



**jersey devil
press**

**issue four
january 2010**

Jersey Devil Press

January 2010, Issue 4

ISSN 2152-2162

Editor: Eirik Gumeny

Web Editor: Monica Rodriguez

All stories and other contributions are copyrighted to their respective authors
unless otherwise noted.

www.jerseydevilpress.com

Table of Contents:

Editor's Note	page 3
Dead Sharp Tail, Cate Gardner	page 5
Why the Walls Haven't Been Painted Yet, Jason Joyce	page 13
The Hair, P. Matthew Kimmel	page 24
Three Dates in Orlando, Daniel McDermott	page 35
Navels, Ansley Moon	page 41
Tête-à-Tête, Christina Murphy	page 43

Editor's Note: Holy Crap, It's 2010

Tonight is the winter of our discontent

Made glorious summer by a sparkly, shiny ball in New York,

And all the clouds that loured upon our past year

In plastic cups of liquor, vast as an ocean, buried.

Ah, New Year's Eve. The one night of the year committed exclusively to reflection, forecasting, rampant drinking, and making excuses. You look back at what you finally did right or at what you screwed up. You take it in, you try to decipher some meaning, and then you prepare to do it all, good and bad, all over again next year. Of course, with more sex and money this time.

Last year my resolutions including stealing a helicopter, conquering Finland, taking better care of myself, finally figuring out a way to launch a Pop-tart out of a toaster, watching TV, getting a promotion, fighting a robot to the death in a knife fight, publishing a collection of short stories, drinking beer, trying to appreciate wine, building a time machine and altering history in an insignificant manner, starring in a rock opera about WWI, cutting back on my caffeine intake, punching a pterodactyl, and carving my name into the moon with a laser.

I'm happy to report I accomplished almost a third of those. Sadly, though, the robot didn't actually die, I didn't actually alter history when I went back in time, and I published a novel instead of a short story collection. But that's what the new year is for: making grandiose claims of taking drastic actions to maybe do something different again, possibly, and then not even attempting to follow

through and coming up with basically the same list of things you should or won't do the following year.

I'm feeling pretty good about that, actually.

You know what else I'm feeling pretty good about? This issue. The six stories we have by Cate Gardner, Jason Joyce, P. Matthew Kimmel, Daniel McDermott, Ansley Moon, and Christina Murphy are probably my favorite blend of funny, fucked-up, and mermaids we've had so far. Not a bad way to start the new year.

And if you can't get to it before the clock strikes midnight, and Dick Clark cheats death once again, like a sleepless, ageless automaton hell-bent on entertaining his way into your living room, and you find yourself collapsing onto your friend's couch or the bar floor in a heap of celebratory immoderation, well, that's OK, too. Just read the issue when you wake up. It's a guaranteed cure for almost all hangovers. Promise.

-- Eirik Gumeny

Dead Sharp Tail

Cate Gardner

Charlie McKendrick scribbled a rule down in Sid's notebook: *No. 142: Never believe anything a stranger tells you in a pub, especially if he is wearing an eye patch.* If the pirate who called himself Captain Crow had made his fortune capturing mermaids, Charlie would eat Sid's fake parrot for supper.

Charlie climbed aboard the rotting timbers of *The Hunted Tail*. He suspected Crow had stolen the vessel from a wrecker's yard, the evidence for the prosecution provided by the teeth marks of a crushing machine embedded in its side and a "Condemned" sticker flapping from its flagpole. Charlie wanted to return to the Wayward Inn and plant his fist between Captain Crow's eyes. Only Sid's enthusiasm stopped him.

"It could do with a lick of paint," Sid said. "And I'd like to rename her. Any suggestions, old chum?"

"Middleton's Folly."

Sid brushed his fringe out of his eyes, saying, "This time we make our fortune, Charlie."

"Perhaps we do, Sid."

As he unrolled the map Captain Crow had given to Sid, Charlie expected to find a price sticker on the reverse. The paper was crisp white and the ink smudged. He suspected the Captain had drawn it a minute before he approached them.

The world swayed, knocking Charlie from one side of the tiny cabin to the other. They had put down anchor off the coast of some mean looking cliffs.

