

VENT

TROOP 



thegorillapress.com

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Editors' note,

Thanks for clicking. Enjoy the new year of Troop. Volume Two's fiction issue VENT allows for just that; from relationships, to meeting new people, to character interviews, as you read you will see. Talk to you again next issue. Peace.

Thank you to all our contributors, and

Thanks for reading,

The Editors
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VENT



~~~ VENT ~~~

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## THE RAY BROTHERS

J de Salvo

*an excerpt from "Setarkos"*

**"Fucking pinch me, Mo."**

"Aye," said I.

Outside I was surprised to find no sign of Manolo. We banged on the thick door, through which sound didn't carry very well, for what seemed like several minutes before we heard the sound of the key turning in the lock. This infuriated the President, who started calling us things I won't repeat, in the interest of national security. One of the men was "Ray Ray", but the two others

VENT I didn't recognize. You could tell right away that they were brothers, though, and maybe even related to Ray Ray; the biggest and thickest of an otherwise indistinguishable enough trio.

"I'm a big fan," said Ray Ray, crushing my fingers in one of those handshakes I've never really understood the point of.

"Yeaahhg!" I said.

"Oh...sorry there, bud. I guess you weren't ready for that." He seemed genuinely sorry. "I guess it's the monkey in me," he said, flashing me a self-assured, toothy, sincere grin.

"It's alright," I said, still wincing, and suddenly deciding to dumb down my speech a little bit.

"These your brothers?" I asked Ray Ray. I was sure they had to be, but it was mostly a way to get him to start talking. I reached into my pocket and hit record on my P.D. Eventually one thing led to another, and I learned how it was that he had come by his strange name. The brothers had grown up in Rural Wisconsin, moving around a lot between one town or another I'd never heard of. Their father cooked speed for a living, and their mother had O.D.'d when the three of them were just starting to get their first hard-ons and pimples. There wasn't much in the way of age separating them. In fact, they seemed to have been born one after the other; the womb refilled no sooner than it had emptied. I was about to remark that there must have been some good genes somewhere back in their family for the three of them to turn out so big and strong despite having been conceived, carried, and born under the influence of meth, but thought better of it and kept it to myself.

"When Mama died, that was about the time that Miley Cyrus was getting popular with the kids. We all kind of thought she was cute, but that was about it for us. Just a phase, you know. Daddy only let us watch certain channels, and the Disney Channel was one of 'em. Papa'd never paid too much attention to what we were watching, but that changed when Mama died. He got, like, really into Miley Cyrus. Her and

her daddy, too. He would play that *achey breaky heart* song over and over, and sit and drink beer and cry. He'd play that song on repeat for, like, three days in a row. It became some kind of a mind-trap for him.

Well, I know you guys have taken your fair share of speed in your time, and I don't have to tell you that that shit can do some pretty weird things to your grasp on reality.

Well...one day Papa got it into his head that we were all somehow related to Billy Ray and Miley. His last name being Ray was what convinced him finally, he said.

"It's too much of a coincidence that there are so many coincidences for it all to be a coincidence."

He said things like this, you know? (I nodded)

"He kind of lost it," I said.

"Kind of, but not quite," Ray Ray continued. "I think he knew what he was doing. Deep down, he knew it was all a fantasy, but he liked it better than the truth.

We all tried reminding him that Ray was just Billy Ray Cyrus' middle name, and that it was pretty common after all for people named Billy who were from the South to have the name Ray for their middle, but it didn't do any good. He'd swear that Ray was Billy's Mother's Maiden name, and that's why Billy'd been given it for his middle. If you asked him just where he'd got all this information from, he'd just say "the internet." If you pressed him too hard, he'd beat the shit out of you and call you a traitor to the family.

After awhile he got this weird girlfriend, Karen, and she was into him for the meth and would agree with him and repeat whatever he wanted to as the story continued to grow in his mind. She was a looker, man, and she dressed real skimpy. He was hooked.

Then there was this kind of close call where we almost all got taken away from him because we'd never been to school, among other things. Papa had to send us to school or lose us, which was kinda ridiculous, being as we

VENT were high school age now and didn't even know our multiplication tables.

We'd pretty much been born off the grid, you see. We didn't have any Birth Certificates or Social Security numbers or anything like that, and as far as the school was concerned they said they couldn't admit any new students unless they had some kind of papers, some kind of legal name. Daddy'd always called us by different nicknames, but none of us had ever had any official names as such, which I guess is kinda weird, but if you grow up like that it doesn't seem that way when you're a kid. Actually, it seemed kind of cool, it was something that made us special and different. We had all these names, you know?

We didn't really have any friends, either, except for the occasional kids Daddy's clients would bring over. Most families weren't about to let their kids come over to our house for obvious reasons; and like I said, we moved a lot. This was partly to stay one step ahead of the authorities, though it was partly Papa's speed paranoia, too. A lot of times we'd move before it seemed to us like anyone could have got wind of what was going on. Sometimes we'd only stay in one place for a couple of weeks.

Daddy used to tell us that it was good that we didn't have any names, because then the Police State couldn't track you down, which kind of made sense in it's own odd way. Without a name, there was nothing to pin a record on. The police were like the bogeyman in my family. Daddy would tell us scary stories about them, the way most fathers would about ghosts or goblins or something like that. We lived in fear of the cops. I still have to fight that fear back some times, it's so deeply ingrained.

...But then when he was told he had to give us names or the school wouldn't take us, though, he hit upon the idea of naming us all after Billy Ray. If there'd been a girl, you can bet her name would have been Miley; but myself I'm kind of glad there wasn't. Daddy was a decent enough guy, but he was kind of perverted. It was the speed that did it. We'd find stacks of Tiger Beat and Disney Magazine under his bed with weird stains on them that we were old enough

by then to know where they came from. And by now we hated Miley Cyrus; so uncool - and thanks, Dad, for letting us know it's supposed to be a girl's show. And we'd never liked Billy Ray's music all that much, either; but even if we had, it would be too painful to listen to it. Daddy'd tune into the secret meanings behind all of Billy Ray's songs, he said, behind what seemed like simple pop-country songwriting was actually a very precise code; the gateway to enlightenment and world peace. If only everyone would listen to Billy Ray! If only we could listen to him more! Any time I hear one of his songs, I cringe. I can still remember the secret message that is supposed to be behind it. All of Billy Ray's answers are very simple, of course. Things like don't kill, and don't steal; you know, biblical type stuff. The thing was, as simple as they were, for some reason no one could really feel safe in their ability to avoid these sins if they didn't listen to Billy Ray's music at least daily. 'He', as dad referred to Billy Ray, *'HE...was what was missing all along.'*

So yeah, I think it's a good thing there wasn't a girl, because if there had been, inevitably she would have been named Miley, and this might have caused some problems.

