience as I did.” He stops for a short breath, then starts again, faster, trying to make up for lost time. “I’d like to thank both of you for such an excellent competition, and in the spirit of sportsmanship but also out of totally genuine respect for you, I’d like to know if either of you are occupied two months and eight days from now, because I’d be more than happy to invite you to—”

James Boggle gives him a little shove. “Screw you, man. I’ll, like, deglove you. I’ll defenestrate you.”

Then he walks away. Julius wobbles on his feet for a second, almost dropping his trophy. He grips it tighter and feels his fingers getting sweaty. The nearby buildings of the underfunded downtown area look small and sad in the summer light. Theresa hangs around for a moment, looking like she feels a little sorry for the winner as he examines his trophy.

“I’m glad you enjoyed this,” Theresa says at last. Julius smiles at her again and she continues: “But it’s not, like, everything. It’s not gonna take you anywhere. A lot of things go nowhere.”

“That’s very poetic, Theresa. Although I’ve got to disagree.”

He’s about to say more when she turns to leave with her family. Julius recognizes them as the group who were sitting at the back of the room. Her dad puts a hand on her shoulder and tells her she did well. She says nothing more to Julius.

Then, a younger kid—he must be Theresa’s little brother—runs up and looks at Julius, his eyes all big and shiny, and he blurts out, “You’re real smart!”

Julius smiles down at him, wondering what role he’s supposed to play here, whether he’s supposed to be a mentor or just a buddy. Before he gets a word out, Theresa’s dad calls from across the parking lot.

“Come on, Alan. Time to go.” He gives Julius a tight-lipped nod.

The family crosses the parking lot to their scuffed little Volvo, and Alan throws an admiring grin over his shoulder before hopping into his booster seat. Then, like all the rest, they start their car and drive away.

Julius is left scanning the eyes of the last few folks to leave the building. He’s still hoping for a warm smile, a murmured congratulations; even just an impressed look would be enough, but he’s not as desperate for it as he was just a minute ago. None of them give him so much as a nod as they vanish behind the slamming doors of their cars. Not even the moderator acknowledges him, as she locks the community center door and heads down the sidewalk, disappearing from Julius’ sight.

Julius stands alone, trophy dangling limp in his fingers, the stuffy summer breeze running over him. He closes his eyes and pictures Alan again, recreating the little tableau. The wide-eyed appreciation. The oversized shoes, one foot untied.

Those big dark pupils promising that it all meant something.

Little beads of sweat itch at his back. He's alone.

But it's enough. As long as he's loved.

Palette Cleanser

KA Dewey

Sadie exited the coffee shop and made her way across the parking lot, two cardboard cups of coffee gripped in her hands. She eyed her destination with trepidation; a lone man slouched against his jacked up black truck. His head was down, focused on his cell phone. At least he matched his pic: same build, same short dark hair, and same snake tattoo winding up his left forearm.

“Are you Tom?” Sadie fought the urge to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. She always played with her hair when she was nervous, and first dates always made her nervous.

The man hastily shoved his phone in his pocket and stood up. “Yep, that’s me. You must be Sadie.”

Sadie handed him one of the cups. “Ice breaker coffee?”

“Bless the beans!” He accepted her offering, took a sip, and promptly spat it out on the ground.

“What the fuck is this?” He held the coffee cup up and glared at it suspiciously, like it had just bit him.

Sadie hid her alarm at his childish overreaction. She had been looking forward to this date, Janet said it would be life-changing. “Sorry, wrong one.” She handed him the other container and took his. “I take almond milk in mine.”

“Almond milk? Seriously? How do you milk an almond?” He laughed, a high-pitched giggle that set Sadie’s teeth on edge. “No nipples on almonds!”

“I’m lactose intolerant,” she said.

Tom paused, a confused look crossed his face. “But Janet said you were easy-going.”

“What do you mean?” Now Sadie was confused.

“I don’t like intolerant types,” he said.

Sadie laughed, but Tom remained serious. Did he not know what lactose intolerant meant? Maybe it was best to just change the subject. “Janet said you had something planned?”

Tom’s demeanor shifted instantly. A cheesy grin exposed a missing tooth and his eyes shone with delight. He clasped his hands together and swung his arms in an exaggerated long arc. “Golfing, baby!”

Sadie froze. “Golfing?”

He paused mid-swing and gave her a quizzical look. “Janet said you liked golfing.”

“She did, did she?” Janet knew Sadie’s history with golfing dates. That last one had been particularly disastrous and had required a three-hour coffee debrief. What was she up to?

Tom continued to swing his imaginary golf club while providing his own colour commentary. “Tom Trainor does it again with a beauty drive off the 18th green,” he said in the serious tone of a professional golf analyst.

Sadie backed away slowly. She needed to talk to Janet immediately. Tom was not her type at all. How was he supposed to be life-changing? She pretended to get a call on her cell. “Tom, I have to take this, it’s work.”

Tom kept swinging his imaginary golf club. “No probs. I gotta drain the snake before we head out.”

Sadie shuddered at the image, hoping he wasn’t going to urinate in the parking lot. He seemed like the type. What was Janet thinking?

She walked back across the parking lot, phone to her ear on the invented call, and sat at one of the coffee shop’s outdoor tables. Across the parking lot, Tom had exchanged his pretend driver for a pretend putter and was working on his short game.