According to the illustration on the map, in these waters they would find a mermaid.

Some hope.

Charlie sighed. He and Sid were lousy pirates; they didn't even have the trademark bottle of rum.

Charlie looked out of the porthole window. Ink black rocks jutted out of the sea like teeth, in front of dark caves that resembled eyes, and gold grass that cascaded down the side of the cliffs. As the boat lurched to the right, his head hit the rough wall and inspiration struck:

The island was the mermaid, and she was butt ugly.

Sid was on deck tying knots in the fishing net to repair the larger holes, whistling with excitement because he'd discovered long blonde hairs and fingernails embedded in the rope.

As Charlie stumbled out into the sunlight, Sid's reaction to his revelation was, "Then where's her tail?"

Sid had a point, which was unusual. Determined to find a fishtail curve of rocks, Charlie clung to the side of the boat, peering across the glittering sea. Spray washed his face.

"Perhaps if we steer the boat around the island, we'll find it," he said.

"Charlie, sometimes you have to believe in the impossible and stop looking for a rational explanation. Now, do you know how to work a harpoon?"

The waves objected to Sid and Charlie's island-bound route, knocking them from one side of the boat to the other. Feeling like a human pinball, Charlie grasped at the flagpole, his feet sliding against the wet boards. The sea urged them back. Foolhardy, they continued forward.

Rising above the sound of the crashing waves and the creaking of their fragile vessel a lullaby drifted close by, circling the boat. Sid jabbed his elbow in Charlie's side, his wide-eyed expression and open mouth screaming *I told you so*.

Sid bundled the net up in his arms and threw it over the side. Sliding to his left, then to his right, he shouted, "It might be a good time to say I can't swim."

Charlie let go of the flagpole. He hadn't been in the water since the 1984 Swimathon at Warren High, and even then, he'd finished last.

In the cabin, he found the lifejackets ripped and spattered with blood.

"Did Captain Crow tell you what happened to his crew?" Charlie asked, swallowing spray.

"Something about a vendetta. I think that's why he was selling both his boat and his luck. Two for the price of one, he said. He told me that's why he named the boat *The Hunted Tail*, though as far as I could tell he didn't have one."

Sid stole a lifejacket from Charlie's fingers, placed it over his head and affixed it to his waist. He didn't seem to note that it was useless.

The mermaid's song drew closer. They stepped out onto the deck. Something was tugging at the net.

Both men rushed to haul it back up onto the boat, their puny muscles straining with the weight of their catch. It felt full to the brim with fish. It wasn't. With their backs flat to the deck and their boots pressed against the side of the boat for leverage, they offered it all their strength and gave a coordinated pull. An empty net slapped down on top of them.

Sid broke first. Charlie swallowed a mouthful of net and hiccupped seawater. They lay there, unable to catch their breath, laughing until pain tore through their sides. Their snorts were so loud they didn't notice the closeness of the mermaid's song.

Something heavy fell beside Charlie. It killed his humour, and he realised the net wasn't empty because they hadn't caught anything; it was empty because whatever they had captured had slithered out.

Charlie struggled against the weight of the net. A mermaid pressed her tail down on it. She ceased her song. With her head tipped to the left, she considered them. Reaching out, she scratched her finger down Charlie's jawbone and released a strange high-pitched noise that sounded almost like, "Hello." Her laugh required no translation. It was cruel and derisive and set Sid wailing.

The mermaid dug her fingernails into Charlie's scalp, grabbing a fistful of hair before dragging him towards the edge of the boat. Sid grabbed hold of his ankles, but proved no match for the mermaid's strength. As she pulled Charlie overboard, his final glimpse was of Sid holding his empty shoes. Seawater soaked his socks.

The sea was colder than he had expected. Keeping a tight grip on his scalp, the mermaid dragged him further and further away from Sid and the boat. His clothes ballooned. The roar of the sea drowned out her song, and for that, he was thankful.

In the journey towards the island, for that had to be her destination, his head dipped under the water several times. He almost wished to drown. His only hope, he figured, was that once they were on dry land and he caught his breath, he'd gain the upper hand.

He was wrong.

