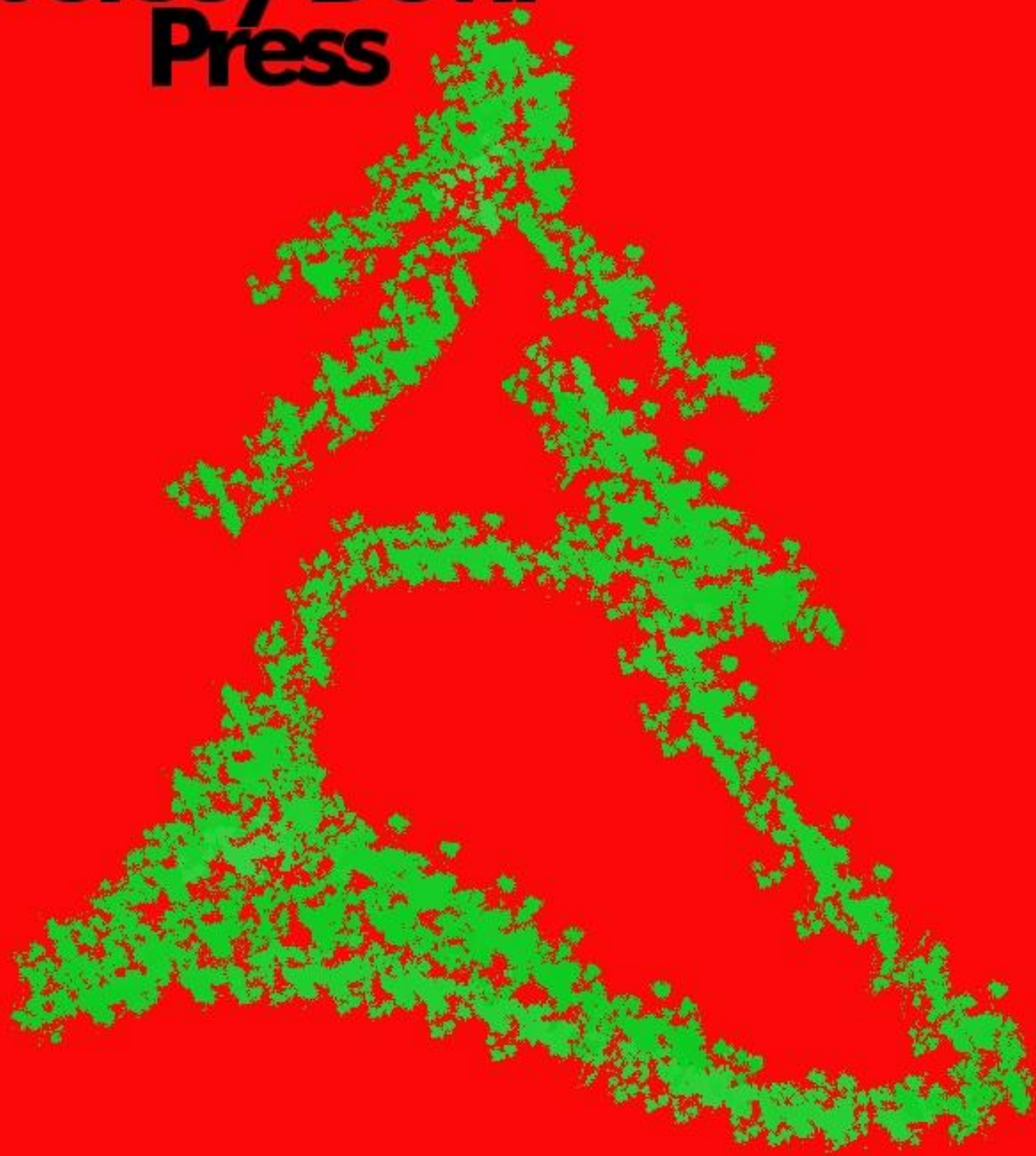


**Jersey Devil
Press**



Holiday 2009

Jersey Devil Press

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Editor's Note: Merry Whatever

Merry whatever you're celebrating, people! Although, let's face it, Christmas kind of owns this season, whether you want it to or not.

Personally, I've always made a divide between the Christian "Yay, Jesus!" Christmas and the capitalist "Buy shit now!" one. I know the latter is based on the former no matter how you slice it, but they're not even close to being the same thing. Ideally, one day we, as a society, will make the split official—a la *Futurama's* "X-mas"—allowing everyone to partake in the gift-giving and the stress and the depression and the debt, while leaving the religion to the religious.

On that note, welcome to the Jersey Devil Press Holiday Half-Issue! It's basically entirely Christmas-themed as far as the holiday tangents go, and, despite only having four stories, about as long as a regular issue. We're sticking with the title anyway.

We start with Audrey Forrest's "Feliz Navidad," a story about the holidays through a seasonal worker's eyes, and follow it up with Lora Rivera's beautiful "For Piano and Voice," a story about the issues plaguing individuals on the other end of the financial spectrum. Then it's a trip Down Under for Australian author Anne Vize's "River Girl." (The tale actually takes place in Vietnam, but they don't have a clever nickname that I'm aware of.) And we wrap things up with repeat offender M. R. Lang and the indescribably awesome "September's Christmas," which I probably could describe if I tried, but I don't want to ruin it. Just read it. In fact, read all of them.

So enjoy the issue, enjoy the holidays, and, if you're a Jewish writer, you really should have sent us a story...

-- Eirik Gumeny

Feliz Navidad

Audrey Forrest

It wasn't really a "downtown" or even a city as it liked to pretend. It was some urban architect's idea of how to disguise a shopping mall and make it look like some charming and quaint village—something you'd see on the back lot tram tour of a Hollywood studio or Disney theme park.

It's all in the details. That was Darby Whitehead's mantra, the managing partner of Stocker Park Village. That's why he insisted on hanging fifties-style Christmas lights in neat rows that ran parallel over the tops of the make believe streets—streets with small town names like Main Street, Front Street and Market Street. According to Darby Whitehead, the reason why throngs of upper middle class patrons flocked to Stocker Park was what it did not have—homeless people, panhandlers, abandoned storefronts, and, the reason he gave to the public, expensive parking.

That's why Darby was skeptical of hiring temporary workers even during the busiest season. The temp company representative, however, had managed to convince him that Ready Man screened and hired the most reliable, neat, and honest workers to man all of those extra odd jobs that the holiday season required. Darby made Ready Man agree in writing that he would have full authority to dismiss any temp worker—with no questions asked and no repercussions against Stocker Park.