Sadie shook her head and called her friend.

A bright cheerful voice answered on the first ring. “Janet’s Joyful Jaunts Matchmaking, at your service.”

Sadie ignored the witty remark and jumped straight into her grievance. “Dammit, Janet! You set me up with a total Chad.”

Janet laughed, a light-hearted trill that sounded like a bird call. “You met Tom,” she said.

“Yes, I met Tom. He wants to take me golfing.”

More laughter. “Perfect!”

“You know how I feel about golfing dates.”

“Yeah, that was Craig, wasn’t it?”

“He dumped me on the 9th hole.” Sadie sighed, annoyed at the memory.

“Men don’t like losing at their favourite game,” Janet said. “I wish I could have seen his face when he realized you’re a former pro.”

“No, you don’t. He was pissed off.”

“You tried to tell him.”

“And look what good it did me,” Sadie said. “Why would you set me up with another golfer? How’s that supposed to work?”

“Oh, it’s not supposed to.” Janet’s tone was nonchalant.

“But you said Tom was nice?”

“No, I said that about all the other guys I’ve set you up with.”

“What about the life-changing bit?”

“Oh that,” Janet said. “Trust me, you’ll thank me later.”

Sadie glanced over at Tom. He had abandoned his fantasy golf game and was now admiring his reflection in the truck window while popping his pecs.

“My skepticism says otherwise,” Sadie said.

“Don’t be negative.”

Sadie let out an exasperated sigh. “Nice guys, Janet. I want to meet nice guys. Why is it so hard?”

“Yeah, you say that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sadie couldn’t hide her irritation.

There was a brief silence before Janet responded. “Sadie, I love you, but you reject every guy I set you up with.”

“I do not!”

“Oh really? What was wrong with Keith?”

“Too old,” Sadie replied promptly.

“Adam?”

“Too young.”

“Mark?”

“Drove a Jetta. I couldn’t take him seriously.”

“And Ben?”

“Too nice.”

“He’s a police officer!”

“Exactly my point. Too nice.”

It was Janet’s turn to sound exasperated. “And that’s why you got Tom.”

“You set me up with an asshole on purpose?”

“Sadie, you’ve lost the ability to recognize nice guys,” Janet said, her voice firm. “You need a reset. A palate cleanser.”

“A palate cleanser?” The word brought up images of elaborate gourmet meals and wine tastings, nothing about men, though.

“Yes! Tom is everything you don’t want in a man!”

Sadie had to admit there was a lot of truth in that statement. “How’s that going to help?”

“Perspective, Sadie. It’ll force you to appreciate nice guys.”

Sadie was silent.

Janet’s voice returned to its earlier jocular tone. “It’s a win-win for me. Either you get over your aversion to decent men, or you never ask me to set you up again.”

Before Sadie could think of an appropriate retort, movement across the parking lot caught her eye. Tom had walked behind his truck and was casually looking around, then appeared to unzip his pants. Fascinated and horrified, she couldn’t look away as Tom’s urine hit the pavement and trickled into the parking lot from underneath the truck.

Just then, a cop car drove by, stopped abruptly, then turned around and pulled into the parking lot. It came to a halt in front of Tom’s truck.

“Oh shit,” Sadie said. “Gotta go, I’ll call you later.” She hung up before Janet could protest.

The cop exited his vehicle and approached the truck. Tom panicked, tried to zip up, but he was mid-stream and sprayed urine all over his pants.

Sadie recognized the cop’s walk and almost laughed out loud when she realized it was Ben, her date from last week. What had she told Janet about him? Oh yeah, too nice. Well, he didn’t look too nice right now.

Ben said something that Sadie couldn't hear and gestured angrily at the urine trail, then at Tom's partially zipped pants. Tom pleaded his case, but Ben seemed to ignore him. He returned to his car, Tom trailing behind, looking sheepish and trying to walk and zip up. Ben grabbed his ticket book, wrote a citation and gave it to Tom, placing it firmly in his open palm, and ended the exchange with another stern lecture. Ben was about to get back in his vehicle when he noticed Sadie. After a few seconds, his face lit up, and he smiled and waved.

"Hey, Sadie! Nice to see you," he said and started walking over.

Damn, Sadie thought, and took a moment to appreciate how good he made that uniform look. His broad chest and shoulders filled out his button-down short-sleeve shirt in a very pleasing way and his lower half was equally easy on the eyes. It was obvious he didn't skip leg day.

"Hey Ben, nice to see you too." Sadie was startled to realize she meant it. Maybe Janet was right, she had needed a Tom to appreciate a Ben. Over at the truck, Tom was using paper towels in a vain attempt at blotting the urine stains out of his chinos, but nothing was going to save them.

"You know that guy?" Ben asked and stuck his thumb over his shoulder at Tom.

"Not really. He's just a palate cleanser."

"A what now?" said Ben.

"Never mind, it's not important." She looked up at Ben, noticed how his smile reached his eyes. He was truly happy to see her.

"Hey, you want to have dinner sometime?"

Ben grinned.



Dam Go Skrr by Sophia Wasylinko
2023; digital photo
Original graffiti tagger(s)
unknown

God Spelled Backwards is Dog

E. B. Sorensen

Ms. Rebecca told us that God made the world. She said, God made everything. He made all the things you love.