The mermaid didn't need to pause or regroup. Sand scratched against his left cheek and grit left him blind in one eye. Ahead of them, and getting ever closer with the swish of her tail, the rocks looked more a monster than they did a girl. Its angry forehead cut off the sunlight leaving Charlie and his captor in

shadow. Water poured from its nostrils to form a pool at the base of the cliffs. Using thick gold twine, the mermaid handcuffed Charlie to the rocks.

With his left eye open wide, afraid to blink and further scratch the retina, Charlie looked out towards the distant ocean and prayed for a steamer to pull up anchor.

The mermaid's high-pitched orders scratched, and worse, behind him, Charlie heard a swell of screams and singing. As he turned to look to his left, in the direction of the cacophony, she slapped him and her garbled tongue seemed to say, "*Best not.*"

The sight of her slithering back along the beach, towards the water, renewed his chill. He prayed Sid had fired up the engine and headed home. Despite her supposed warning, he turned his head as far as it would go and, pulling at his restraints, he managed a few steps. What he saw broke his heart and sent him hurtling back against the wall. His breath tore against his throat. *Their* song intensified.

There were too many of them. If he couldn't fight one girl, how was he to escape a tank of deranged mermen? He screamed until his throat ached, and then he passed out.

Charlie awoke to Sid's screams. The mermaid was tying his friend to the cliff and Sid was too busy emptying his lungs to fight. The mermen had ceased their vicious song, but *she* continued hers. Charlie doubted she had ever beguiled a sailor with her caterwaul.

Once the mermaid had secured Sid, she called into the cave. A similar cry echoed in reply.

Deep within the cavern, water sloshed and shrill voices slithered closer and closer. Charlie pressed his back to the cliff wall. He remembered the things he'd seen swimming in the tank. Most of all, he recalled the blood red water.

"Please, if you have any honour untie us, let us go."

Her hiss an unmistakable "*Shut up.*"

Shielding their eyes against the harsh sun, five mermaids crawled out of the cave. With their golden hair, rosebud lips and eyes bluer than the clearest ocean, they should have beguiled him. If he gained nothing else from this trip, death aside, he at least now understood why men paid fortunes to lock mermaids beneath the Perspex ceilings of their swimming pools.

A mermaid pressed her chest to his. Skin scaly, breath smelling of tuna. He squirmed beneath her caress.

The original mermaid pulled the newcomer away from Charlie, dragging her by the hair and throwing her back into the pool formed from the island's dripping nostrils. The mermaids offered a collective hiss as they encircled the girl. They grabbed her wrists and tied them together with the same gold twine that bound Charlie's. Her shriek broke through Sid's stupor and renewed his screech.

The mermaids turned their attention to Sid. They ripped him from the rock. Water splashed with the weight of Sid's body falling face first into the pool. Clouds scuttled across the sky leaving the beach and the cliff even deeper in shadow. A hand grabbed hold of Charlie's restraints. His turn.

Instead of allowing them to walk to their fate, the mermaids grabbed their hair and pulled them along. Rocks tore into his shin and knees, staining the water red.

Ahead of them, the mermen were waking up. The scent of Sid and Charlie's blood caused the mermen to slam against the glass wall dividing them.

Decaying fists beat against the tank. These were true beasts. Their scales dulled, their hair sparse, their skin peeled back to reveal bone, and several of them were missing arms and noses. In quick succession their teeth snapped.

The traitor mermaid shouted something that sounded like, "They're hungry."

Sid's mumble translated as, "We're sleeping with the fishes."

Showing no pity, their captors slid the bound mermaid into the tank first. A tail sliced her throat open, and a cloud of blood obscured Charlie's view. The smack-tear-lick sounds that pushed through the feeding tube caused Charlie to shudder.

"Cannibals," Sid shouted.

Fingers prodded into Charlie's back, pushing him in the direction of the tube. A merman poked his arm through the pipe eager for first taste. All about him, the mermaids' song played high-pitched and nervous.

"Would it help," cried Charlie to the mermaids, "if I could tell you where to find Captain Crow?"

The lead mermaid nodded. Her tail slapped out, knocking him away from the tube and her screech cried, "Show us and we won't eat you."

"Do you have a plan?" Sid asked, as they were marched out of the cave.

"Not becoming a fish supper."