For Joe Torres, the job at Ready Man was another temporary job that required him to take two busses and then walk half a mile every day from the middle of October until the job ended in February. But it was better than the last

temp job where he was made to hold a placard on street corners, advertising going out of business sales. Cars would honk, passengers would point at him and sometimes laugh while Joe, wearing a caveman's costume, stood holding a sign that read "OUR PRICES CAN'T BE BEAT." Once a car load of teenagers driving a brand new Acura tossed a fast food bag at him containing half eaten fries and burgers. Joe was so hungry that day he had to fight back his urge to pick up the bag and eat the remaining contents.

Joe walked proudly toward Stocker Park Village, the site of his new job. As he entered Stocker Park, passing under the ornate stone and wrought iron gates, he looked above and admired the perfect rows of bright Christmas lights that he'd hung yesterday. The all white, slightly obese, and thoroughly highlighted forty-something clientele, outfitted in designer jeans and cashmere overcoats, wouldn't laugh at that.

It would be a stretch to buy Christmas presents for his wife and new baby boy this year, Joe thought as he checked the bulletin board in the temp office in the back lot for his daily assignment. But Joe wasn't complaining. Jobs didn't grow on trees, even the opulently fake ones that lined the walks at Stocker Park Village. Mercifully, it was mostly inside jobs today, setting up displays and hauling deliveries to the mega bookstore known as Whitehalls. That was a relief; Joe's arms still ached from hanging and then re-hanging all those Christmas lights yesterday to exact specifications in the ice cold wind.

Joe pushed a rolling rack of folding chairs out of the storage room at Whitehalls as his thoughts drifted to his wife, Lydia, and their new baby boy. *It's worth it*, thought Joe. This year Joey Jr., or "mi cielo" as Lydia adoringly called him, would be three years old and ready to play with real toys. Joe had his eye on a big yellow construction truck he had seen earlier that morning at Clay's Discount Drug Store where the bus stopped. Today was payday and with all of

the holiday overtime, Joe would have enough for the toy truck and a heart shaped locket for his wife that he had spotted in the jewelry section of the drugstore. *Lydia will love that*, thought Joe with a faraway smile. *She can put Joey's picture in the locket and keep him close to her even while she is working the night shift at the nursing home.*

Bing Collier had seen a hundred of these places if he had seen one. Another Saturday morning book signing at the local Whitehalls, this time at Stocker Park Village in a posh Chicago suburb. Problem was, nobody knew who the hell he was anymore. Back in the fifties, Bing had made his fame as a panel member on daily game shows broadcast between soap operas and local news. Unless you were in your mid-fifties, though, you wouldn't even recognize his name.

"Eighteen chairs set out today? That's it?" he asked aloud.

Traci Classer, the Stocker Park Events Manager, surveyed the small group of folding chairs that Joe had carefully placed in the café section at Whitehalls, three neat rows of six a piece. The card table in front of the chairs displayed a poster size picture of Bing Collier's book and about two dozen new copies of *The Memoirs of a TV Game Show Celebrity... Bada Bing!*

Bing rolled the last drops of a tepid cup of Mocha Java between his teeth as he tried, but failed, to hide a disgusted glare at the rows of empty chairs. Frankly, it was embarrassing to have to sit near the back of the store for two hours on a Saturday afternoon behind a card table and portable microphone trying to peddle your own biography.

Damn, Bing thought. *If that bitch hadn't cleaned me out in that last divorce, I'd be teeing off on the back nine instead of driving cross-country to suburban shopping centers and staying at the deluxe suite in the Holiday Inn.* Bing's cell phone

interrupted his thoughts with the theme song from *I've Got Your Number*—an old game show starring Bing.

“Yeah, babe,” Bing grunted into his cell phone. “Yeah, okay, okay, I’ll pick it up for the little bugger. Look, I’m onstage in two... later.”

Bing slapped the lid down on the cell phone and tossed it into the front pocket of his navy blue Italian sport coat. It was Reedy, Bing’s third wife, reminding him to pick up SkatePro, a kids’ video game for her eight year old hyper brat.

That’s the downside when you marry a chick twenty-five years younger. The sex is good, but the baggage that comes with it—It’s a tradeoff. Hey, at least I had a few hot nights with the cocktail waitress, Bing mused as he stared unabashedly at Traci’s behind.

“Hey sweetie, tell Pedro we need a few more chairs,” Bing stage whispered to Traci, looking no higher than her chest. “I’m good with the suburban mom crowd, ya know what I mean?”

Bing playfully draped his arm around Traci, pulling her into him for a wet kiss. Traci cooed back, giving Bing a wiggly hip bump in her tight black pencil cut jeans.

“Gotta check my hair, where’s the loo, honey?” Bing gurgled in Traci’s ear with coffee fouled breath. Tracie gestured with her shoulder, a deliberately calculated move which tightened her low cut blouse and extended her breast within inches of Bing’s nose.

“Back in a few,” Bing chortled in what he thought was a sexy voice.

Joe’s jaw tightened and his eyes began to well up as he felt his pulse surging through his temples.

Pedro? My name is not Pedro... Joe raged in his head. *Whoever thinks that temp jobs don’t have stress should try one for a day.*

Joe bit his lip and trained his eyes on the perfectly neat rows of chairs he had set up. He thought about his paycheck, the big yellow truck for Joey, and the golden locket that Lydia would wear around her dainty and graceful neck. Joe headed towards the storage room to get another rack of chairs but detoured towards the men's room to splash some cold water in his face. As he rounded the hallway corner he pushed the men's room door open, unexpectedly catching Bing smiling at himself in the bathroom mirror, as if Bing had just heard the answer to the question, "Who's the fairest of them all?" Joe looked at his feet noticing Bing's navy blue jacket on the floor. Bing was lost in self-admiration as Joe stooped to pick up the sport jacket.

"Don't touch that."

Bing's exhortation came too late, as he spun around nearly losing his balance with his arm stretched out in a blocking move. Joe had already scooped up the jacket. Bing and Joe both stared at the brand new copy of SkatePro, the plastic label half removed. Bing's jacket had been concealing it on the bathroom floor.

'Hey there, buddy... wow...uh... thanks for all that great...uh...uh... set-up work. I'll put in a good word for you with the, uh... boss!'

Bing stuck his hand out intending to shake Joe's hand. Joe stood silently, hands clenched in his pockets, while his eyes alternated between the video game and Bing's outstretched hand.

"No comprendo, pal? Ha ha..." Bing said, snatching the video game and stuffing it into his jacket, before banging the door open with his fist.

Even with the stragglers and little kids playing musical chairs, the audience barely filled twelve seats. The theme song to *I've Got Your Number* blared out of the portable amps, signaling the start of Bing's book signing. Traci was now

standing in the store vestibule attempting to usher patrons, or anyone, for that matter, into the free Bing Collier “show.” Bing entered through the back café door, jacketless, and with a little hop-skip, up to the book signing table.

“Well, hello, Stocker Park, it’s time to play... Ha ha ha, you remember the show!”