Choosing the names was easy enough, because there were three of us, and Billy Ray had three names. We drew straws to see who got which, and I was the unlucky one who ended up being Ray Ray, which is about the stupidest name for a white guy to have. Sounds like a Black name, doesn't it? Not like a birth name, but like some gangster's nickname or rapping name, you know? Suffice to say, that name didn't do me any favors. As you may know there aren't a lot of black folks in Sconcie, and people used to think I was trying to act Black. I had to show my I.D. a couple times to avoid some kind of racial purity motivated thing. So then, all of a sudden, we three had our names, Billy Ray, Cyrus Ray, and Ray Ray. They really were the first name names (sic) we ever had, since before we'd been called things like "Little Dog", and "Blazer", and "Cocoanutty!" Just those strange kind of nicknames that don't make any sense to an outsider. We all had a few of them, you know?"

“Daddy wrote a lot of letters to Billy Ray, and of course to Miley, and he’d get these standardized replies, which in his mind he’d make mean something other than what they really did mean. By the end, he’d convinced himself that he’d finally been acknowledged by his distant kin, and as Miley began to grow older he’d talk a lot through the night and the morning about how him and Miley were only probably distant cousins, and so it wouldn’t really be incest or anything like that, right? When Karen would piss him off somehow, he’d threaten that he was only with her out of the kindness of his heart, and that his distant cousin was only waiting for him to say the word, and they’d be going off together to Bermuda, or Greece, or wherever it happened to be that night. Cyprus he fancied particularly, cos of the spellings being so close. He had a map of Cyprus that was always hanging in his money counting room.

Wherever we did go he always kept a little room like this, separate from his bedroom. Sometimes he wouldn’t leave these rooms for days at a time. He’d just sit there, banging his dope and jacking off to his little teenybopper magazines. Even Karen knew to stay out of his way when he got like this.

We loved our Daddy, but we knew he was ill in the head, and as we got older we began to kind of resent Karen for feeding into it. One day I had words with her about it, and that started a fight that went on for several weeks. I mean, basically that woman was a slut/whore/tramp who would have jumped ship the minute somebody with a larger pile of white and green showed up. She’d cheat on him from time to time, and it drove him crazy. But she had some kind of sexual hold on him. We were looking through her things one day when they were gone somewhere, and we found all these clothes that were way too young for her. Most grown women wouldn’t have been able to fit into them, but with the speed and all, I guess she could. All we could figure was that she would dress up like Miley for Daddy, and he was afraid to let her go because he didn’t figure he could find any kind of replacement in that category very quickly. She dyed and cut her hair to resemble Miley’s, too; she had kind of a child-like build to her anyhow.

Eventually she did leave him, and shortly after that he took his own life...”

Ray Ray stated this fact as if he had practiced it many times. His face spoke more of resignation than it did of sadness. His brothers were giving each other looks that told me they wished he'd shut the hell up about all this. You couldn't blame them for not wanting their dirty laundry aired to a stranger like that; a reporter, to boot.

"Did you ever think of changing your names?" I asked him.

"Well, what would be the point by now? A name is a name, even, or even especially a fucking stupid one. I'm 39, now. What's the point? People would still call me Ray Ray even if I did change it."

"I guess that's true. So how did you guys all end up here?"

"Well, when Pirate came to town, it really shook things up. It seemed like the things he was saying were all things we'd been thinking ourselves for some time, but just hadn't been able to put into words. He's the one who turned me on to your stuff. He has all your anthologies, and your novellas and poems, too. You been to Sconcie much, lately?"

"I've passed through, sure."

"Alright, well, then you know. The whole state outside of Milwaukee is completely depressed. We're talking ghost towns. Already happened in a few places. After we got out of the Army, we couldn't find jobs anywhere, and neither could any of our friends. We all just started drinking all the time and raising hell, which is no way to live for too long. All the women, or mostly, in the town had had enough of it, and most of them left once they came of age, or else married someone they met over the internet and moved away to somewhere with more opportunities. Pirate offered us jobs on his dairy farm, and when he finally decided to put his plan into action, he didn't have to ask us. We were ready. There's a lot more people on our side than you know, too."

"What do you mean?"

Here Cyrus interjected. "Ray Ray, shut the hell up. I know you like this guy's stories, but we're not supposed to talk about that."

"You're right, Cyrus. I'm sorry, Mr. O' Malley, but that's the way it is."

I knew there was something there, but I also knew when not to press my point; something I learned by losing more than one story simply by being too bold. Ask the right question at the wrong time and you can be sure that you'll never get the answer. You might as well write off that source. Whatever it was that Ray Ray had been alluding to, I couldn't press him or I'd make him suspicious, which was the last thing I wanted. I wasn't likely to get much out of Pirate and Manolo other than manifestos and silence, respectively.

Yet I hadn't been so dazed by what I've fallen into the habit of calling the "un-reality" of the situation that I'd forgotten how to think critically. I knew this had to be an inside job, at least in part. I was sure that some of the men here must be active duty, and, consequently, something far beyond AWOL.

We would all have to wait to find out. Just then time was flying by or was it the booze and the sleep dep? Pa and I came to the conclusion that we had done all we could do for the day. What we needed was some serious recuperation, and until we could see our ways there, it was clear that we were useless. When the sun went down, we went down with it.

## MARLOWE'S LAMENT

Davy Carren

**She came at me out of the traffic light's glimmer like the miracle** of hot water on a freezing-cold night— a cigarette blinking red in one hand, a pair of high heels dangling from the other. I didn't wink. I sort of half smirked or something. Something more with the eyes, a flare with a twitch in the cheek or a quick twinge of eyebrows. "There's a place for us." I was almost singing. I was almost humming along with myself. She wriggled. She jaw-dropped a tad— not so much that you'd notice; not too much; but it was there, and I did. A craning thing she did, then, fingers gripping at her topcoat collar, tugging it closed around the delicate curve of her

VENT neck. I was all twisted up inside, you know. I was scrunched and given to nonplussed expressions: something flummoxed and bare without any wonder or slack, fists shoved deep in coat pockets. There is no telling what she might've been pondering on about just then. Just some brushy dame with the moon in her stockings. It was just a second's lasting, there. That's all we had. As Russian as apple pie. A pale, ashtray look gone blank and bored. Black lipstick and blacker eyes averted elsewhere. Car headlights shoeing us on. Just a whiff of dread and a tick's spotty notice. I am not ruled by my ambition, just my inhibition. You know, like a strike-anywhere scraped on brick to set one last smoke smoldering in a streetlight's sodium glow. I crept back, as always, into the safety of my own personal space. I retreated like gangbusters. I'm a born runner, you know. And, man, did I drift just then.