I asked, so God made Benny?

And who's Benny? she asked.

My dog, I said.

Yes, God made Benny, she said, then smiled with her thin lips.

We waited for our parents to pick us up and I played with Legos. Anna tapped my shoulder. Want to know something? she asked.

Okay, I said.

God spelled backwards is dog, she said. That's why dogs are man's best friend. Because God is our best friend. They are both loyal, too, Anna said, and licked the ring of red chap around her mouth.



Ms. Rebecca told us that God loves everyone. She said that God loves every little boy, and every little girl on earth, and every grown-up, too.

I asked, so God loves me?

Ms. Rebecca looked over her glasses. Well, are you a little boy? she asked. The other boys and girls giggled.

Yes, I said, giggling too.

Then God loves you, she said, with her hands in the shape of a heart.

I played with the farm animals. Anna sat down and took the sheep. Want to know something? she asked.

Okay, I said.

If God loves everyone, he doesn't love anyone at all. Nobody is special if we are all loved the same, Anna said, and set the sheep back down.

When we got home, Benny greeted Mummy, Daddy, and me at the door. He wiggled between all of us and licked each of our hands.



Ms. Rebecca told us that God is always there. She said he is everywhere. He is always watching.

I asked, so God is looking right now?

Yes, God is looking right now, she said. Let's wave hello.

All the other boys and girls waved in different directions. I waved out the window towards home, at Benny.

I pushed the train along the wooden tracks. Anna blocked it with her hand. Want to know something? she asked.

Okay, I said.

God sees you do bad things, she said. And when you do bad things, you get in trouble. So, when you do something bad, God knows, and you can't lie, Anna said, and let my train go through.

At home, Mummy made me a bologna sandwich. It had lettuce. I don't like lettuce, but Mummy says I need to have it. But Mummy wasn't looking, so I took it out and stuck it under the tablecloth. Benny was under the table like he always is when I'm eating.

Benny yawned. His mouth was a black hole. You took the lettuce out, he said.

My tummy twisted.

Benny shuffled on his big yellow paws. I saw you take it out, he said.

My cheeks felt hot.

Benny tilted his head. Take it out from under the tablecloth and eat it, he said.

I looked at Mummy leaning over the sink, then grabbed the lettuce and stuffed it in my mouth. It was bitter and stuck to my teeth.

Benny stayed underneath the table while I finished my sandwich. My tummy kept hurting for the rest of the day.



Ms. Rebecca told us that after you die, you can go to Heaven, or you can go to hell. Heaven is in the clouds and hell is below.

How do you get to Heaven? I asked.

You let God into your heart, she said, and pressed her hand against her chest. She told us to bow our heads and told God to come into our hearts. In my head, there was a picture of Benny on his bright red bed.

I ripped the Velcro on my shoes on and off. Anna sat beside me. Want to know something? she asked. I nodded. In hell, there is fire and the devil. You go there if you do bad things called sins. You'll suffer forever, Anna said, then ripped her Velcro loud.

At home, I ate my sandwich with lettuce while Benny watched. It was yucky, but I ate the whole thing. Then I cuddled with Benny on the couch and pet his long golden hair and thought of Heaven in the clouds.



Ms. Rebecca told us that God knows your thoughts. He knows when you are happy, and he knows when you are sad. You can also talk to God in your head, she said, and pointed to her forehead.

What do you say to God? I asked.

You can say thank you, she said, and told us to be quiet and say thank you to God in our heads. I said thank you to Benny on his bright red bed.

I washed my hands in the sink. Anna came up beside me. Want to know something? she asked.

I didn't look at her.

God can hear if you say something mean in your head. It's a sin to think bad things, and when you do things you know you shouldn't do. If you sin, you will go to hell, Anna said, and pulled the collar of her blue flower dress.

At home, Daddy wouldn't let me watch TV until I did my math problems. Stupid Daddy, I thought. But then I remembered what Anna said about saying mean things in your head. My tummy hurt when I saw Benny looking at me from down the hall.

I heard what you called Daddy, he said.

I ran past him and went upstairs to get my math problems. I heard Benny slowing climbing the stairs behind me.

You called Daddy a mean word, he said.

I crawled into my bed and held my tummy. Benny stood at the edge of the bed and pushed his big, wet nose into my face.

You sinned, he said.

All I could think of was how I would suffer forever in hell.



My tummy kept hurting every day. Even when I was at school. I did lots of sins there, and Benny saw everything from his bright red bed. He got angry at me when I got home.

You looked at Martha's spelling test, Benny said. You cheated, and that's a sin.

You broke T.J.'s pencil, Benny said. You terrible, terrible boy.

You pushed Harold during kickball, Benny said. Hell is where you'll go when you die.



Ms. Rebecca told us that God is three things. We call it the Holy Trinity, she said. God had a son named Jesus who he sent to live on earth. The Holy Spirit is the part that makes Jesus and God the same, she said, and traced a triangle in the air.

I sat in the cubbies and held my coat tight. Anna sat beside me. Want to know something? she asked. I put my coat over my head, but Anna yanked it down. The Holy Spirit is also called the Holy Ghost. Ghosts are dead things that come out at night to haunt you, Anna said, and let go of my coat.