He rolled out the scripted dialog for the zillionth time, nodding with fake humility at the poster of himself and then mugging for the audience of six postmenopausal ladies, a couple of bored husbands, and a handful of kids whose mothers had dropped them off while they browsed elsewhere. Bing continued, pasty smile plastered across his face, as if he were doing the opening monologue at the Oscars.

“Now, don’t be shy, ‘C’mo- ah ah ah ahn Do ow ow ow nn!’ for your very own personal, autographed copy of my book,” Bing bellowed out as he concluded the “show.”

As the few ladies trickled out of the café, Bing pointed at Traci giving her the come here command with his index finger.

“Hey, hon, pack up the books for me and have someone load them into my Beamer in the front lot.”

Traci departed to the rear of the store, toward the back emergency exit, opening it with the key on her plastic wrist bracelet that looked like a mini telephone cord.

“Joe, you’re on a break again? I need you right now to load the books into Mr. Collier’s car in the courtesy lot and then take down the display tables and chairs. Now means now!” Traci said, snapping her fingers and pointing at Joe.

“Miss Classer, I need to talk to you. It’s important,” Joe pleaded as Traci turned her back to him. “It’s about Mr. Collier... I saw something that’s not right and I need to report it.”

“Joe, no time right now, okay? Mr. Collier is in a hurry. Here are his car keys, now get going.”

Joe piled the last box into the Beamer as Bing approached the car.

“Hey, buddy,” said Bing, “I put in a good word for you, just like I said. See ya.”

Bing did a finger wave at Joe as he backed up his car and gunned it out of the lot.

Joe pulled the rack of chairs into the storage area next to the table and portable audio equipment, and then rang the buzzer on the wall that signaled a manager to lock up the room.

“Hello, Mr. Whitehead,” Joe said quizzically as Darby Whitehead approached Joe, accompanied by Traci Classer and a security guard. Joe had not seen Mr. Whitehead since the first day he reported to the temp hiring office at Stocker Park.

“Joe,” said Darby, “I’m afraid we won’t be needing your services anymore. When we let an employee go, we have a policy of escorting the employee to his locker and then off the premises. It’s just a security thing. I’m sorry. You’ll get your last paycheck in the mail in two weeks. With the holidays, it will probably come after Christmas, though. Sorry about that. We can’t control the bookkeeping. Come with me.”

Mr. Whitehead gestured towards the door with a manila file that had Ready Man Temporary Staff printed on it.

Joe stood motionless, feeling a wave of nausea rising, and his legs beginning to collapse. The security guard grabbed Joe’s upper arm.

“But why I am being fired? I was trying to tell you, Miss Classer. I saw Mr. Collier in the restroom with a video game hidden under....”

“Joe, let’s go. Mr. Collier is none of your business, and frankly you shouldn’t have spent so much time in the restroom.”

Miss Classer stared blankly at Joe then checked her watch.

Joe shuffled, almost forgetting how to walk, as the security guard escorted him by the arm to the door in front of Mr. Whitehead. Tears streamed down his reddened face as shoppers in expensive ski parkas and designer sunglasses gawked, then veered away, clutching their designer bags tighter. A popular rock-style Christmas carol blared from the outside speakers where Joe was being led past fake trees and life-sized carolers.

“Feliz Navidad,” the singer sang in a not too Hispanic accent.

“Feliz Navidad,” the singer continued, even more upbeat, “Feliz Navidad, Prospero Ano y Felicidad.”

AUDREY FORREST is an author of short fiction whose most recent work is featured in the Spring 2009 edition of the University of Wisconsin’s literary magazine, *Straylight*. She is an adjunct professor at Lorain Community College in Elyria, Ohio. Her works explore issues of social justice.

For Piano and Voice

Lora Rivera

Ah! Vous dirai-je Maman

To the tune of "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star"

On the end table beside the armchair where Nisha sat, tense and engulfed by cushions, a black cylindrical voicebox sometimes reflected back the light of the chandelier in the great room beyond. Nisha carefully did not look at it. She looked nowhere but at the three octaves of piano keys angling toward her, the base notes invisible from her corner. Lacquered fingers depressed these white and black keys confidently. Although Nisha's gaze was riveted there, it was not the pianist's song that held her attention.

She had been sitting for several hours, listening through the evening shadows to the soft tremolo of dancing voices. The air, thickened by fireplace smoke, by baked ham and pine and pumpkin candles, by the dizzying mélange of perfumes, was just heavy enough to accommodate the dance Nisha had herself performed countless times over the years. It was a dance of eyelashes and swirling skirts, of polished shoes and cufflinks, of furtive glances, and above all the bright splash of champagne in the bowels of gold-rimmed crystal. And voices.

Nisha sighed, pushing the white Persian cat from her lap for the fourth time that night and brushing the long fur from her gray velvet gown. She adjusted her pearls and huddled deeper into the cushions of the armchair, her eyes drifting to the jouncing of her most adept student's fingers on the baby

grand. The piece, *12 Variations on 'Ah, Vous Dirai-Je, Maman.'* Feelingless, but perfected. Nisha could not fault Diane Lazear a single note.

Moi, je dis que les bonbons valent mieux que la raison, mouthed Nisha, smiling tightly. Sweets are worth more than reason.

Nisha's aging mother floated by in rhinestones and white gloves and sat on the arm of the sofa beside the armchair, making even that awkward perch somehow glamorous, and stroked her daughter's black hair.

"You're out here by yourself."

Nisha nodded, refocusing her gaze over her mother's head and across the piano into the room proper. Thirty, perhaps forty, individuals moved about the great room, each with a glass of liquor, eyes too intent on the voice of the person whose hands they were not quite touching.

Her mother's breath smelled like caramels.

"You shouldn't be all alone so close to Christmas," said her mother, frowning.

Nisha shrugged and scanned the room for her students, her own mouth unconsciously mimicking her mother's when she noticed two of them, Ryan and Bella, in the corner near the bar. She had a strict No Philandering While on the Job policy, which had gotten her through Julliard. Those two wouldn't last the first rigorous semester.

"Nish." That voice her mother always used when she was about to get her way. "*What* is going on? It's been too long. You can't live the rest of your life ..."

Nisha signed quickly, too quickly, she knew, for her mother to understand fully. She also mouthed the words, although she hated the fact that speech was so deeply ingrained that she couldn't keep her lips from moving when she was signing. It made the memory more acute: she, a soprano with a four octave

range, who'd had a full scholarship for Voice, could no longer speak—or she could, but only with a mechanical device that rendered her terrifying to small children.

Signing was still strange for her. And embarrassing. She'd had to take classes with ASL students after the accident. Their language had a non-linear quality to it she couldn't understand until she'd translated linearly. At that point, it was too late. She'd become confused, and what was supposed to be received as an impression, or as a series of visual impressions, had already lost some of its power and meaning by her very translation.

She signed: *You want to parade me around and tell stories to all your rich friends* Her mother would probably understand only *parade* and *rich friends*.