It just loomed up, while I walked on my upper lip and vacated the premises, as lost as a bookie in a used bookstore, like shuttling my eyes about some minimum capacity crowd. Something out of a kind of time without space. Something undecided, rampant with conjecture and liveliness, declaring peace. A made-up enemy. A name not taken. A collection of question marks quiet as mummies. I said "Christ" like it was a dirty word. So there I was, about as romantic as a ten-foot pole, in the brassy light of no place, wondering about the possibility of something versus the possibility of nothing, squabbling with partialities and disquiet. Some angular turnip brought to a gleeful rage. An attention grubber with dishpan hands. A decrepit heart and a lousy smile. Some ancient albatross with a dirty mouth. Riled and given to fits of pleasure. Some slob filling in the four-letter words for me, chased by the gin spilling off the fog's breath, or just a dozen John Does buried in some Potter's Field.

The magic never lasts. It just doesn't. She went back into the dark from where she'd arrived, and the sidewalk wouldn't hold any of it. The caress of the trashcan wind was gone. Everything had fled south to lost feathers and mire. Everything was broken. There were no more good questions. All of my answers got scrapped for bigger and worse things to come. "A time and a place for us." We both walked on, on to our separate and disparate ways. Loneliness gets the worst of us at night, and she'd placed herself back into the latest parts of its deep violet. "I've got plenty of nothing." I did sing something above the traffic's boom-crush clash. I could've been singing the most beautiful song in the damn world. But nobody would know or care. I was keeping it all to myself, back to the same old cold water and doom. Some gross malcontent trying to sweet talk strangers with planets of insolence and a vodka-tonic mouth; babbling on about bad casts in worse movies, and the way sleepers fair better in soggy conditions; sacked by the blitz of coddling the laziest parts of being me. Well, it's just cold feet and colder women around here. And I'm only another permanent fixture playing hi-goodbye in the flaring of 40-watt gestures, some riled floater who's minding somebody else's business, driving his Buick down the stairs, whistling up a daydream of suds and a suitcase full of nothing. And nothing? Hell, "...and nothing is plenty for me."

## THE BANSHEE, OR MARGARET MARY'S RED-LEATHER SACHEL

Jesi Bender

**The day broke in a deep purple when Margaret Mary was on the train** to New York, a fashion magazine passively laid across her lap. Her body hummed to the steady vibrations. As they rolled on by the calm black water of the Hudson, her eyes were elsewhere - she was watching trees scratch the sky.

For me, to look at a photo of a young girl - some dead-eyed model with colors globbed on her face - sat all disjointed in the odd angles of stilettos and long thin limbs like a pale *de Stijl* painting - there is nothing so sad. The brevity of a blossom on some gilded lily. I know now that no matter what she does, the rest of her life will be lived in souvenirs.

*Je me souviens*, her lips mouthed.  
[I will never forget.]

My mother (G-d rest her soul) always said life is just a series of moments and where you choose to place yourself. Time and lines, time and lines.

Margaret Mary was choosing to place herself back in lower Manhattan, closer to the water shared with Brooklyn, where the tallest buildings are project housing and the streets are no longer numbered. She was going to a small bar near her old apartment on Clinton Street to watch a man she used to know sing a few songs and pick a cittern. But for now, she was somewhere outside of Albany, sitting silently on a train that shook to some obscure beat like an angry hand rocking the cradle. In between her legs, on the floor, sat her red leather satchel. It held something very important - she guarded it with a foot on either side. When she got up to use the bathroom, she strapped it to her chest.

Opposite the toilet, as in most bathrooms, sat a mirror but in this small bathroom, its proximity was abnormally close and it was made of materials with just slightly better quality than a sheet of tin foil. It was impossible not to see her self. Her hair stood red and blanketing, a fury of tussled gossamer, and her porcelain skin randomly punctuated with freckles. Under her eyes, thick dark-purple highlights curtsyed to the harsh precipice of an aquiline nose. Below the crucifix at her neck, the satchel on her lap bulged with the present she had brought for him. The reflection was too loud or too close. The lines seemed aimless and broken; the colors screamed in opposition. She turned away from the mirror like an angry wave.

I think the most closely related emotions have to be sorrow and anger. My sick brain oscillates wildly between the two. Sometimes, when I

think of what might happen when he sees the present inside this satchel, a raw happiness crawls over me and then even joy becomes somewhat perverted. It is in the unknown of the future combined with all the heartache of the past. I have something to give him; I have to guard it between my legs.

Back in her seat and day had fully broken; a new sun sat fully visible in the sky. It rose like a halo around the outline of upper Manhattan as the train moved closer to its destination.

Soon the train stops and I work my way upward. Outside Penn Station, in the pulsating heart of this town, the sun shines down on tomb-grey buildings. This city is my church. Littered with idols, with its wine and roses, I am navigating it like an endless text and its myriad meanings. Moving forward, I tumble down Fifth on an invisible current.

Margaret Mary moved through the streets with her arms wrapped around her satchel like it was her only possession. She moved fast and her cross beat against her chest to the rhythm of her stride. After getting lost a few times, both physically and in her thoughts, she arrived at the bar by her old apartment right before dusk. She could hear him before she saw him. Margaret Mary decided to take her Eucharist (“You-kah-riiist” she mouthed to herself) at the bar, though as close to the exit as possible.

*The King of love my Shepherd is,  
Whose goodness faileth never,  
I nothing lack if I am His  
And He is mine forever.*

His voice is light and beautiful, and the music feels so close to pure. An Irish brogue against the lilt of punctuated strings evokes something almost magical. But I don't know if there is such a thing as purity or magic.

VENT I don't know if sin isn't ingrained from conception. Sometimes I wonder if he remembers. If he does, it doesn't show on his face. His eyes are closed, a peaceful head floating underneath the light, decapitated by the black background.

*Thou spreadst a table in my sight;  
Thine unction grace bestoweth;  
And, oh, what transport of delight  
From thy pure chalice floweth!*

The songs seemed to go on for hours, ebbing like a wayward tide, with Margaret Mary keeping a steady pace of a drink for each changing melody, a blessing for each blessing, and it was well into the night before he stopped. The moon outside pushed forward an errant tide.

After his set, there was no pause - Margaret Mary made her way through crowd like an angry wave crashing to the black shore. She walked straight up to the man that sang and opened her red leather satchel. Before he fully recognized her face beneath the fire of her hair, she sat this object on top of a bar stool, and it bled, and it cried. It cried a hundred dirges; it wailed a thousand psalms. Margaret Mary opened up her mouth to sing along but all she could produce was one long, loud scream.

"Margaret Mary Keen!" The man gasped, shrinking backward onto the stage. Heading backward into the spotlight. Her present floated in its jar, beads of condensation running down its side like tears.

Oh Father, I'm so disappointed. I'm kind of like my own mother now.

## THE DIVORCE OF THE MAGI

Eric Wallgren

**Chester perched on top of a mahogany bookcase in the living** room. He watched a cockroach scurry across the kitchen floor, wiggling its body and swaying its antennae. The cockroach's legs tapped a steady rhythm into the linoleum. Chester listened. He stood up and arched his legs. He craned his neck. He waited for the tapping to stop because he knew that this meant the cockroach had crossed onto the shag carpet, where it would have a hard time running away when he pounced.