The Wayward Inn stood perched on the edge of an unstable jetty. Charlie licked his lips and drew in the scent of rum. No man had ever needed a drink more.

He and Sid found Captain Crow seated beside a roaring fire regaling drunks with the story of how he'd sold his boat to two nitwits. The idea of mermaids and leaking boats caused several listeners to spray their beer across

the inn. Charlie offered them a theatrical cough. Noting their entrance, Captain Crow adjusted his eye patch, moving it from his left to his right eye.

Charlie sat down next to the Captain and wrapped his arm around the man's shoulders. The deeds to the boat and the map poked out of his jacket pocket.

"We found them, sir. Let us buy you a bottle of rum because we have, this day, made our fortune."

The Captain flinched and drew Charlie aside. A tide of drunks swayed with them.

"I didn't expect you back," Crow paused, "so soon."

Charlie offered the man a hearty slap on the back.

"We have a boat full of dead fish-women and a contract to sell them to several posh eateries in London."

"Is that the contract poking out of your pocket?" Captain Crow's fingers pinched the air.

"Among other things," Charlie said.

Captain Crow grabbed the papers and ran. Charlie sat down at the bar.

"A bottle of your finest rum, bartender."

"Aren't you going to chase after the thieving fellow?" the bartender asked.

A screech an octave too low to belong to a mermaid echoed across the harbour.

"I don't think so, no."

CATE GARDNER's stories have appeared, or are due to appear, in *Fantasy Magazine*, *Necrotic Tissue*, *Postscripts* and *Space & Time*.

Why the Walls Haven't Been Painted Yet

Jason Joyce

Through the kitchen window, out past the dog run, is a graveyard. On some mornings I see a person or two park their compact car along the black wrought iron fence and slide through the heavy gate so that they can jog the dirt paths. I wonder why they choose to run here, through winding lanes lined with tombstones, where my mother was buried last month. Like the weather, my father has been soggy and grey since, and I see him scuffling along the dirt paths early every morning in his slippers to my mother's headstone, a modest piece of marble chiseled with hummingbirds and chrysanthemums.

After my mother's death, my father slipped into a deep state of depression and had two minor, rapid strokes that were unrelated to the depression, but that were the catalyst for me to sell my loft, ask for a transfer at my advertising firm, and move Northeast to Portland and my childhood home.

I grew apart from my family soon after September 11th. The buildings were falling right outside my office and I called home to tell my parents that I was safe. Neither of them called back during the next few days, and in the months and years since then, they've acted as if it was only a movie reel they watched, a work of fiction. This caused me to weigh the burden of taking the time to bother anyone at home each time something important happened in my life. It felt wrong to me, but I kept telling myself that since I'd left home for school at Syracuse, things had changed. Or maybe they hadn't, but helping out my father gave me a chance to know for sure.

Growing up, my parents would always insist I consume food and drink in the kitchen, even if I was drinking a cup of tea, yet they would rarely tidy up the house, and a fine layer of dust accumulated on all the wood surfaces too high to be reached by vacuum bristles. My mother never watered her plants either. They would sit in corners, bargaining with late bloomed leaves or last minute white tea cup flowers, but to no avail. The wilted brown stems drooped to the floor, ground into the rust colored carpet by careless feet, to be vacuumed on Sundays. When I arrived back home, the exterior of the house had followed suit, and my father's habitual smoking had begun to stain the interior walls in yellow patterns.

I settled quickly, the piercing, comfortable sting of the nine to five, the apathetic, faked weeknights with my father, where we rarely spoke, watching West Coast weather stations, *Hatari!*, or any other number of programs that the satellite beamed down to us.

After a late night watching a Clark Gable movie, my longtime girlfriend, Abigail, and I walked up the tan carpeted steps from the basement. I had no novel care for old movies, but she loved anything in black and white, except Ansel Adams photographs, and I could feign interest for two hours at a time. That and she liked to tell me that I looked like a modern age Gable, sans the mustache, and I couldn't argue with such logic. We had become accustomed to the stale stench of nicotine, immune to it creeping into our clothes and hair, wrapping tightly around knit threads, staining our white's a subtle yellow, coloring our darks with pale hints of ash. I was even becoming acquainted with the black flecks speckling the shower floor, revealing that my father had taken to smoking in the shower. Abigail had yet to meet him, despite the fact she had been spending

most nights with me, and was already talking about us finding a place when my father was well enough to live on his own or when his lack of closure drove him to medical care. She had been positive about the matter, saying there's no place she'd rather be than visiting her thirty-three year old boyfriend at his smoke and ash stained parent's house, and I had plans to marry her once we saw this out.