That night, something was scratching at my bedroom door. When I opened it, Benny was there. His white face in the dark made me so scared. I slammed the door and didn't let him in.



Ms. Rebecca told us that Jesus died for our sins. He died so we could ask for forgiveness. That way when we sin, we can say sorry, and it becomes okay.

Now my tummy really hurt. Worse than it had before. So, I cried. I cried so much that Ms. Rebecca had to get Mummy and Daddy from the grown-up service to take me home.

In the car, I said I'm sorry to Benny on his bright red bed.

When we got home, Benny didn't come to the door like he always did. He was on the couch, and he wasn't moving. Mummy and Daddy said he died because he was old. But I knew the truth.



Biblically Accurate Dandelion by Darrian Thompson
2024; digital art

Biblically Accurate Dandelion is a horticultural hallucination, where plastic trolls are reborn as petalled prophets. It's a daisy chain of divine oddities converging around an all-seeing eye that serves as an anchor amid the chaos. This piece marks the cathartic closing chapter of my life in Alberta, and was inspired by a Good Luck Troll I found amid the many boxes that contained the tumultuous remains of my childhood.

The Last Shower

By KA Dewey

Chad really liked this gym, but they were fanatical about appropriate use of designated changerooms. He poked his head out the door and checked the hallway for the bathroom police. Fortunately for him, the corridor was quiet and empty. The KinderGym crowd were long gone, and the after-work die-hards hadn't arrived yet. Shower kit and towel in hand, he dashed down the hall and opened the door clearly marked FAMILY ONLY.

Chad hated the showers in the men's changeroom. There was zero privacy and no place to put his toiletries. It also didn't help that most of the men there looked like close relatives of Bigfoot; large full-bodied furrries. All that hair gave him the shivers. You wouldn't find a stray strand on his body; he kept it smooth and clean. Besides, the family changerooms were usually empty, so he didn't see why he couldn't use them.

He quickly shut the door behind him and locked the deadbolt. The space was small, but it was private with its own shower and toilet and a large shelf that would hold all his skincare products. He started the shower and unpacked his toiletry bag. Once the temperature was to his liking, he jumped in and started his routine.

He was fully lathered and immersed in the floral scent of his Hibiscus Hawaiian Retreat shampoo when there was a knock at the door.

"Sir? Sir, you can't be in there."

Dammit, he had been enjoying his privacy, but it was only Chloe, the receptionist. What could she do?

"What's the problem? I'm just taking a shower," he said. He rinsed the shampoo out of his hair, then massaged his Pomegranate Epic Explosion conditioner into his scalp.

"It's the family changeroom, Sir. You know you can't be in there."

"Sorry, my mistake, I'll be right out." Chad grabbed his loofah, squirted some of his Luscious Lavendar body wash on it, and started lathering his body.

"I've already called security, they're on their way," she said. "You can't keep doing this!"

Security? She had never called them before, maybe he should wrap this up. Chad quickly rinsed his hair and body and turned off the shower. He turned his attention to drying off and getting dressed. He'd apply his Never Grow Old moisturizer later.

More banging on the door. A different voice now, male, and serious. "Sir, this is security, open the door immediately."

"I'll be right out!" Chad said. Panicked, he dropped his towel and started yanking his Lululemon chinos on; underwear could wait. He pulled on the zipper, but it wouldn't budge.

“Sir, this is your last warning, open the door now!” The door handle rattled. “What’s he doing in there?”

“I don’t know, but it’s the third time this week. We’ve had complaints.”

The voices faded out, then in again. Did someone say something about a key? Chad tugged on his zipper furiously, jerking his hand up and down. The handle rattled again, and the door flew open. Someone shrieked.

“Gross, he’s jerking off!”

“No! That’s not what I’m doing!” Chad’s voice was a high-pitched squeal. He gave one last desperate pull on the zipper. It gave and slammed home, taking a big chunk of his penis with it. Pain enveloped him in a red haze and his head swam as blood spread across his groin. His legs turned to jelly, and he crashed to the floor in an ungraceful heap. As his vision faded, there were screams that Chad realized were coming from him, then everything went dark.



This is Fine (stormclouds edition) by Sophia Wasylanko
2023; digital photo
Original graffiti tagger(s) unknown

Honeycomb

Evan Shumka

Content warning: Sexual content involving bees.

Rox huffed and puffed like a virgin as they pedalled their childhood bicycle up the steep farm road. Their thighs burned like a virgin, and their nose itched with virginal hay fever. Rox even sneezed like a virgin.

Up ahead, a tractor came down the hill, taking up most of the road. The man driving it did a double take as he pattered past. Rox was an unusual sight with their dyed pink-and-blue buzz cut, torn-up muscle shirt, and denim short shorts. They looked like a circus bear bent over their tiny bicycle, complete with basket, tassels, and training wheels. Rox gave the farmer a masculine nod, which the farmer returned.

At twenty-one, Rox had done little that even the most conservative of judges would consider sexual: a few chaste kisses, a hand-hold, and some light touching exclusively above the collarbone. For Rox, this simply would not do. There was a nagging sensation in their gut—and yes, maybe a bit lower too—that the last sexy train was leaving and they had to hop on board pronto, or risk being tossed into some kind of proverbial volcano.