"You're too lovely tonight to hide out here," said her mother sternly. "Of course, I want to show you to my friends. And they're your friends, too."

Not anymore Nisha grimaced. *Lovely*

Nisha was tall, Indian on her father's side, French on her mother's, had fine cheekbones and a stubborn jaw, dark eyes, a warm complexion, and just enough of a nose that she wouldn't be mistaken for anyone else. All these features were lovely. And none of them were hers. They *belonged* to her, but she was not born with them. They were products of her parents' money, and although she was grateful to her mother's insistence on cosmetic surgery after the accident, she was angry, too, that both her parents pretended her cheeks and jaw and neck, the skin on her chest and arms, her beautifully individual nose, were the same features that appeared in Nisha's eighteen-year-old high school glamour shots from nearly ten years ago.

Her mother gripped Nisha's hand. "You are being morose. There's no reason for it. You *are* lovely, and any number of men out there—"

Nisha signed furiously: *Do you think I'm stupid too as well as mute I'm not like them anymore I don't belong leave me alone*

"That's not polite, Nisha."

That voice again, as if her mother could frown and the world would stop spinning. To think Nisha had been like that. There were times when she felt she had been given a grace, an unlucky salvation.

I am the dreamer who woke

"You are full of yourself," said her mother tersely. A tiny lock of hair had come loose from the sleek knot at the nape of her neck.

Nisha nodded and slipped the bit of hair back into place.

Her mother frowned again, and then relaxed, sipped her champagne, smiled.

"I want to introduce you to a friend," she said. "He's the son of your father's newest partner, Dr. John Hartford, who's doing some sort of nuclear research with CERN, if I remember. He's still in Switzerland, but Benjamin is a personal favorite of mine, and I've known his mother Donna a long time."

Nisha nodded. Andrea Flanders, Nisha's most recently acquired virtuoso, laughed loudly across the room, and then squealed when she found she'd spilled wine on the back of her hand. The young man she was talking with whipped out a handkerchief with the kind of expertise only acquired by long acquaintance with Christmas parties of the caliber thrown by Nisha's parents. He wiped Andrea's hand.

"You'll come meet him, then," said her mother, dumping the cat from the sofa. "Down, Monsieur Fluff, or I'll have you shaved. He's darling, Nish, a perfect gentleman."

Nisha rose, gestured at Diane to continue on to another Mozart number, and followed her mother through the heady air into the middle of the great room.

Voices. Voices everywhere.

"Benjamin, there you are!"

A man in maybe his late twenties, a little older than Nisha perhaps, who wore a designer black suit and deep burgundy tie, whose dark hair attested to mornings spent performing the achingly tedious affair of maneuvering every strand into position as if into military parade rank, and of staring, afterward, into the mirror one more long moment to be sure the masterpiece would not all come undone in a sudden puff of errant wind, turned to flash white teeth at Nisha's mother and bow slightly while taking her mother's hand.

Her mother's face flushed.

"I have the pleasure, Benjamin, of introducing you to my daughter Nisha. I don't suppose you've met before."

"Enchanted." He nodded at Nisha, whose cheeks grew mutinously warm.

"She doesn't speak, Benjamin, poor darling, though she's magnificent at the piano."

"These are her students, then? I arrived late, I'm afraid, and didn't hear the introduction."

Her mother bobbed her head. "That's Diane Lazear playing a Sonata— yes, Nisha? Oh, well, I never was good at remembering which piece was what--"

Nisha signed, *Concerto Number 24 in C minor*

"—Mozart, at any rate," said her mother, smiling indulgently at Nisha.

"It's beautiful, no?"

"One of his finest."

Nisha glanced at Benjamin in surprise, but her mother had already gone into a long discussion of Nisha's own burgeoning and so-far-triumphal musical career, her years studying at Julliard, the offer she had received to teach there, her compositions and opera: "*The Setting of the Norwegian Sun* is being performed at the Grand next month."

"How wonderful."

"Yes, it really is. She's an affinity for minor keys, though, I'm afraid."

They both smiled at her.

"Really," continued her mother, "you'd think her life was tragic, the way she rips out sheet after sheet of tear-jerkers."

"Tear-jerkers." Benjamin's expression was unreadable.

Nisha stared, horrified, at her mother. The following year, she'd be starting as a professor at Julliard; she'd be dealing with prodigies only a few years her junior. Her mother had called her opera a tear-jerker, like some cheap Hollywood movie that had debuted as a hardback bestseller only a few months before, to be forgotten by nearly all its viewers the following week. Years ago, she would have scolded her mother, would have laughed and looked up at Benjamin through mascara-thick eyelashes, would have proceeded to sweep him off his feet and then fuck him—as Andrea would probably do to what's-his-name just as soon as the young man nursing her wine-spilled hand had been properly liquored—but Nisha was done with the debonair type, Benjamin included. Though he had nice eyes.

Alone on Christmas! She wanted to laugh outright at her mother's ludicrousness.

"Benjamin, your glass is empty, and Nisha's probably been too busy with her students to get anything at all." Her mother clucked her tongue. "I'll be right back."

She glided across the room as if over ice.

Nisha rolled her eyes.

"You're unkind," said Benjamin softly. "She *is* your mother."

Nisha swallowed, looked around, realized that her artificial voice box was still over by the armchair on the end table, and held up a finger. Why she cared, why she felt like she had to defend herself from him, she didn't know, but her heart thumped, and her face flushed as she hurried from him and grabbed paper and a pen from the desk in her father's study at the far end of the long hallway that led out into the foyer.

When she returned and found him, surprisingly, still waiting, she wrote, *That's no excuse.*

He tilted his head. Nisha noticed her mother had not returned with the promised drinks; she was laughing at a joke told by one of Nisha's father's friends, fanning herself with her hand.

Benjamin said nothing as he gazed at the paper; Nisha offered nothing more.

Diane Lazear hit a wrong note, and Nisha winced. Scribbling hastily, she wrote, *Diane has never played for an audience this large.*

"She's very good."

She's stiff, like a machine. No feeling.

Benjamin paused, cocking his head, staring vacantly in the direction of the piano. When the song was over, he sighed. "I would give my right arm to play music like that, stiff or not."

Nisha had begun writing, *Both arms, your legs? How about,* when Benjamin said, "My father's in Switzerland, did your mother tell you?"

She crumbled the paper and nodded.

"May I see your garden?"

Surprised, she nodded again. She drew him along through the hall, down a short flight of stairs and into the library. The doors opened onto a veranda. Benjamin closed the doors after them.

The air was bright and cold, light without the scent of food and perfume, without the heat of bodies and the smoke from candles and fireplaces. Nisha hugged herself. The skin on her arms had already begun to ripple into goose bumps. Snow had fallen earlier, spattering the cold stone steps and the garden below; frosted Christmas LEDs lined the branches of dark firs and peeked out from beneath small accumulations of snow along the benches and trellises twisting along the garden path.