Jason saw the cockroach too. Without getting up from his armchair, he took off his right sneaker and smacked the floor beside

VENT the cockroach as it sprinted towards the shag carpet. Chester dove towards it. He chased it under the table and behind the couch. Then he pecked his nose into the space between the couch and lodged his head into that narrow void, eyes widened. No matter how many times he swept the rug with his paw, the cockroach never dragged back with it.

So Chester gave up. He laid on his back and let Jason rub his belly, deciding there had never been a cockroach, and that nothing had ever happened. If the thing came scurrying out from under the couch, Chester would not see it.

And when it did come scurrying out from behind the couch, Chester forgot this vow and darted towards it. The cockroach made a big mistake. It crawled into the shag carpet, giving Chester a crucial advantage. On the carpet, the cockroach had to crawl over and through twines that Chester could simply press down with his paw. He killed it in a split second. A golden yellow stain was left in the threads of Jason's snow-white carpet, and an empty glistening shell, in the patch of carpet where the cockroach got smashed. It's antenna still swayed. Chester licked between his toes and under his paw, squinting his eyes and bobbing his head, lapping his tongue with ecstatic diligence.

"Gross," Jason said. "No, not you. My cat just killed a cockroach and now he's, like, licking its' guts off of his paws." Jason sat upright in a velvet reclining chair, his fingers wrapped around the telephone. "I know what this is about," he said, "but you can't have him. I think he really likes it here, and if he stayed at your place, he'd run away because you would never feed him. You used to do that. I remember."

"I don't care if he runs away," Toni said on the other side. "I don't care if he gets eaten by a panther. The fact of the matter is: he's my cat. I bought him."

"Yeah, you bought him. As a gift. To me. Because you knew that I liked cats." Jason held his hand downward over the armrest, so Chester

could brush his cheek across his fingertips. Then Chester walked away, stepping softly on the carpet. Jason watched, admiringly. “You can’t just take him away from me now,” he said. “He’s my best friend.”

Toni paused. She understood how much that cat meant to Jason. So she knew that if she were going to get Chester back, she would have break into Jason’s house and steal him.

When they were dating, Jason’s pool league would meet at the VFW every Tuesday and Thursday nights for practice. She figured this was still the case. So the following Tuesday, she waited in her car around the corner from his house, headlights turned off, until he left.

Once he was gone, she got out of the car. She walked across his front yard: glistening and evenly mowed. There was a window to the basement that she knew had a broken latch. So she climbed in, turned on the lights, and walked upstairs to the living room.

Chester perched on top of the couch. He yawned smugly with his paws stretched neatly in front of him. When she picked him up, his eyes bugged out and his whole body twitched. He meowed upward, cradled in her arms, but she shhh-ed and held him tightly to keep him from squirming away.

Toni walked out the front door, clasping Chester in one arm while she pulled it shut. She was sure that Jason would think that Chester had nudged the basement window open and gotten out on his own.

But Jason knew exactly what had happened. He saw her car parked by his house as he drove off to the pool hall and put two and two together when he found that Chester was missing. He thought about calling Toni but then he realized that it would be useless. She would refuse to give the cat back or she just wouldn’t pick up the phone. So he came up with a plan to get her attention.

Toni had an otter fur coat that her grandmother had left for her when she passed away, which never left the house. She only put

VENT it on when she was alone because she thought other people would ruin it. A couple of times, they fucked while she wore nothing except the coat (her idea) but mostly it just stayed in her closet. Jason knew she would be devastated if it went missing.

Toni lived on the third floor and her doors were always locked. So breaking in was difficult. He jumped the fence to her courtyard and walked up her back porch easy enough.

What was harder was smashing a rock through her bedroom window so he could unlatch it from the inside. To reach the window, he had to kneel onto the wooden railing of her back deck and extend his arm across a couple feet of brick wall that separated it from her window, three stories above the ground; with the rock in his hand. After he lifted the window, he crawled in feet first into her bedroom.

The coat was in her bedroom closet, where he knew it would be. He walked out the back door holding it on a wooden hanger, just above his head to keep it from dragging on her staircase.

That night, Jason received the call he had been waiting for all day. “What did you do with my cat?” he said when he picked up the phone. “I’ll tell you when I have my grandmother’s coat,” Toni said.

“You’ll tell me now,” Jason said.

Toni’s lips parted; she cracked a little smile because Jason raised his voice with her. It reminded her of how much she used to love making him upset. “OK,” she said, “If I tell you where he is, then you have to meet me there. Bring me the coat and you will get your cat.”

Jason agreed, and Toni gave him directions to the animal shelter where she had dropped Chester off. She waited there for him so that she could make sure she intercepted him when he arrived. She needed to have that coat back, it was the most important thing she owned. Her grandmother promised it to her when she was a little girl because

she was disappointed with Toni's mother: who never married Toni's father, never ascended beyond a Floor Manager position at JCPenny, never wore fur and was never fabulous. Toni would be different.

"Otters have the most beautiful fur," she once said to Toni, lowering her head into the collar like a turtle and caressing it with her cheeks. "I'd club one myself if it meant getting my hands on another one of these, but they're too hard to find." She sighed, slumped her shoulders, and ran her fingernails down the edge of the coat. "This is by far my most favorite thing in the whole world, and when I'm as dead as this poor guy, it'll be yours."

After waiting with the cat snuggled in her arms, Toni exchanged Chester with Jason for her grandmother's coat in the parking lot of the animal shelter. She had always hated that cat because he ruined furniture and sometimes pissed on the carpet. But now he seemed helpless and endearing. After she handed him over, he licked Jason's face and Jason seemed content. It was the first time Toni had seen Jason in about two months. He'd shaved his beard. There was a dent in his front bumper that hadn't been there before. Otherwise he was basically the same.

Chester wiggled from Jason's arms and pounced to the ground. He darted to Toni, stepping into her car, leaped up and clung to her otter coat. Reflexively, she picked him up and tossed him. Jason saw the spite when she threw his cat that she had for everyone and everything in the world except for him. He never understood where it came from. And now she felt it for him too.

That spite was one more thing they could not share. Their whole relationship, they never shared anything.

VENT





## MONTSERRAT, ART DETECTIVE

Elizabeth Terrazas

**What happened on the aircraft before that woman showed up** out of nowhere? My Scientist's brain could not put all the pieces together. I was on my way to a resort for seven days of relaxation, the next thing I knew I fell out of a plane that was headed toward some desolate beach. I can only assume I am the lucky one who fell in the water.

I remember one of the passengers exclaimed: *a woman is on the wing of the plane!* It took seven of us to bring her in. As soon as we did, she started trouble.

“Where is the money? Where is Montserrat? I was to meet her on

VENT this plane at exactly this time, 12:46 PM, and she is always late.”