The yellowed bulb in the fridge's ice dispenser cast the only light at the top of the steps, bathing the kitchen and dining room in murky light, casting water shapes and ripples when it bounced off the colored crystal in the china cabinets. Abigail, with her spotlight hair, jingly laugh, and the red carpet wattage that was her smile, looked like a Broadway actress in her first big scene as she ascended the steps.

Soon after I had moved in, my father sat on the front porch cleaning his guns, drinking cool lemon tea, and had asked me to come sit with him as I headed for my car. We rarely interacted without some form of media staining the background, and that day there had been little noise, besides the occasional clack of metal or the subtle wheeze or whistle originating deep in my father's sinuses.

"Son," he said, "tomorrow is the most important thing in life. Comes into us at midnight very clean. It's perfect when it arrives and it puts itself in our hands. It hopes we've learned something from yesterday."

And that's how he left it, his attempt at convincing himself and I to find closure, using a John Wayne quote printed on the bottom of one of my mother's collectable ashtrays.

My mother caught me after my first inhale, the one time I had smoked, and ripped the tangy menthol from my lips and broke it in half. I was nine years old and wearing one of her floral print dresses and brown wedge heels. Playing in

her closet, I had found a cigarette and lighter in one of her sweater pockets and knew my outfit would not be complete without a lit Capri and one of her oh so valuable collector's ashtrays in the other hand. No one had been kind enough to take her Capri Lites away from her.

On the porch, again tonight, he stood, this time colored by a green porch light, misplaced Christmas cheer, hands grasping the metal railing and his Wranglers taut at the seams as he leaned over, his back to us, talking to someone in a wheelchair beside him. Seeing that it was too late to steer Abigail out the back door, I swung the heavy oak door open wider and pushed the glass door open. On cue, my father turned toward us, showing his teeth.

"Who's this ray of sunshine?" he asked.

"I'm Abigail, it's nice to meet you Mr. Reddick." She stuck out her hand and my father took it gingerly and moved it up and down. My father hadn't been looking past us at something that wasn't quite there, his voice was brighter, still sandpaper-like, but the blue nylon sling he'd taken to wearing lately for no necessary reason, was gone.

"It's truly nice to meet you little lady, Ryland has told us so much about you."

There was some skirting of the fact on his part that there had been no mention of any of the women in my life to him in the past five years.

"But you'll have to excuse Ryland's mother, she is feeling a bit under the weather tonight. Usually she's the spryest old hen I've seen, but my gal has taken the night off," he said chortling. He patted his hand on the slumped over form in the wheelchair. The light was dim and the blanket was positioned over the form in such a way that I couldn't make who was sitting in the chair.

“Since it’s late and I would like more time to talk, especially on account that you seem to make my boy so happy, why don’t you join Ryland’s mother and me for dinner tomorrow night?”

“That sounds great. We would love to,” Abigail said. I could see a shadow moving across her bright features, realizing all that I had told her about my family wasn’t what she was seeing.

“Well let’s plan on seeing you at five tomorrow. You kids have fun tonight. I’m going to get my beauty to bed,” my father said and lit his last call cigarette.

I grabbed Abigail by the arm and guided her past my father and the person in the wheelchair and towards the car. Halfway across the lawn, she pulled away from me and hit me in the chest.

“What kind of fucked up joke are you playing on me Ryland? You tell me your mother has just died and that your father isn’t able to cope and that when the time is right I can meet him. Well, your mother looks pretty goddamn alive to me, and your father isn’t at all the way you made him out to be. Tell me right now that this is a joke, or I swear to God...” She hit me again across the chest to solidify her point.

“It was Abby, I’m sorry. Slow down a second. It’s just that I thought I could joke with you and then I got too deep into it and didn’t know how to tell you. Please, I’m sorry.”