I am afraid there is not much to see, she signed to him, for she'd left her paper indoors.

Perhaps Benjamin did not know sign language; he stared at her face for a moment, and then looked out on the garden. His breath was gray as he spoke.

"He's working at ISOLDE. I don't quite understand it all. Studying the beta-decay of radioactive isotopes or some such physics-talk. What do you think? He's not here, you see, he's never here, same as when I was a kid. Even when he's *here* he isn't here, you understand. His mind is always gone, off in that place, that world of equations and periodic elements. He's missing out on the real world for his miniature one."

She signed, *This is not the real world*

Benjamin gave her a long, thoughtful look. "I think he's an amazing man," he said finally. He had watched her hands. Had he heard what they said?

He gave a small laugh, then; an awkward, odd sort of laugh that often accompanied this sort of unsolicited intimacy from people Nisha barely knew.

"What does it matter, right?" he said, grinning out at the garden and shaking his head. "Whether he is or isn't, an amazing man?"

The wind gusted, and Nisha shivered.

"I'm sorry," said Benjamin, shrugging quickly out of his coat. "And I'm supposed to be a gentleman." He helped her into it and then paused, his fingers on the lapels. His face was very near hers. His lips parted, wet. He had just licked them.

"I wondered," he continued softly, "when your mother told me about you earlier. She didn't tell me how it happened."

Nisha had thought when she was recovering in the hospital bed, trying to piece together in her mind the shreds of her life as it had been, wondering which aspects were salvageable, that people didn't usually ask about accidents. But somehow, her case was different. They pried because they were clumsy, talking to a mouth unable to respond. And because they couldn't understand her, they tried to commiserate. And afterwards, how nervous and distant they became!

But Benjamin, still so near, pulled the lapels of his coat shut, and his knuckles brushed her throat where her larynx had been. She jerked back.

I have to check on my students, she signed, and turned to slip back through the door, back into the warm, sweet-saturated air of her parents' mansion. She swept into the alcove on the far side of the piano, touched Diane's shoulder and received a headshake—no, she was not yet tired, she could do a few more pieces—and curled up in her armchair. The fat white Persian immediately claimed her lap, and this time Nisha didn't bother to push him off. She took a few deep breaths.

On the table beside her right hand lay her black, battery-operated larynx. She lifted it, closed her eyes, and put the vibrator to her throat. "*Ah! Vous dirai-je, Maman, ce qui cause mon tourment?*" It was a French nursery rhyme American children sang to the words and tune of "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star." Ah! Will I tell you, Mother, what's causing my torment? Nisha could hear the pitches in

her head, but the voice that emitted from her mouth was loud and robotic. Diane missed a note but recovered fluidly.

“What *is* the cause of your torment?”

Nisha jumped, her movement dislodging the cat. Benjamin sat on the sofa at her elbow, head tilted again the way it had been when he was listening so intently to Diane’s performance.

She signed, *Papa wants me to reason like a grown up but I say that sweets are worth more than reason*

She grinned at him suddenly. Because his eyes had lit up, recognizing the rest of the verse. Because it meant he understood her language. But no, it was not her language; it was simply the only language left to her.

He licked his bottom lip. “Will you play something? Play something from your opera.”

A tragedy my opera, she signed. She gestured at the thirteen-foot Christmas tree near the entryway resplendent with shining red and gold balls and bright icicles.

“Christmas is the most tragic time of year,” said Benjamin.

And because she could not tell whether he was serious, uttering some curious, enigmatic kindness for people whose lives were not like his own, Nisha agreed to play. Diane rose graciously after finishing the second movement of the piece she had been working through, and stood on Nisha’s left, as if to turn pages.

“I think I have the score in my folder in the foyer,” offered Diane, but Nisha shook her head. She would play from “August’s Song.” After the lovers’ tryst and their fatal undertaking to resurrect their stillborn son, following a series of perverse commands from the sadistic priestess who agreed to carry their child,

Aren sings of the coming of winter and offers a tribute to his partner's resulting suicide.

Benjamin stood near Diane's shoulder, on her student's other side, and too far for Nisha to see him without looking up from the piano. She could hear Diane whispering the story to him as she played. In the great room, conversations inconvenienced by the jarring minor chords grew first hushed and then rejoined even louder, as if to drown out the piano's voice.

Halfway through, Nisha paused at the end of a fermata to slip out of Benjamin's coat, which had become too warm in the stifling heat of the room, and let it fall to the floor. After rescuing the coat, he returned to Diane's side, bent toward her ear, and murmured the question that had made Nisha leave him on the terraced patio overlooking the snow-covered garden.

Nisha glanced at him, but he was not looking at her, and she felt her pulse quicken. As she bent more deeply into the lyric passages, Nisha listened in her mind for the dance of Aren's voice. It did not prevent her from hearing Diane's response, still in a timid whisper, yet loud, much louder than the piano, so much louder than any of the voices in that room, loud like the fire had been, the roar of it, and the blast of heat in her ears.

Her senior year at Julliard, her tiny studio apartment with its red, chipping wood paneling, mauve curtains, a poster-sized framed first page of a score by Stravinsky. She'd been plucking out an easy third cello line near the window.

Sometimes, Diane's voice drifted through the memory. "She'd been sleeping and the stove was on . . . a few blocks from campus."

She'd curled up on the sofa and shut the window, being cold. An omelet for dinner, and probably the personalized linens her parents had given her as a

Christmas gift, lying on the counter still in their box. Flames were so bright and so dark all at once. And loud.

“... the whole place on fire. Anybody else would have just left everything and got out. But not her. And maybe that’s not true. Maybe if I had my music in there—she was writing the opera at the time—maybe I wouldn’t have left until I had everything either. She’d gotten it in her arms, but then there was an explosion. They said some chemicals were the cause, went up in flames, too, along with all the wood. And a violin, a cello, and a piano. God. She’d had it in her hands.”

Diane paused, listening, and Nisha felt the woman’s eyes, felt Benjamin’s eyes, felt their sadness, their sympathy. The way one would look at a misshapen, ugly wound on a once-beautiful face. She focused on the keys, on the movement of the music. She did not want their sympathy: she spoke a strange tongue; she was an impostor. Her very presence shattered their careful politeness, their delicate sensibilities frustrated by her unwillingness—no, she’d had enough of lies—her *inability* to play their games. She was to blame for Diane’s nervousness, for Benjamin’s efforts to make her feel human. It was the first party she had attended after the accident. She was the reason for the missteps in tonight’s dance, the blunders and broken rhythms. They were not calloused, Benjamin and Diane. Had they ever seen a face like hers among all the throngs of masks worn at her parents’ parties? A voiceless monster. Anyone would gawk.