It had all become clear in a moment of drunken clarity at three A.M. on their birthday: if they let another year go by without having sex, this restrictive state of virginity would become permanent. In their alcoholic fervour, Rox had snapped a few sexy pics, thrown together a Bumble account, and swiped through everyone within a thirty-kilometre radius before passing out.

The following afternoon, they'd woken up to a pounding headache and a hazy recollection of their epiphany from the night before. They opened their phone and took a sober look at what they'd done.

Rox, 21 (they/them)

Sexual novice looking to ditch the 'ginity. Hit me up.

Rox was mortified. The photos verged on pornographic. They were about to delete the account when they noticed they already had ten matches and decided to at least check out what kinds of people had swiped back on their spicy profile.

The first two were obvious catfish. The third was a literal photo of a catfish. But the fourth profile was of someone in a beekeeping outfit, her face hardly visible behind the dark veil.

Heather, 25 (she/her)

I'm a beekeeper new to the area hoping to connect :)

Bees.

As a kid, Rox had been afraid of bees. The last time they'd gotten stung, their hand had swollen to the size of a cantaloupe.

Rox went through Heather's other photos. She was hidden behind her full beekeeper getup in each one, but there was something sexy and mysterious about that. Anything could be under that suit. It filled Rox with curiosity, and they remembered a dark hollow in a tree trunk, and the powerful urge to reach inside and see what it contained. What could be hotter than the unknown? Of course, it occurred to Rox that they were just horny—a feeling which only increased when they saw that Heather had already messaged them.

I'd be happy to teach you a thing or two 😊🐝

Rox re-read the text a few times and felt their heart rate double. This could be it. This Heather person wanted them. The knowledge of it was overwhelming. Rox tried to stay calm as they trimmed their nails extra short and filed them smooth in case things got serious. They made themselves wait a full hour before replying.

about sex or bees?

As they waited for a response, Rox binged bee documentaries on their phone. After two hours, there was still nothing. Maybe they'd gotten ahead of themselves. They kept checking their notifications, worrying that they'd been too forward, or not forward enough. The only thing they retained from the documentaries was the image of a hornet being cooked alive by a mass of buzzy, vibrating bodies. It seemed that Rox's flirtatious encounter with Heather had ended before it had even begun. But then, a day later, she replied.

Both 😏

Oh yeah. It was so on.

Rox went back and forth with Heather over the rest of the week. They were pretty sure she wasn't a human trafficker or a serial killer, so when Heather invited Rox over to meet at her house, Rox agreed.

The only problem was that Rox didn't have a driver's license, and even if they did, their parents wouldn't have agreed to lend them the car for the sake of facilitating a sexual escapade with a stranger. Plus, public transport was virtually non-existent in the valley, leaving Rox with only one option for reaching their sexy destination.

Which is how they now found themselves leaning against the handlebars of their tiny bicycle, gasping for breath in the sweltering summer heat.

They squinted at Google Maps, wiping the sweat out of their eyes. They'd been biking for an hour but still had a ways to go. Their shirt stuck to their skin and made them itchy. On top of that, some of their fingernails were now ingrown, which made gripping the handlebars painful. They took a moment to catch their breath and get a lay of the land. Rolling green fields spread out on either side of the road. Cows clustered in the shade of a tree. The blue mountains loomed large, and above them, cushiony clouds drifted along, lending depth to the expansive sky. There were worse places for losing one's V-card.

Between the fatigue and the arousal, Rox thought for sure they'd pass out. They tried telling themselves nothing sexual was going to happen. They were just going to learn about beekeeping. No need to get excited. But every bit of their biology knew better.

After another twenty minutes of hard riding, Rox made it to the beekeeper's property. The address was marked on a boulder by the mossy, wooden fence. Rox pushed their bike up the long driveway towards the farmhouse. Gravel crackled under the wheels. Rox snooped around, feeling like a trespasser.

It was a big property, with wide open flowery meadows, dotted here and there with brightly painted boxes, each a bold splash of colour against the green landscape. The air hummed as bees buzzed by. Rox winced as one darted past their ear.

The door to the farmhouse hung open, but there didn't seem to be anyone around. Rox stopped in the middle of the driveway and double-checked the address on their phone. When they glanced up again, they saw the beekeeper coming around the house, dressed in her bulky, white outfit. She waved at Rox, like an astronaut on the moon waving at Earth. Rox held their breath as the beekeeper walked up and removed her veil.

She was absurdly gorgeous.

Her face seemed familiar—not because Rox had ever seen her before, but because there was something so open about her. She seemed like the kind of person who would change your tire or remove a sliver from your toe. Her face was swarming with freckles, which made her sage green eyes pop. Locks of curly brown hair were pasted to her forehead by sweat. She wasn't drenched like Rox. More like she'd been spritzed with a fine mist, like fresh fruit at the grocery store, just enough to make her glow.

Rox tried to say hi, but let out a loud, disgusting sneeze instead.

"Bless you," said the beekeeper.

"You too," said Rox. "I mean—thanks."

They wiped their nose on their shirt and caught a whiff of their sweaty pits. Rox could've sworn they saw a flower wilt.

"Did you ride here?" asked the beekeeper.

Rox looked down at the bicycle with its sparkly tassels and training wheels.

"It wasn't far," said Rox, trying to sound casual.

The beekeeper cracked a smile.