As I said this, I watched over Abigail’s shoulder as my father wrestled with the wheelchair, trying to get it over the front door’s lip and onto the tile entryway. The form, who I assumed was female, jostled back and forth in the chair, giving away my father’s inexperience in maneuvering the chair, and showing his apparent obliviousness to the delicacy of the situation.

“If your father wasn’t such a sweet man, I don’t think I’d come to dinner tomorrow, but I’m not going to disappoint him, so consider this your warning that tomorrow night you impress me and redeem yourself, because right now I have serious doubts about you.”

Abigail snaked a lanyard out of her purse and clutching her keys tight, walked to her blue Mazda without a goodbye or a kiss.

Inside, I bolted the door and wondered what other precautionary measures I should take to cover my father and the hostage he’d taken into the house. I stepped from the tile entryway and sunk ever so slightly into the dated carpet. My father was sitting in his chair watching a fly fishing program.

“Dad, where did this woman come from?” I asked.

“You mean where was your mother born? She’s told you before that she was born in Boston and then moved to Wales when she was five because her father, your great grandfather, was in the Navy.”

Forfeiting the game, realizing nothing less than a polygraph would get me answers, I walked into the dining room. On the serving table lay a yawning manila folder, a teal hospital identification bracelet, and two pill bottles on their sides. I picked up the bracelet and read the typewriter font to find that the woman sleeping in the bedroom was Beatrice Tipman and she was a resident of the Crestview Nursing Home and Rehabilitation Center. The pills were valium and prescribed to be taken three at a time, twice a day, and reason for her compliant and comatose state. I glanced up from the copper bottle and looked out the kitchen window. Under the carport sat my father’s tan Silverado with his rusted blue horse trailer on hitch. Pieces began to fit together. The problem this created was not that my manic father had kidnapped a woman, it was that when or if someone noticed this woman was gone, she probably wouldn’t be a high

priority case, as she had been parked at the nursing home by her family three years ago, so said her file.

I spent the next day with Beatrice, or Bea as my father fancied. He had left to work, supervising the assembly and tearing down of sky top wooden water towers in the city as he had done for the past twenty-nine years, and when I came upstairs, I found that Bea was sitting alone at the table. Imagining my father thought she would be fine on her own, as my mother had for so many years, he must not have had a second thought before leaving. I found later that she probably would have been fine on her own as I had pushed her near the living room window and there she stayed most of the day, staring at the hummingbirds when they came to eat from the flowers. I moved her once when she began to rock back and forth in her chair, moaning under her breath. I decided she was having a stroke or heart attack, or an embolism, or whatever it was that plagued seniors these days, and needed me to call for help, but before I finished dialing I saw that she was sitting directly in the sun and was simply uncomfortable. I moved her closer towards the wall where the carpet was shaded by the curtains and let her be for the rest of the day.

“It’s just so interesting that you look nothing like your mother. I don’t want to be rude, but if I hadn’t met her I wouldn’t know that she is black,” Abigail said.

My neon girl was still very much unaware of the kidnapped woman about to eat dinner with us, but was in a much peppier mood, acting as if last night hadn’t upset her. She and I stood in the kitchen, placing buttery white rolls into a wicker basket. My father and Bea sat at the table ready to dine on prime rib and mashed potatoes. He wore his best pear colored, pearl snap shirt and was clean shaven, which I noticed was the first time a razor touched his face since I

moved in. For now, I decided, it was best to play along and keep Abigail believing that the sedated black woman in the dining room was my mother. Lying came easy for now, and I would make sure to keep Abigail away from the house long enough to fix this situation.

An undertone of patented nursing home smell peppered the seasoned potatoes as I sat down beside Bea. She hunched in her wheelchair, staring intensely at the brown lines running around her plate as if a miniature horse derby was taking place between them. Her hands would tremor in her lap every few minutes, the one lasting will in her body the sedatives had yet to conquer.

"I'm glad you could join us tonight little lady," my father said. His Camel dangled from his lips, flecking ash into his green beans. "Ryland's mother and I like it when our boy is happy, and you seem to make him happy."