It was then that the captain, who had patiently remained in control of the plane during all the fuss and decided to ask the woman how she got on the wing of the airplane and when we should expect the arrival of said Montserrat. “Can you please tell us your name?”

“My name is Julia, and I am here on behalf of the Ministry of the Repatriation of Art from France. Am I not on the roster of passengers?”

The Captain looked over the roster after putting the plane on automatic and at last he nodded, “Yes, you are on the roster. Glad you could make it, though it’s not common to use the Einstein PDA for such flights. On this resort service we strive to stay away from the use of modern conveniences and in any case, you obviously did not direct it properly.”

From the back of the plane in a formerly empty seat we heard a French accent.

“Darling, I am here. Did they not give you the latest Einstein?”

It was from a woman sitting next to a man. She was in a casual tan silk resort skirt with a loose white Pilipino wedding shirt that belted around her waist, wearing genuine leather sandals, which were no longer sold within most modern countries. The styles had moved to synthetics, due to the cruelty and now banished practice of using animal skins or parts for any consumer consumption. The magazine always wrote about this Montserrat as an iconoclastic woman whom no magazine had been able to identify specifically nor were they ever able to locate her residence.

“The Einstein PDA is a precision instrument, Julia. Really, to arrive on the wing of this old plane is quite shocking.”

Montserrat chortled to herself and lit a cigarette, a real cigarette, which of course was banned decades ago, but one could find the completely synthetic ones from Colombia, a smoky oak flavor with extra nicotine. They taste just like the old ones, of corrugated cardboard and

old diner coffee ashtrays, as if punishment made it worthwhile. Most opted for the inhaler if they wanted nicotine and if one could find the old school cigarettes, you had connections or by God, but if a person can locate themselves to the wing of a two prop plane, that person can find cigarettes everywhere.

“Where is my jump drive?” asked Julia, standing there in blue pencil slacks, Cordovan heels, and a two toned blue and white nautical jacket.

How does a government worker afford clothes like that, I thought. It’s something I noticed since I browse that section, but I only relent to the occasional Saks or Neiman’s sale. A scientist’s salary doesn’t provide much, not that I even know what a position like hers would earn in the first place. It isn’t my field.

Julia approaches Montserrat, stands over her in the aisle and demands, “Where is my jump drive and why have you changed the meeting place several times? We have an agreement. I have personally checked on all the contracts and they have been made.”

Well, even I knew they were talking about money. This repatriation of art had become a truly ugly thing in the last decade. Everyone wanted what was theirs back—to be sure the world had become small enough for each country to proudly display their own contribution to humanity. However, there were powerful and minority decision makers that held to the belief that whosoever “discovered” or “valued” the work, should hold onto it, not to mention a time limit for this action. These were the old countries of Britain, the United States, Russia, France and Germany. Of course, these were the countries who had gained the most in the past century.

Oh yes, the world of art had turned upside down by newly born democracies and proud nations with their own scientists easily proving their contribution to the human race. Sovereignty had become the question of the decade as people aligned themselves with their heritage in

VENT whatever country they lived. The world had basically become a courtroom as the leading attorneys, ethicists, humanitarians, and artists (of course), made delicate balance of power decisions. But there was a great deal of gossip as to the Black Market trade of some of the heretofore unknown artists who had become valued as rumors grew of their abilities and sensation.

“I have been approached by the Polynesian Government about their paintings,” said Montserrat, “Even if they were French Islands, or by a French artist.”

Julia responded, who must of sensed trouble immediately, “The art should be displayed in Paris.”

“All the subjects are Tahitian. It is a testament to that time in their history. That is where they were painted.”

Montserrat looks down and pauses, “Unfortunately, the laws have not covered this situation clearly enough for me to change my decision. This is the future we are committing to—and to the past. It is as valid as the ruins of Egypt in the British Museum.”

We watched silently as the dramatic events unfolded. The rest of us, six vacationers and two pilots, were hoping the plane does not shake too much. I gripped the arm of my seat as I observed that Montserrat beared a resemblance to the head of the Museum of Modern Art in Baltimore, Maryland. I read about her, Ms. Dubois, in that she had just hired Claude Satie to head the research department. It was quite a coup, since Mr. Satie was a descendant of the great musician Eric Satie and the former head of the British Museum overseeing the Egyptian exhibit, or what was left of it. Mr. Satie had succeeded several appointments and there was much talk as to the reason for so bad a retention problem. Most had assumed it was due to Ms. DuBois’ eccentric manner.

In times past, scientists mostly dealt with research papers and books. Now we were expected to know software development, logic,

anthropology, psychology, in addition to our science field of choice —and all to make it easier for humanity to access and organize the immense amount of information that exists in digital quark iibraries. Most scientists these days have 2 or 3 doctorates. Then again most people have a degree.

The Dark Ages of the early millennium irrevocably changed the world, on the scale of Age of Enlightenment. Education and uncensored free art flourished in the late 2100's, especially in the second age of science. It was a constant struggle to decide how to transfer, store, and categorize the massive amounts of tedious information that meant so much to so many.

“Darling, you know how the game is played. You know the dangers. You must agree this is new ground we are covering. Julia, you win some and you lose some. Are you not happy with the re-acquisition of the Masters of Impressionism? They were all over the world— United States, Russia, why even South America had some Renoir's.

I realized Montserrat had other intentions with Julia, and that they might be flirting. I see Julia has also become aware of something odd in Mr. Satie. He looks at his watch quickly and nervously puts his right hand in his pocket to interrupt the conversation.

“Montserrat, after all this was the agreement. You must turn it over to her,” he said. That Mr. Satie went against Montserrat was not the odd thing, but that he seemed to be so anxious. He was perspiring greatly and the handkerchief in his hand was soaked with moisture.

I became lost observing Mr. Satie as he jerked to the right and fell on the floor. Before I knew it I felt myself fall over crashing in to the emergency door that had not been secured since Julia's arrival. The plane lurched to the left— the suspension suspended and out I popped! I fell into the wide expanse of the Pacific. It was lucky I went in feet first! My eyes were closed, I sank and sank.

When I opened my eyes I saw pinwheel flowers floating around me, turning arm over arm, brightly colored hues of blues and yellows, pinks and violets, with dark maroon ones next to white and lavender. They were so beautiful that I didn't immediately notice them to be telepathic.

"Hola Carolina," they said.

What are they saying?

"Follow us, how is your head? Nos vez?"

It sounded like Spanish, oh Spanish, my family language, full of love and color! But it wasn't words?

I'm breathing!

"Don't worry," they said. "It's just like outside, but you breathe in everywhere; not like a snorkel. Just follow us."

I smiled.

"You will eventually remember what happened and why you are here. 'No te apures.'"

I was deep under the water. I could breathe and move about as if I were flying! It was easy. They led me deeper like so many Christmas lights spinning a story. It was me. They told me my life story, some of it good, even funny, and some of it sad.