A bee flew at Rox's face and they tried not to flinch in case it might offend the beekeeper.

“So,” said Rox. “You’re Heather?”

“Yeah,” said the beekeeper. “And it’s Rox, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You look like you could use a glass of water, Rox.”

“Nah, I’m good.” But as soon as Rox said it, their mouth felt dry. They licked their chapped lips and regretted not bringing lip balm.

“Are you sure about that?” asked the beekeeper.

“Actually, I would like some water, thank you.”

The beekeeper led them up to the house. Rox leaned their bicycle against the deck and climbed up the stairs, stopping before the doorway.

“I can help you take those training wheels off if you want,” said the beekeeper as she entered the house. Rox wasn’t sure if that was meant to be a euphemism.

“Are you saying you wanna go for a ride?” they asked, but by then Rox could hear the tap running and figured that the beekeeper hadn’t heard. Probably for the best. Rox missed the extra time that flirting over text allowed.

They stood awkwardly on the deck, watching bees flit through the open door at their leisure. To the left of the door was a swinging deck chair suspended from the roof by chains. The chair swayed gently in the breeze. Rox wanted to sit down and rest after their long ride, but not without an invitation. The beekeeper returned with a tall glass of water and gave it to Rox.

“Did you say something?” she asked.

Rox shook their head and chugged the water in one go, watching the beekeeper smile through the bottom of the glass.

“Thank you,” said Rox, handing it back.

“I’m just gonna go take this stuff off,” said the beekeeper. “Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right back.” She disappeared inside again. A bee flew in after her.

Rox was unsure whether “make yourself comfortable” meant to come inside or sit on the fragile-looking deck chair, so they stayed hovering by the entrance. They peeked through the door and wondered if the beekeeper was going to come back out totally naked, then reminded themselves that this was not a porno.

There were just as many bees buzzing around inside as outside. The hum in the air was constant, and every prickling sensation of drying sweat felt like a bee crawling over Rox's skin. They breathed out slow. They'd come too far to let their childhood fear get in the way of their mission now. Rox was resolute: this would be their last day as a virgin.

The beekeeper returned—still clothed. She had a tank top and a pair of very-wide-waisted jeans held up by suspenders. The pants were enormous. Rox could've easily fit inside with her.

"Whoa," said Rox. "Nice, uh... pants."

The beekeeper seemed embarrassed and Rox felt bad.

"Your boobs look great in that tank," they added.

"Oh, thanks," said the beekeeper, glancing down like she'd forgotten about them.

A loose whirlwind of bees hung around the beekeeper, who didn't seem at all bothered by them.

"You're not afraid of bees, are you?" she asked, leaning against the doorframe.

"Just not used to them," said Rox.

"They're actually really docile. You just have to stay calm around them."

Rox tried to keep completely still as the bees buzzed past their face. The hum in the air had grown louder and Rox tried to figure out where the sound was coming from. The painted beehive boxes were all too far away to be the source of the humming. The beekeeper gazed into Rox's eyes.

Now that Rox was here, it wasn't altogether clear how they were supposed to proceed. They hadn't thought farther ahead than showing up, and had expected the more experienced beekeeper to take the lead. But instead, they both just stood on either side of the threshold making intermittent eye contact and smiling awkwardly at each other. Rox was going to have to make the first move.

"So," said Rox. "Sex?"

"Right," said the beekeeper. "Sex." She did a half-turn, looking puzzled for a second before saying, "Um, did you want to do it out here?"

"On the deck?" said Rox.

"It's too nice out to be cooped up inside," said the beekeeper. "And no one really goes by. Plus, we're too far up the road for anyone to see if they did. I mean, it's up to you."

Rox wondered if the beekeeper was an exhibitionist. They had pictured someplace more private and conventional, like a bedroom, but this was a day of trying new things and Rox didn't want to disappoint their attractive and obliging host.

They did a quick scan of the road and the surrounding fields. There wasn't so much as a cow to peep on them out here. They were alone.

"Okay," said Rox.

Their legs felt weak and their heart pounded as they followed the beekeeper over to the swinging deck chair. The whirlwind of bees seemed to move with them. As the beekeeper made to sit, a bee flew right down her pants.

"Wait!" said Rox, bracing.

"What?" said the beekeeper, her massive pants deflating against the seat as she sat down. No sting. No shriek.

"I thought—" said Rox. "Nothing."

Maybe they'd imagined it. They could hardly see through the sweat in their eyes. But there was still that humming sound. It was louder now.

The chair was wide like a bench, with floral cushions on the seat. The beekeeper patted the spot next to her. Rox eyed the precarious structure.

"We're not gonna break that, are we?" they asked.

"We'll be gentle," said the beekeeper. "It's your first time, right?"

"Yeah," said Rox, their arms hanging awkwardly at their sides.

They sat down beside the beekeeper. The bench swung back and forth. Rox's heart hammered away and a shiver went down their legs. The beekeeper smiled and scooped in closer so their thighs touched. The hum got louder. Rox was certain now that the sound was coming from inside the pants.

"So, um," said Rox, "how do you wanna—?"

The beekeeper reached out and cupped Rox's cheek with her gentle, calloused hand. She leaned in and kissed Rox's lips.