My father was acting as he did when I brought my college sweetheart over for dinner after our first year away. As far as I remembered, he was saying the exact same words as before, creating the effect of watching a movie off its reel, replaying one scene over as the corners of the film burned towards the center, the picture discoloring to a hazy melted plastic bottle yellow and brown.

He continued on as we ate, like a starving actor trying to prove he had memorized his scene. He slowed his pace when he was unsure of the next words, and sped up when he felt comfortable. Abigail played along unassumingly, her eyes flashing at stories from my childhood, dabbing her parted lips with the cloth napkin after each bite.

"You know for the longest time his mother and I thought Ryland was experimenting with that friend of his, what was his name... Jeff." My father laughed, spitting small chunks of prime rib onto his chin, and grabbed Bea's hand.

"Remember that, sweetie?"

Bea muttered something about the cats getting in the garbage again and that's when I knew the current dose of her pills was wearing off.

Bea's shoulders twitched under her cream sweater, her feet banged the metal foot stirrups of the wheelchair, her eyes focused behind double thick glasses. Still intent on talking to Abigail, my father didn't notice the frequent subtle movements Bea kept making.

Sitting next to her I was able to pick up on the words spilling from her mouth more frequently. My father banged the table then, laughing, coughing, stirring the ice in the water glasses, covering Bea's voice.

"Who's ready for pie?" he asked, smiling at Abigail. "Ryland's mother makes the best blueberry pie in the state of Maine. That's the reason I married her," he said as an aside to Abigail.

"Dad, we don't have any blueberry pie, you know that."

My father's face fell as he realized that I was not lying to him. Abigail looked at me, perplexed, registering that my father may not just be an overenthusiastic senior. He excused himself from the table and went into the bathroom.

"Ryland, what's going on? What's wrong with your dad? Did your mom just ask me why the walls haven't been painted yet?"

"They are just tired, babe. I think we should probably go."

"Are you sure that's it?"

"Yeah, that's all it is. My dad will clean up the plates. I'll take you out for a drink if you grab our coats."

My father returned from the bathroom as we were sliding our coats on. His face looked sunken and haggard, he slouched as he walked. It was as

though a professional make-up crew had been camped in the adjacent room, waiting earnestly to prep my father for this new scene. He was broken again.

Still not noticing Bea's babbling, which had steadily increased in volume over the past few minutes, he steered her away from the table and into the living room where he parked her in front of the hardwood television set and covered her legs with an afghan.

"Well you kids have fun and don't be too late," he mumbled when he walked back to us where we stood at the door. "I think your mother and I will have some coffee and go to bed early. We are going to the botanic gardens in the park tomorrow so I don't want to stay up late," he said, half looking at us, half looking at a smoke stain on the wall that resembled a small bird.

"Thanks for the lovely dinner, Mr. Reddick," said Abigail, as I pulled her towards the door.

I found a new place to live that next week. I convinced Abigail that I was only living with my parents because my apartment wasn't ready yet and I had wanted it to be a surprise for us. She bit on the lie hard and wasn't concerned about my family any longer. Now that we had a place together I could do no wrong. My father showed no sign of knowledge of my cracking his illusion he had worked so hard to fabricate, and was back to acting like his old self, before my mother had died. I only saw him twice more that month after the dinner party, but he seemed to be preoccupied with making Bea comfortable at all times. The man is sick, but I can't bear to send him to a special rest home. I cope my own way, he is fine on his own.

My father makes it routine to call my phone each evening at seven, but I don't answer anymore. His messages let me know that he is fine and that he and my mother hope I will bring my friend over for dinner again soon. On the nights

Abigail works the late shift, I light a Camel and set it in the ashtray under the lamp on my end table and let it disappear down to the filter. The spark takes its time to burn out, like my father, smoldering nicotine, flecks of black ash on a bathroom floor. I guess some things change, or maybe they don't.

JASON JOYCE just graduated from the University of Wyoming with a bachelors in Business Administration and a minor in Creative Writing. He is pursuing a career in event promotion and entertainment management. He plays bass for the Cheyenne, WY based band "Save My Hero." Jason is currently working on his first full-length collection of poems. You can find out more about his writing on his blog at jasonrjoyce.blogspot.com.