A shadow drifted over us, at first it startled me, but as it angled by, its four flippers gracefully fanning the water I realized it was a turtle. I saw others above it.

"Friends," The pinwheels said. And more still beyond, so mysterious were they in their speed, obviously on a mission of some sort, as they might of had, as I could tell, a determined look in their eyes. It was then I noticed they were all headed in the same direction, moving in unison.

Not knowing much about turtles firsthand, I thought, "Well, it is odd, but maybe that's where the food is." I wondered a bit, as these were not the usual Hawaiian turtles I knew so well, who ambled slowly and

waved hello from the reefs.

The Pinwheels called and I turned to answer. We approached a trench that looked like so many movies where the submarine falls into a canyon. What turtles are these that guard the entrance? I was no longer tried, instead I wanted to be caught up in the majesty and parade of color. I wasn't yet certain, but it seemed as if every time I heard a thought I also felt it. It felt so playful and loving. An occasional turtle would peer my way in silent approval. On an overdue vacation and here now with unique creatures who seem to know an awful lot about me and the lab!

Now a scientist never accepts without question, yet here I am breathing under water, listening to beautiful spinning colorful cartoon creatures tell me that I am indeed a stubborn Taurus rising, which came as no surprise after all. This astrology lesson was yet another comment to my skepticism. What else had I missed in my life?

Though I've always been easily pleased and content with the pursuit of protein structure in crystallography, I felt restlessness and yearning that serial relationships and affairs never quite cured anything. It became easier and easier to lose myself in my science and the general administrative tasks of running my projects or in watching movies at home or following the Home Hearth Diva on TV.

This retrospection was dreamlike. As with every revelation there is elation and joy to understand the simplicity of small changes, degrees of change if you will, and how much can be accomplished. Wait! The pinwheels, the turtles and the crystals that I have studied for twenty years all knew each other! Oh, dios! How much damage have I caused the crystals with my x-rays? How much pain—oh no!

They quickly told me, thank God, that a part of a crystal is whole before or after multiplication, regardless of its size, it is their natural order to divide and grow and divide again, with or without help and it is painless.

VENT Each crystal knows itself and others equally well. When and what they know is communicated through the light they reflect outward. That is how easy it is for pinwheels and others to meet them, if they wanted to.

The pinwheels rest above a large precipice overlooking miles of luminescent indigo blue sculptures with smaller pearl edged doorways. Oh the color, I was awed by the brilliance of the Pinwheel Palace against the sunrise. I saw the turtles in the distance at what I now recognize were gates to the city. Do other turtles approach this depth? We had been traveling what may be miles below the surface. I remembered something about a huge wave and three turtles riding it. I believed I fell.

“You did, into the deepest part of this bay, but it is beyond your control”.

It is quiet in my thoughts and yet my heart knows they were waiting for me, for something in me—who else do they know?

“Everyone,” they answered.

I am overcome with a warm joyful flood with this thought hug.

“They know us and you know them. You just didn’t know you did, at least that was the past. Now you’ll know them all. We’ve talked to you for years, so have they, and others too.”

I thought of astrology and non-locality, and the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. With that I realized there were many, many creatures and people that knew me and my life.

“Walk through this doorway and you will return home, to a different kind of home.”

The Pinwheel’s petals spun slowly but emphatically beside me. I had become used to breathing under water, used to the wordless communication, and felt completely at ease in this not so foreign world. The concept of time had not come up at all and I had no idea how long I had been with them. I wondered if anyone had reported me missing yet.

My work with crystals will take a new turn, now that I know, now that I speak a new language. We will work together. They had always been friends, like the ancient turtles. I wondered if I would ever see the pinwheels again.

“Yes,” they said, “We will come to you in your dreams.” They laughed with me and offered one piece of advice, “more vacations.”

So I swam through their doorway dreaming of Puerto Vallarta and Oaxaca, all the delicious food I would soon enjoy. I looked forward to learning more about their city and how it was built. Could this be the Atlantis of so many years ago?

I stopped thinking about my job, and began thinking about my work, everyone's work. What a chance for us, how carefully planned. The world learned how accurate Jung's writing turned out to be. His legacy guided, as his ideas of synchronicity spread around the world in the 2nd Age of Enlightenment.

## A PREVIEW OF DEFEAT

Sean Madden

**An ultra-glam Molly McCann floated into the aquatics' now infamous** Halloween party just as the Baron was about to make his first great observation of the night: that it was refreshing to see two people his own age use a ping pong table for its intended purpose, rather than as a platform for Beirut.

The improbable game had broken out at a diver's whim, after two rubber paddles were found sitting inside a hollowed-out television set. This diver, who tonight was done up as a kind of aboriginal warlord, challenged a girl in lynx ears to a match; and at the moment Molly

VENT appeared, the score was three-nil in the feral cat's favor. It was also at this moment that the Baron felt the time was ripe for a harmless bit of social critique, as the band was between songs and it was now quiet enough for his fellow spectators to hear; but the sight of Molly so arrested him that he had to forgo the opportunity in order to alert NW, his chaperone for the occasion, to this most fortuitous scene.

"There she is," said the Baron, softly from under his scaly felt beak, "the one I was telling you about."

On the other side of the room, Molly shrugged off her turquoise parka. A sleeveless black dress, modestly hemmed at the knee but with a lacy, see-through back, cut a fine silhouette against her trim freckled figure. Bangles galore adorned her wrists, and in her hair she'd pinned a brilliant peacock plume, standing erect just behind her right ear.

NW, glued to the game, did not acknowledge the Baron at first. The girl in lynx ears had served up a doozy of an ace, and NW, standing directly behind the diver, had to duck his head to evade the line of fire. By the time NW stood back up, the ball had landed, scuttling to a stop in the kitchen, and Molly, thirsty for a cocktail, was already halfway down the stairs to the basement, where the rowers were mixing drinks. A sad clown, who had so far been the unofficial scorekeeper, loafed over to retrieve the ball, and NW nodded in solemn consideration at Molly's vanishing calves.

"She thinks I'd make a great professor, you know," said the Baron.

"Get out of town," said NW, flatly. He brought out a plastic bottle from the inside pocket of his coat and took a discrete swig. Then he stepped into the bathroom and set the bottle in the trash.

Let it be known (for those who are innately curious about such things) that Norton Wesley Forrester III and the Baron were not friends, nor did they aspire to be. This is not to say that they were enemies—there was no enmity between them—but rather their relationship was something

in between, something murkier, not so easy to define. For the Baron, it was NW's prickliness that turned him off. Take NW's last utterance as an example. The Baron would have preferred that NW echo Molly's sentiment rather than belittle it, but he knew that to expect anything other than practiced apathy was to wait in vain: just like ping pong at an aquatics' party, a heartfelt compliment from NW was a rarity to be savored. As for what NW thought of the Baron, it was anyone's guess. NW never said very much, nothing revelatory, anyway. He was like the main character of a long lost Steely Dan song, in the tradition of Deacon Blues and Cousin Dupree, eternally and effortlessly cool but with an insular gloom about him, a darkness that was almost romantic in its leanings. NW was at home in this darkness the same way he was at home in his maroon and navy blue striped scarf, a ubiquitous souvenir of his boarding school days in Santa Barbara. He wore it confidently and with the kind of tossed-off air that the Baron and his friends found femmy but all secretly envied; for not one of them in a billion years could ever pull off the look so convincingly.