Diane went on, and this time, no flames accompanied her. “It’s called ‘August’s Song.’ She didn’t write it until after the accident. Mostly she’d had to rewrite the entire opera from memory. But this piece she wrote first. Only months later, while she was recovering from reconstructive surgery. They did their best on everything they could. It was because it was such a small, enclosed space. That studio, with the windows and doors shut. She inhaled all that

super-heated smoke and it just destroyed her larynx. They had to take it out. Third degree burns. And it's a wonder it didn't destroy her lungs, too."

Nisha glanced up for a moment to see Benjamin's eyes on her. She did not look up again. The song finished on a twisted, broken arpeggio, ending on the aggravatingly unfulfilling Picardy third, the promise of happy endings. Nisha plowed on to another part of the opera. She heard their voices over the smooth black piano lacquer, heard her own name several times. She felt them leave the piano, the sound of their voices fading into the background of conversations. Her students approached intermittently to ask if she was tired, if they should take their turn, but she did not reply except to shake her head. She played set after set until a herd of slightly offbeat footsteps and clacking heels echoed through the foyer, voices well-wishing and Merry Christmasing, and at last the hollow boom of the front door. Her parent's voices sighed goodnights.

"Nish," said her mother through a huge yawn delivered through the fingertips of her white gloves. "You should go to bed. It's almost four in the morning."

Nisha looked up, blinking, for her eyes had become glued to the keys in a daze. She almost said, "I'll just play one more," before realizing that she couldn't say anything. Nor could she sign with her fingers still scudding along the piano keys. Her hands were like machines attached to her wrists. Even if she had wanted to stop, it would have been impossible. Impossible now to look up, or earlier—when Benjamin's hands had been so very close to her face, to the flesh of her neck, even if it was *not* her own flesh!—impossible to be still for that moment longer, to linger there and wait. . . . But for what? A shudder, a thick voiceless gulp, an awkward apology? No, it was over: She would not attend any more of her parents' parties. Her hands moved faster, melody like an imprecation—or a

protestation? She could not be sure; they were tearing through the notes too quickly.

Her mother stared at her for another minute or two. Finally, she sat on the edge of the piano bench and reached around Nisha's head to smooth her hair. For a brief moment, Nisha felt the warmth of her mother's hand, the flick of a fingernail against her scalp near her ear. The caress slid down the length of her hair and fell to her waist.

"Benjamin's a nice boy, Nish," said her mother. She sighed, resting her head against her daughter's shoulder as Nisha continued to play. "Donna told me he studied sign language in college. He would have made a good match."

Nisha couldn't remember what the piece was; the notes were all wrong.

"He probably doesn't like Diane as much as he does you, anyway," continued her mother. "You're much prettier. Now, that's an interesting song. What's it called?"

Nisha lifted her hands momentarily from the piano. There were wrinkles on her knuckles, fine crisscrossing wrinkles all over the backs of her hands, skin just beginning to ripple softly like a disturbed pool.

Several minutes went by. She felt her mother rise and kiss her forehead, heard the thin stilettos tapping across the floor, stopping somewhere near the bar.

The piano came to life again. Mozart's first variation, one stroked key at a time: *Ah—Vous—Di—rai—Je—Ma—man.*

"Nish."

She stopped playing and looked up. Her mother seemed ancient, holding onto the stair railing like that, as if she was unable to raise her foot to the next step. The strap of her dress was slipping, and one of her gloves had bunched at the wrist, making the fabric come up only to the elbow.

“I just thought . . .” Her mother shook her head. “I was so sure he was right for you.”

In the empty room, the sound of the cat’s purr as it rubbed up against the legs of the piano bench was accompanied only by the last note Nisha had played before looking at her mother. Her foot had begun to ache from holding the pedal. On the air, the note attenuated gently, resonating, an almost imperceptible passing.

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River Girl

Anne Vize

Than Le dips her paddle idly into the murky water of the Thu Bon River and gazes across the glassy surface towards her home. She looks at the young couple seated nervously in the front of the boat and smiles at them. They smile back, and then glance at each other as if seeking reassurance that this small gesture has been the correct thing to do. She watches in amusement at their unspoken conversation. It is the start of the Australian holiday season, and the tourists are just starting to fill the hotels and restaurants with their enthusiastic chatter and passion for spreading money around like confetti. Soon it will be peak season, with people jamming the markets and stores and snapping photographs in every direction. But for now it is still peaceful in her small town, and Than Le is making the most of the peace before the holidaying hordes descend.

The water slaps gently at the side of the boat, and she turns her attention back to paddling. They have not progressed very far along the river, but the tourists do not seem to mind. They never do. Than Le is always surprised at how short a distance she can paddle up the river without the tourists complaining. So long as she lets the oars occasionally brush the surface, they seem to be happy. They are talking to each other now, pointing out the scenery as it drifts slowly past. A large white bird glides gently past on outstretched wings. An old woman stands on the shore, gesturing to them. The tourists wave to her enthusiastically and the old woman waves back, a bright, toothless smile lighting her worn features.

Than Le has been paddling this stretch of the river for years now. She makes a reasonable living for herself during the tourist season, ferrying eager travellers from the restaurants to the bridge and back for a few thousand dong a trip. The money she makes supplements the family business. Her mother, like many of the women in Hoi An, is a dressmaker. She spends her days toiling over metres of fabric designing clothes for the western tourists who visit her store. Than Le always thinks it is quite comical that people would travel all the way to Hoi An just to spend their holidays being measured and pinned and fitted for dresses and suits that they could buy just as easily at home. Her father runs a small mini van for a hotel, driving rich Americans to see the major sites around town. Sometimes the tourists pay Than Le in Australian dollars, and these she hides away under her mattress. She is saving them for a trip she wants to take when she is older.

Than Le dreams of one day visiting Australia. She saw Australia on a map once. It was enormous; a great spreading eagle covering half the page. Her own country, by contrast, was tiny. A mere spot at the very top of the map, with only some small writing in the corner to show where the rest of her homeland disappeared onto another page. She would love to visit at Christmas time just to see for herself what all the fuss was about. She had read a story at school called "An Australian Bush Christmas" and ever since she had been fascinated by the notion of everyone sharing a religious festival that seemed to be chiefly concerned with playing sports, visiting friends and giving each other presents.

Than Le's attention returns to the couple in her boat. She listens to them talk. They have not yet discovered that she can speak English, and so she lets them chat uninterrupted. They think she is a boy, probably because her long, black hair is swept up underneath her floppy sunhat. It is much easier that way; when her hair is down it often catches in her fingers. The young woman is

asking the man if he thinks they should give her a tip when they get back to the shore. Than Le giggles quietly and thinks that it sounds like a good idea to her. She doesn't mind tourists like this couple. Quiet and polite, not like some of the loud, demanding holiday makers who think she should have to entertain them during their boat ride. She likes that this pair can sit in the boat without wriggling, so she does not have to work to balance the boat as well as paddling. Some tourists insist on lurching from one side of the tiny craft to the other so they can take photos of each other and of Than Le. She hates having her photo taken, but most never bother to ask. They just click away with their cameras and videos, taking photos and film of just about everything. Than Le wonders sometimes if they ever get to see the real Vietnam, or just blurred images through the lens of a camera as a reminder of their Vietnam holiday.