This was as far as Rox had ever gotten before, and fortunately, they knew more or less what they were doing when it came to kissing. The familiarity of the action was reassuring. But even over the wet sounds of lips smacking and blood pumping in their ears, Rox could still detect the mysterious humming.

The beekeeper disengaged from Rox's lips and said, "May I?" Her hand hovered over Rox's fly.

Rox nodded with gusto and struggled to unbutton their short shorts.

"It's okay, I got it," said the beekeeper, brushing their hand aside and deftly unfastening the shorts. She slipped down between Rox's legs and got to work.

It was finally happening. Rox couldn't believe it. They could almost feel their virginity washing away like warm water over their skin.

They looked down at the beekeeper's pants and breathlessly requested admission.

"Do it slowly," whispered the beekeeper, her gentle lips grazing Rox's neck.

Rox closed their eyes and slid their hand into the beekeeper's gargantuan pants. As they reached inside, they felt the beekeeper's smooth skin turn—waxy. They felt a tickle and a frustrated buzz. A sensation like falling came over them and they drew back their hand, opening their eyes.

"Are you okay?" asked the beekeeper, halting her work in Rox's underwear.

Rox gaped at the pants. They slowly lifted up the beekeeper's waistband and took a peek below.

It was all bees down there.

Heaps of them bumbling around with their pulsating abdomens and fuzzy bodies, whizzing in and out, buzzing. The beekeeper was crawling with them. Layers upon bustling layers. A whole hive, just going about its business in the dark of the beekeeper's pants.

"Do you want to stop?" asked the beekeeper.

Rox's heart pounded. The hum reverberated in their ears. Fear wriggled inside them, and their hand tingled with pins and needles. But they were too close—right on the verge of losing their pesky virginity. They didn't want to stop. As long as Rox's horniness was stronger than their fear, they could do it.

Rox shook their head and reached back down into the beekeeper's pants. They just had to stay calm and the bees would remain docile. Rox ran their fingers down the beekeeper's waxy terrain, hesitating at every angry buzz that vibrated up their arm.

They couldn't focus on the wonderful things that the beekeeper was doing to their own body. Rox wasn't even there anymore. They were climbing a tree, peering into the dark hollow stretching deep into the trunk. They could hear the enticing hum and wanted so badly to reach inside.

Rox delved deeper into the beekeeper's strange territory, searching for any familiar structures. But there was only honeycomb. They could feel the little hexagonal cells beneath their fingertips. It was getting stickier down there, and the bees seemed to be getting progressively more upset. Rox felt like they had to try something soon before the bees started stinging. They slid a finger into one of the cells. The beekeeper arched back and sighed.

"Oh, right there—you're a natural."

"Are you sure?" asked Rox.

She gasped, "I'm sure."

While the beekeeper seemed to like what Rox was doing, the bees were working themselves up into a frenzy. They swarmed Rox's hand and vibrated, generating heat. Rox recalled the video of the hornet being roasted alive, engulfed by the inescapable flood of bees. The buzzing was so loud that Rox could feel it in the base of their skull. Their hand was on fire. The bees were going crazy. Rox was back up the tree, darkness closing around their hand as they reached—reached into the humming hollow.

They felt the stings in quick succession.

Zap—zap—zap!

Searing pain pumped through their hand in excruciating waves.

They fell out of the tree.

They ripped their hand out of the beekeeper's pants and leapt out of the deck chair, sprinting off into the field, trying to outrun the bees all over their hand. Their undone shorts tangled around their ankles, and they went down, face first into the grass.

They rolled over onto their back, dazed. They stared up at the magnificent blue sky. Clouds materialized above, resembling snow-capped mountains. The adrenaline subsided. Rox held up their hand against the sun. It was dripping with golden honey, but there was no pain, no swelling, no bees.

Heather ran over to them.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "I'm so sorry—did you get stung?"

"No," said Rox. "Just got freaked out. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, it's okay. We don't have to do anything else."

"I just need a minute," said Rox.

Heather stood over them, looking fretful, then sat down, keeping some distance between the two of them. The bees buzzed sluggishly overhead, paying Rox no mind as they meandered among the flowers.

“When I was a kid,” said Rox, “I climbed up this tree at my oma’s house. There was a hollow in the trunk. I reached inside and didn’t realize there was a beehive in there until they stung me. I fell out and broke my collarbone.”

“That must have been scary,” said Heather.

Rox shrugged. It had been terrifying. But they were a kid then. It seemed silly to still be afraid now.

They were both quiet for a while. The clouds kept shifting above them. The only sound was the quiet hum of bees in Heather’s pants. Rox absently licked the honey off their fingers, then stopped as they remembered where it had come from. They hoped Heather hadn’t noticed.

“I should’ve warned you,” said Heather. “I’m just insecure about it. And I was really excited to—do that with you. It’s a bit intense for your first time, though. I’m sorry.”

Rox was curious about whether Heather had always had a hive but didn’t ask.

“I guess I thought it would be simpler,” said Rox. “Losing my virginity. Everyone does it. How hard can it be?”

A gentle breeze swept through the grass and made Rox sneeze.

“You know, there’s really no such thing as virginity,” said Heather. “It’s different every time. I’ve had sex before, but I’ve never done it with you. It’s a whole new thing to figure out.”