Now it was the Baron's turn to be mocked, the price paid for losing a bet to Matheson, the Rapa Nui's resident pool shark and small-time bookie. All evening the Baron's plush domed back, teardrop ears and fat tail had been fair game for the more hateful members of the water polo team; and, under different circumstances, he might have nobly endured another three hours of their punches, pinches, and prods if it meant keeping his word. But with a stag Molly milling about just a floor below, he could no longer afford to stay in costume. When NW suggested that he should talk to her, the Baron replied, "I will, once I shuck this shell." He tugged off his sequined gloves but left on the mask to maintain his anonymity.

"What about the bet?" said NW.

"Matheson's not here," said the Baron. "He'll only know if you squeal."

"I swore I'd keep an eye on you."

VENT “Then come back to the building and watch me change.”

“I wouldn’t leave if I were you.”

“What is he going to do?”

“Trust me. You should stay.”

“Chicks like Molly don’t fuck armadillos. Even Matheson would accept that.”

NW sighed. “It’s your choice.”

“Where are you going?”

NW didn’t look back on his way towards the garage. “To see about something,” he said. This was a signature NW line that only complicated his mystery; he was always prospecting, but for what, only God really knew.

The Ping-Pong game dissolved after the badly losing diver lost interest, and the Baron, now lacking an audience but with a new objective stepped out the back door and went home. In his absence, the modestly attended party grew into a full-blown rager, complete with keg stands and other acts of indiscretion that gathered even the most prudish guests outside. The back deck and yard soon became so saturated with French maids, Rasta pimps, dorks and the undead, that when a trio of Paul Reveres trudged through the drunken lot, carrying a bloated burlap sack and an oblong suitcase, no one so much as batted an eye. No one even noticed.

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Perry Matheson, it must be disclosed before I continue, had never been the jealous type, so what happened next should not be misconstrued as an act of malice. It is true that Matheson, like the Baron, loved Molly; only Matheson, unlike the Baron, who confused love with an irresistible tightness in his pants, loved her very deeply, and in detail. He loved how gracefully she erased chalkboards: in long, lazy strokes. He loved the shallow dimples in her cheeks that would appear whenever she read aloud a

bawdy line of poetry. He loved her tattered crossbones shoelaces, and her Minnesota accent, and her (sometimes) legible commentary in the margins of his papers. He loved her so much that oftentimes in his boozy reminiscences he would divide his existence on this planet into two parts: Life before Molly, and Life Afterwards. He even loved her in the pit of betrayal, when he spied her in Wheeler Hall one afternoon, gushing over the Baron's essay proposal with the same level of enthusiasm as she had over his own proposal only a semester earlier. (Who knew they were both cut out to be such fine academics?) But when the Baron skimmed on his promise, Matheson had to put his feelings aside. Molly would need to be his pawn—just this once—if the Baron was to be brought to justice. For if there was anything that mattered more to Matheson than true love, justice would be it.

When the Baron returned, it was midnight, or thereabouts. Matheson had been waiting almost an hour. He sat inside a sun-bleached rowboat, alone, at the farthest corner of the yard; so far removed from the action, in fact, that it was sheer happenstance when the Baron, dressed now in a dusty rose suit, spotted Matheson smiling sumptuously at him and, realizing that he'd been caught, came near. Matheson doffed his sombrero.

"You folded," he said. "Like a wet tortilla."

"Something came up," said the Baron. "You would have done the same."

Matheson flicked a toothpick from his mouth. "You made a costly mistake, Baron."

"I'm good for it."

"It was a costly mistake," Matheson repeated. "You'd hate yourself if you knew."

"I said I'm good for it."

Matheson's face grew sour. "Money won't fix this. Nothing will."

"You greedy bastard," the Baron said. "Just give me the damage."

"The damage?" Matheson said. He reached under his seat. "You

mean, the irreparable, irreversible damage?”

Before the Baron could realize it, his fist had crushed the cartilage in Matheson’s nose; the sombrero flew off his head like a Frisbee; the peacock feather he’d revealed swirled from his hand to the ground. Matheson tumbled backwards out of the boat and into a bristly nest of weeds, cursing. The Baron turned into the crowd. Just then, a dazzling orb of fire sailed overhead, followed by a sonorous pop. The orb exploded into a rain of cinder and pumpkin guts that settled over the party—suffice it to say, all hell broke loose. Shouts and shrieks ripped across the firmament, rattling the moon and the stars. The yard lit up like an absurdist pinball game in championship mode, with Tolkien-stoned Bilbos bouncing off trannies, and witches sweeping past surgeons, and greaser babes squeezing soup-can waists through gaps in the fence. Car alarms caterwauled on Chilton Way, and in the distance sirens cried, faintly then louder, louder. On the balcony above, a colonist reloaded an antique musket, as two others in tricorne hats looked on.

The Baron scrambled into the house and made a beeline for the stairs. From out of the basement stormed the rowers and their company, a grunting herd of Vikings and maidens; the burliest among them cast aside the Ping-Pong table, which had been tilted on end and propped up against the front door. Above them the gun fired a second time, even more thunderously than the first, and the living room window went florid with flame. A werewolf tore through the kitchen and dove behind a sofa, where he cowered, whimpering, with his paws to his ears.

At the top of the stairs, the sad clown sat waiting. “You’re too late,” he said, his doleful black eyes bright with tears. In his thick, white-gloved hands, he held a maroon and navy blue striped scarf, hanging limply from his upturned palms as if it were the last surviving garment of a fallen brother. The Baron could have slugged him then, but the clown was too pathetic to harm, guilty or not. The Baron sidestepped him and marched

down the hall. Through the crack in the door, NW's hairy outstretched leg was visible, resting atop a rumpled sheet, his foot pointed skyward. The Baron's pace quickened, but before he could get a broader view, a force from behind tackled him to the ground. On the way down his head hit the door and knocked it open; and when he stared up through Matheson's bloody fingers at the incriminating sight—the rippled spine of her lace-covered back, undulating to a rhythm not her own; the gunman on the balcony behind her, taking aim at Saturn's crumbled rings—the Baron felt the ache of knowledge within him, that he had unwittingly gambled away the fate of mankind for the chance to screw a woman he never really knew.