Than Le has one photo of herself at home that she keeps in a box by her bed. It was taken by an Australian tourist last year. The girl had been travelling alone, and Than Le had watched her spend some time sitting on a bench besides the river, trying to summon the courage to ask for a boat ride. Finally Than Le had taken her out, and the girl had chatted excitedly for the entire trip. She had quickly discovered that Than Le's English skills were good, and they had enjoyed a pleasant half an hour chatting about food and Australia and Than Le's school and family. The girl had asked Than Le if she minded having her photo taken, and had spent some time carefully organising the light and the background for the shot. At the end of the trip, the girl had carefully copied down Than Le's address into a small notepad and promised to send her the photos she had taken. Than Le had never expected the picture to arrive, and she had deliberately put it out of her mind. Then, weeks later, a small envelope had arrived with a note and a photo inside.

To Than Le,

A picture to remember our boat ride. I hope we meet again someday. I have written my address for you so if you ever have a chance to come for a holiday to Australia you can visit me.

*From your friend in Australia,
Annelise.*

The young couple are holding hands now and watching her as she paddles. She dips her paddle into the water again and points to her house. It is raised on stilts above the water, and for some reason all the tourists seem to find this intriguing. They often ask about how high the water rises up the stilts during a storm or flood. They seem to enjoy hearing about the big flood last year that carried so many people to their deaths. Than Le still shivers when she thinks about that day. She finds it strange that the tourists want to hear about a day when people died trying to save their belongings and their children and animals. But they seem to enjoy those bits the most. So sometimes Than Le makes the story sound just a little worse than it really was. She invents some extra details about people floating holding their possessions above their heads so they could save them. She tells them about young children performing heroic rescues against the rapidly rising waters. She knows when she has got the details of her stories just right because the tourists gasp and nod knowingly at each other.

Than Le begins the story about the rising waters of the flood for the fifth time this afternoon. She tells the young couple about watching the water creep up the stilts of her house, and seeing her books and clothes disappear into the swirling river muck. She tells them about her mother crying as her treasured sewing machine was swept away. She finishes her story with a nice detail about oranges bobbing on the surface of the water and her fishing them out so her family could have something to eat that night. She likes stories where she gets to

be the hero. The young couple look admiringly at her, as if they can suddenly see something more than just a young, dark eyed teenager in a floppy hat.

Than Le has a secret rule on her boat. If the tourists smile at her and her stories and they are polite and well mannered, she tells them about the bridge. If they grunt at her indifferently like some of them do, or if they are rude and ignore her while she is telling her stories, she doesn't tell them about the bridge until it is almost too late. The bridge sits low over the river, its ancient bulk casting a wide shadow over the water. All the kids who paddle the river play on the bridge. They tie their boats up to it, and climb up to explore the pylons. If there are no tourists around, they might sit near the bridge and fish. They all enjoy the game of paddling unsuspecting tourists towards the pylons, waiting until the very last second, and then pointing casually at the fast approaching stone underside and saying "bridge." It's a great laugh to watch the tourists shriek and flatten themselves against the floor of the boat, often making it rock precariously with the sudden movement.

They are almost at the bridge. Than Le points over the young woman's shoulder and motions to them to duck their heads. She deftly guides the boat under the low bridge, and safely out the other side. The couple sit upright once more, and smile at her in appreciation. The man takes some bananas from his bag and offers one to the woman. She takes one, then motions at Than Le. The man hesitates for a moment, as if wondering if he can afford such generosity. Then he shakes his head and holds the bunch out to Than Le. She reaches for a banana and peels it quickly, the paddle tucked for a moment under her armpit. It has been hours since she has eaten and she is hungry. She smiles a quick thank you to the man and munches happily. The couple smile at each other, pleased with themselves.

When they return to the shore, Than Le steadies the boat against the river wall as first the man and then the woman step gingerly out, her holiday beach bag clutched to her chest. They exchange another look and the man nods decisively at the woman. He reaches into his bag and holds out the rest of the bananas. Than Le takes them from him, pleased to have a snack to eat during the afternoon. The man smiles at his wife and Than Le hears them tell each other that the young boy will have something decent to eat for a change. She forces her smile to stay where it is, and waves to the departing tourists. As they look back, Than Le takes her hat from her head, and shakes her long dark hair out from under it. She runs her fingers through the knots, smoothing it as best she can without a brush. She giggles at the stunned look on their faces as they realise that she is, in fact, not a boy at all.

“Bye,” she calls out to them. “I’ll see you around sometime. Enjoy the rest of your holiday in Vietnam! Oh, and thanks for the bananas!”

A version of "River Girl" was first published in *Island*, a Tasmanian literary magazine.

ANNE VIZE is an Australian author who works mainly in educational writing, creating books for teenagers who struggle with literacy and their teachers. She is currently a frustrated eco travel writer (hampered by two small fries who don't travel well) who aims to travel the world in her own holiday times, reviewing wonderful places to stay sustainably. She is sure no one else harbours this ambition, so the market should be wide open. Anne's latest books are 'Into Reading Books 1 and 2' published by Phoenix education.

September's Christmas

M. R. Lang

It's a yellow school bus with a prow made from house decks in the front. There's a wooden hull wrapped around it and the windows are stained-glass. The stop sign on the side has a Jolly Roger biting its tongue painted in green. For the mission at hand, it has snow tires stolen from a used auto parts store.

The captain sits on the roof of the bus-ship, dangling her legs through an emergency exit. She wears a thick, black fur coat and a puffy, worn ski cap to keep her warm. Her long, brown hair tied in the back, below the hat, is starting to freeze at the ends. Welder's goggles keep the snow and bright glare out of her eyes. Down inside, her skellingtons man the ship and get ready for the job. The knives are sharpened, the guns are loaded, bones are bleached, and Alice in Chains is playing over the bus-ship's intercom system. As he passes the sign, Derek, the driver, motions to the others that it's almost time.

North Pole: 3 miles

Captain Ducksworth jumps down into the bus-ship to inspect her crew. The navigator, Shelly, has a crude drawing of the northern hemisphere drawn on her skull, and there's a small candy cane sticking out to mark the North Pole. There's also a rifle strapped to her back. The one they call Tool has a denim Sex Pistols jacket open, revealing his ribs, which have a machete and a handgun inside for easy gettin' to. Morris and Joplin clean their guns, sitting together in the back. Ron paints his vertebra, alternating red and green. The belts hanging off his shoulders and wrapped down around his ribs have been painted bright white, clashing against his off-white bones.