The sun shone on Heather’s freckled face. Her legs were crossed, hands resting in her lap. All around was golden-green grass and mountains, and the summer sky. Rox thought about what an interesting person Heather was, with her farmhouse and her bees. There might not be anyone else like her in the world.

Maybe there really was no such thing as virginity. Maybe first times didn’t matter all that much. But either way, Rox wanted their first time to be with her.

“Do you have one of those smoker things?” asked Rox.

“I don’t normally use it, but yeah,” said Heather. “Why?”

“Do you think that would help?”

Heather chuckled, then considered. “We could try it,” she said.

“Is next week okay?” asked Rox.

Heather smiled. "I'll be here."



Pouting in Pink by Sophia Wasylinko
2023; digital photo
Original graffiti tagger(s) unknown

Contributors

Emerald Ayres

Born in Yee-Haw Land (Texas), Emerald now happily resides in Much-Better-Weather Land (British Columbia), where she attends Vancouver Island University as a Creative Writing student. She enjoys all things neon pink, playing Dungeons and Dragons, and being a general weirdo. "Call Me Detective Peanut Butter" is the product of several questionable ideas shamelessly strung together, and is Emerald's first published work.

KA Dewey

KA Dewey is a Creative Writing student living in the middle of beautiful Vancouver Island. An Ontario transplant, she has fallen in love with the purple splendour of the mountain sunsets. If you cross her, you may end up dead in one of her stories. Her writing companions, three furry felines and a middle-aged Boston Terrier with a heart condition, are never far from her side. You can reach her through her agent, once she manages to bribe one into representing her.

Lee Groen

Lee Groen is an author, poet, editor, and superorganism consisting of several various kinds of flora and fauna, including but not limited to: microscopic brain shrimp, a modest colony of Sitka trees, half-a-dozen domesticated foxes, an infestation of sewer rats, the eternal timeless serpent, two or three iced coffees, with a chest full of wildflowers, and arteries flowing with fresh wild salmon. In his free time, Lee enjoys reading and watching sports.

Alexandra Groenwoldt

Alexandra is a second-year Creative Writing student at Vancouver Island University and an international student from Germany. In her free time, Alexandra writes, reads, and trains karate. Rumor has it, she's made a deal with the devil, promising him she won't collect more books until she's read the ones she already has. Oh, and she enjoys going on secret missions to rescue books from secondhand shelves on a regular basis.

Bob Richardson

Bob Richardson is a retired criminal lawyer. These days, he spends his time taking the fun courses at VIU that he didn't dare take when he did his undergrad 41 years ago. He also finds time to read a lot and to try his hand at creative writing, a pastime which he loves much more than it loves him. He leans more to psychopathic puppets than to cuddly puppies in writing, and, possibly, in life. Then again, it's hard to beat the sound of a bunch of dogs sizzling on the barbie. He lives at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac in Comox with his wife Peggy, his laptop, and his barbecue.

Evan Shumka

Evan Shumka is a writer, actor, and artist from the Cowichan Valley, whose short stories have been published in *The Temz Review* and *Portal*, as well as the issue #1 of *GOOEY*. His plays have been produced by the VIU Satyr Players as well as Magical Theatre Company in Edmonton. He is currently working on his first novel and is entering his final year in the Creative Writing program at Vancouver Island University, after which he will be unleashed on an unsuspecting but ideally receptive world.

Flynn Connolly Sifton

Flynn Connolly Sifton lives on Vancouver Island. Having spent most of his life reading, writing, and walking in the woods, he now studies in the Bachelor of Arts program at Vancouver Island University and tries to write fiction about empathy, vulnerability, and the horror of the everyday. His work has previously appeared in *Portal Magazine*.

E. B. Sorensen

Elke Sorensen is a third-year Creative Writing and Digital Media Studies student at Vancouver Island University. Elke has non-fiction publications in *Healthy Debate*, *The Vintage Seeker*, and *The Navigator*, and a poetry publication in *Portal Magazine*. She is the producer of podcast *Indigenous Echoes* season 2, is a host at *CHLY 101.7 FM*, and hosted *Evenings With Elke* at *Cabin Radio* during the summer of 2024. When it comes to fiction, Elke is drawn to the strange. She is currently working on a dog-themed weird fiction collection, and "God Spelled Backwards is Dog" is her first short fiction publication.

Darrian Thompson

Darrian Thompson is an accidental artist and intentional scribbler of words based in Nanaimo, BC. No formal art school could cage her wild musings, so she forayed into this venture alone, armed with only her pen and paint brush. Her medium? Whatever she hasn't spilled on the floor... yet. When Darrian isn't lost in the pandemonium of paint, poetry, and prose, she is running her business *Designs by Darrian*. Here, she plants her flag in the fertile soil of the peculiar, nurturing a garden where her art blooms with wild, wondrous abandon.

Sophia Wasylinko

Sophia Wasylinko has survived five years of university (including the Year Online) and is now roaming the Earth as a VIU Alumna. She's returned to the chaos of family life in Kamloops and is feeding her appetite for literature (and her bank account) with a page position at the downtown library. As if that wasn't enough, she's juggling several writing projects, including freelance content writing for Ichigo, a fantasy novel, and her piece for this issue. Sophia has no idea where she'll be in the next five years, but it will involve a perilous journey back to Vancouver Island (at some point). This is not her first rodeo with *GOOEY* and it hopefully won't be her last.