## AN AFFAIR REVISITED

Kacy Cunningham

**I went to the beach after, feeling strange but all right. Two seagulls** pecked at a headless duck, the duck's legs and three-point feet straight. I ran a little, escaping emotions. Then a dog. A goddamn dog! Leaping and slurping at the air with a dry tongue, paws all crunchy from ocean and sand. And I fell, sand in my hands, on all fours, and I sobbed, hiccupped and cried out like a child. No, no! The dog barked around me, lapped the tears from my face.

VENT I told my daughter first. She was braiding pastel yarns on the floor, her back to me.

I'd had an affair too, but it was years, years, before Anabel's birth. It hadn't even felt like an affair. Jonathan had said, "I bet," chuckling over his food. He was always eating. "I'll bet this house that you'll tire of me. Take up tennis and fall in love with the coach." I hated tennis.

I started therapy after the miscarriage in 1996. Once a week, Mondays. John refused to come. He drank whiskey all day on Sundays. One Sunday, I was ironing his work pants when he spit near my feet. "You're sleeping with him, aren't you?" I was quiet. He'd been drinking since before noon. "Do you do it on his desk? No, you wouldn't be so cliché. Against the bookshelf?"

"Walter doesn't have a bookshelf."

"Well, fill in the blanks, Darcy dear." He circled me. Steam rose from the iron. "Is he good?" He grabbed between my legs and gripped.

When I was a girl, thirteen, my mother was always accusing me of smoking her cigarettes. "You may as well tell me how you like it already." Barb, my older sister, stole a stick each week. She offered me a drag, but I shook my head. I didn't realize I could be any other way so I was always like that, quiet.

My husband never hit me, but he hit things near me. Slammed cupboards, punched the wooden steering wheel, pounded the headboard above my head. Or like then, with the Walter accusation, he pushed the ironing board. The metal crisscross legs buckled and the board clamored down. The hot iron plate singed the carpet. Everything smelled burned, and he was walking to the bedroom, toeing his socks off in the hallway and leaving them behind.

I imagine her name is Jezebel, exotic but also close to home. Something to make me reconsider Anabel's name. If my mother was alive, my sister tells me, she'd be disappointed we didn't stay together for Anabel.

I was forty-six and she – Jezebel – was twenty-eight!

John and I tried to get pregnant early, right after marrying. “It’s not you,” he said, test after test. But he also said: “The doctor says I’m healthy.” When he bought himself a tennis racquet, I tagged along, superstitious that he would meet someone with a swinging ponytail. Marco played on the court next to us, coaching a different kid every time we saw him.

Marco was mostly gentle, why I liked him. I called my husband’s anger, his “passion.” Marco had passion too. We were on a rollercoaster, my first time since an adult, when he yelled at the top of his lungs. Not like weeee, but in a menacing, “passionate” way. Eating lemon ice after, I asked, “What was that about?” He glowered. He wanted me to leave Johnny.

John hadn’t told me by choice. Jezebel’s husband came to his office, said he would call me and tell me everything. He’d hired a detective, had pictures to prove it.

“Do you have the pictures?” I asked.

“What? No.”

“Who is she? The secretary.” Talk about cliché.

“Assistant,” he said. Then softer, “They’re called ‘assistants’ now.”

I thought of Gladys on the bleachers. The traveling lumberjacks were in Oconomowoc. Next to her, her husband – and everyone knew – kept smiling. The end of summer, sure, but the teenagers were still in shorts. And his smile! We had bought a fix-up house in town so we were short-term neighbors to Gladys and her husband. Our open kitchen windows faced each other and I never heard them raise their voices. I saw their surprise, though, whenever I said hello across our front yards. Squinting against the sun but smiling, their distance apart shrank. “Darcy!” Smiles. “How’re you? What a day, huh, Darcy? Could be warmer,” Gladys said. “It is May.” All with a smile.

I remember when John’s mother died. They had been very close,

VENT for his father had left when he was six. After the funeral, John said he didn't like to dwell on the past, and we had a glass of room temperature white wine with lunch. He looked around ceaselessly at the restaurant's surroundings. I described him to my friends as "alert," "aware." He had already left me, even in those early days.

The home where we had Anabel had once been a barn. John demanded I see it at night before we buy it. Only the framework was there, boards jutting up, beams crossing above. We stepped over the wood lip of the doorframe and it reeked of mold. "This isn't a barn! This isn't anything," I said, but he put his hand over my mouth and pointed up. Stars were everywhere and there was a swollen moon that lit up John's face. I hadn't seen him smile like that. The stars were low. He kissed me with an open mouth and we made love under that canopy of natural light. Oh, he was easy to fall in love with, that Johnny.

We drove over twenty hours to visit my parents when Anabel was three. Kicking in her car seat, she refused to sleep in the car. When we reached Odessa, Florida, Anabel fell asleep in the hammock in their backyard after hugging hello. My Mom insisted we try the *Oyster Shucker* down the road for dinner. I told her we wanted to spend time with her and Dad, but she wouldn't have it. Out the door and John's forehead was caked in wrinkles.

"We drove all day, dammit, now we have to drive to the Oyster Shucker to eat?"

"We don't have to drive. She said it was right down the road."

He didn't answer me, just got behind the steering wheel.

A diner wasn't John's style, but he sat silent. A waitress bounced over to us. "Stone crab's in season and we have plenty, don't you worry!"

"Stone crab," I said. "That sounds interesting."

"Where you from?"

"Midwest," John said. "Sure, bring us the crab."

“What kind? We have stone, snow, king...”

“The one you said.”

“Okee-dokee!”

We got them cold, at her suggestion; the claws slid and clinked around on a colorful plastic plate and three bowls were in the middle of the table: one with wooden mallets and little forks, an empty one for shells, and one filled with a pale, creamy mustard.

“Anything you’d like to do while we’re here?” I asked, softly rapping the mallet on the shell.

“Eat,” he said.

“I mean, in Florida? It’s Anabel’s first time.”

He pounded at the crab, the plastic plate lifting up. “She won’t remember it.”

“Of course she will! We’ll take pictures.”

“Your mother should have cooked.”

“Let’s not get into it. Our mothers are different, that’s all.” We held eye contact, beating the crab.

I fear for Anabel. She’s already watching what she eats. John hardly notices her unless she starves herself and then, of course, he’s father-of-the-year, taking her to the dentist. The dentist! I’m so ashamed that I sometimes think the miscarriage should have been a sign.

She’s with him now, for the weekend, and it was my first night alone in the house, the same one that was once the frame of a barn. He was smart enough to always sleep at home, maybe not with me, but at least in the house. I dreamt of Marco. His hands were warm for winter and his eyes were clear, unlike John’s puffy, red eyes. I was feeling his ear. John’s hair curled when overgrown, curled under and around the ear, waving up toward the earlobe. But Marco’s hair was cropped short, close to his head, and I kept brushing behind his ear, tucking my fingers around and around until his smile faded. I knew then that his hands were warm and his hair

VENT short because it was summer. I began to understand that I was dreaming so I went to kiss Marco, but then I heard the drone of the noontime bell outside.



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