The captain opens her coat to show a rapier hanging from each side of her belt and a nine millimeter handgun sticking out of her waistband between them. She takes a moment to pose, a hand on her hip, and pictures bold text across her waist: "Captain September Ducksworth: Surrealist Pirate, Extraordinaire."

"It's almost time, crew. We'll perform a frontal assault on the compound the moment Derek pulls up to the stables. Hit anyone and anything that gets in your way. I want us to move fast before they can mount a counter attack. If they get a chance, they'll hit us hard. If anyone's too injured to continue, fall back to the ship and have Derek signal me."

The captain looks out the windshield and sees another sign.

"The fat man is mine..."

Reindeer Crossing Next 500 ft.



Derek slides the bus next to the reindeer stable and everyone else hustles out of the bus-ship. Tool pistol-whips Rudolph so he can't alert the Claus. Once they're sure the stable is locked up tight, the team makes for the compound. A hundred feet from Santa's compound, they separate and dive behind snow banks for cover. September peers behind the snow to survey the battlefield. A handful of elves are already packing the sleigh with brightly wrapped boxes, but only two bags are full... there's still time. September waits for the elves to go back inside for more boxes before she signals her skellingtons forward.

The team doesn't get more than fifteen feet before the snowmen sentries burst from the snow and pull out rifles from inside themselves.

"FALL BACK!" September yells.

They each fire off a few shots as they retreat to the snow banks. Ron's skull is grazed and two holes are punched through Tool's jacket.

“Shelly! Morris! Joplin! Suppressing fire!”

The three run to the top of their snow banks and fire at the snowmen while the other three charge with swords drawn. September plugs a snowman’s rifle with one sword and takes several swipes at it with the other. Ron slices one snowman in half and then tosses his sword into another’s head. Tool jumps straight for a snowman and drives the machete down the top of its head. The other three now focus on the remaining snowman and decimate it with bullets.

September waves the whole team to move forward. She’s sure Santa’s heard the gunfire.

As they approach the compound, doors in the snow burst open, throwing snow behind them. Clowns and jesters on springs fly into the air to reveal jack-in-the-box guards. Four of them take aim with shoulder-mounted cannons and fire wooden train grenades. The team runs through the explosions and fire back. The guards can only fire one shot every few seconds, and the grenades are easy enough to dodge. It’s not long before they’re dispatched.

September eyes Santa’s cottage a short way down a path away from the compound.

“Tool, Morris, and Shelly, inside. Make sure no one comes after us. Everyone else with me.”

September, Joplin, and Ron run down the path, keeping their eyes open for more sentries and guards, guns ready. Gunfire and screams are heard behind them. As they get closer to the cottage, Santa’s Mechanical Robotic Soldier Calibrated for Logical Assassination and Ultimate Sabotage jumps out from behind a metal Christmas tree and slings ninja stars shaped like the Star of Bethlehem. Ron and Joplin change course towards MRS CLAUS while September heads right for Santa’s front door. She twirls around and lets her back hit the wall, next to a window. She takes a glance at the others fighting

MRS CLAUS before spying inside the cottage. Santa is sitting at his desk, checking his list. She sidles towards the door and takes deep breaths.

Captain Ducksworth kicks in the door and fires towards where Santa was sitting, but he's already gone. Gun first, she inspects the cottage for fat men in red. As she starts to peak inside a bedroom, September hears boots hit the floor and she spins around.

"Ho, ho, ho! And what are you doing here, little girl?" Santa asks.

"I'm here to stop you, fat man!"

"Ho... but I only bring happiness to children around the world! Why would you want to stop me?"

September takes a few steps forward, making sure the gun is between the two of them.

"You only bring happiness to the children you want to! And then you break into their houses while they're sleeping. Who are you to decide who's naughty and nice!? Getting children to write you letters about all the toys they want, then toy makers and video game studios mark-up the prices and push the goods you tell them to! And there's that whole elf-slave thing. I'm on to you. Oh, I'm on to you so good..."

"Ho, ho... ho... You're a naughty, little girl, Ms. Ducksworth." Santa puts his hands on his belt and laughs, making his belly shake like an evil bowl of pudding.

"Santa's going to have to put an end to you..."

He whips off his belt and it snaps straight into a sword.

September tries to take a shot with her gun, but Santa is a fast old elf. She draws a sword with her other hand and blocks Santa's belt-sword. She takes aim with the gun, but with his free hand, Santa grabs it and pushes it to the side. He pushes her against the wall and smiles. She kicks him in the knee and he falls to

one side. With Santa wavering, September cuts his sword arm at the elbow and escapes his hold. She gets off five shots into his belly, but Santa just laughs. The bullets are pushed back out from his belly and hit the floor. September looks Santa in the eyes just as they start to turn as red as his suit. He takes a look at the cut on his arm as it heals itself, the suit mending itself with a loud hissing sound. Santa slowly turns his gaze back to September and continues to laugh. She runs into the hallway and shoots at Santa's face, but his beard bursts up to cover his face and the bullets just bounce off. In the hall, September realizes she's gotten herself cornered. She's only one idea left.

Santa calmly walks over to his desk and opens a drawer. From inside, he pulls out an old ordinance pistol from the 19th century. It's been customized with a Christmas tree shaped sight and red and white striping.

"Santa got this little baby from the Easter Bunny last year. Ho, ho, ho... I've been waiting for a chance to try it out."

As Santa takes aim, September ducks low and start running. She takes a few blind shots at Santa's head, causing his beard to cover his face. With Santa effectively blind, September pounces on his chest, stabbing him where his heart should be. She kneels on his protruding stomach, no longer shaking, and pushes the sword in deeper.

"No!" Santa screams. "My heart has been pierced! My cold, dark heart... Ho, ho... oh..."

Santa coughs and starts to falls backwards. September pushes off and lands on her feet a few feet in front of where Santa now lays.

"You've been a very naughty... Oh, God..."

Santa's juices spill onto the floor and start to bubble. His eyes slowly turn back from red to blue and his beard begins to melt. September stands above Santa, victorious. Outside, MRS CLAUS explodes.

The team walks back to the stables followed by a horde of newly freed elves. They release the reindeer into the custody of the elves and turn Rudolph over to some elf chefs. Derek opens the door and lets the other skellingtons board. As September gets on the first step, a taller elf named Shermey walks up to her and tells her that he'll take charge of the compound and plans to turn it into a dental school. She smiles and walks onto the bus-ship.

As she turns the heater to high, she looks at her crew and asks, "Who's for coffee?"

M. R. LANG writes from his aboveground cavern, assisted by his manservant, Jackandular McGaston. With his supercomputer that in no way at all resembles a flying mammal of any kind or makes horrible, shrill cries when alerted to local crime, he writes short fiction and plays solitaire. No one knows where the giant penny comes from.