The Hair

P. Matthew Kimmel

Tim was 25, and, other than being gloriously bald, he didn't really care much for his appearance. In spite of this, he was the image of Mr. Clean. He was 6' 5" and all bulging, toned muscle. The rest of him was as hairless as his head. This was not due to any effort on his part, though. He was stunning, in a word, and probably even more so because of his lack of attention to his appearance. Tim looked exactly the opposite of who he was.

Tim worked at a dry cleaner. He intended to do more with his life, but hadn't figured out what. A job cleaning clothes happened to be available when he graduated from college and it paid his bills. So he took the job. Besides, looking like Mr. Clean helped with business. Or so his boss said.

Tim mainly worked the register, so he spent most of his shift people watching. The store had a big glass window with faded writing at the top, and it happened to be in the middle of a busy shopping center. People watching tended to be very good.

There are three kinds of bald men. The first kind are the real bald men. These are the men that have been going bald and have decided to, rather than try to hide this fact, embrace it. They sometimes shave off the areas that are mostly bald. Sometimes they shave off the areas that might become bald. And sometimes they shave it all off. But regardless, they don't buy wigs, use comb-overs, or wear hats to cover it up all the time. They don't hide their bald heads. To be frank, they're BALD, and proud of it. They accept who they are wholeheartedly, and though bald, are respected.

On this particular day, though, not many people had walked by. So Tim was almost completely lost in his thoughts as the hair rolled by. At first Tim thought it was odd that a pile of leaves would look so stringy, but he soon realized it was hair. The color of the hair was indistinct. It almost looked as if it was a chameleon still deciding what color would be best to hide in. It was tightly packed and rolling along at a good clip. Tim couldn't understand why it rolled past because there was hardly any wind.

Then Tim remembered that there was a barbershop in the complex. That's where it must have come from. Of course, the barbershop was in the direction the hair was rolling to, rather than away from. And there was no wind to blow it that way anyway. But Tim didn't like to argue with his own perceptions, so he left it at that. The hair rolled by, and Tim continued to stare into space.

He would have gone back into his semiconscious state, had the hair not rolled back into his view. This took place a few seconds after it rolled out of view. Tim figured that the wind had changed. But then the hair stopped in front of the window.

This wouldn't have been so confusing if the wind had ceased. The hair would have rolled along a little bit more, and then come to a gradual stop as its momentum disappeared. But this hair stopped immediately, right in the middle of the window. As if it had been moving itself and decided to stop, instead of just being blown through.

Tim decided to ignore the hair, and simply looked above it. It was far too strange and, besides, it looked rather disgusting on a second viewing. It was gunky and unhealthy. And it was in fact at least six different colors. Someone had obviously dyed it, decided they didn't like the color, and changed it. Probably within minutes of the first dyeing.

The hair probably sat there for five minutes. Again, Tim was trying not to pay it a great deal of attention. But then it stood up.

Ordinarily, hair cannot stand without extreme mousse, at least in Tim's less than adequate experience, but this particular pile of hair stood. Or at least went from being a pile to a vertical column of hair. And it seemed to be looking at him.

Hair, of course, doesn't have eyes with which to see, but it doesn't usually stand up on its own, either. Therefore, the fact that it was pressed up against the glass and facing Tim quite directly would be best classified as staring.

Tim at this point was a tad bit startled, but unlike most people who tried to rationalize the absurd, he tended to take life at face value. Therefore when the hair stood, he accepted it as fact, and not a trick of light or his mind. Tim didn't particularly like the thought of hair standing up of its own accord, though. So, again, he did his best to ignore it.

The hair, however, seemed to want get his attention. It started to hop. The entire mass of it would collapse in on itself and then jump up. Collectively. Not a single strand of hair would remain on the ground. It would all leap right into Tim's view. And when he would try to shift his attention to the right or the left the hair would leap in that direction. The hair wasn't going to be ignored. And it definitely wasn't going to be ignored by Tim.

At this point Tim had a decision to make: continue to sit there and ignore the hair unsuccessfully, or do something about the hair.

Though the second option was slightly more disturbing, Tim decided it was the best option to take. He was there to mind the store, and an agitated wig would probably not help business.

Having made this decision, Tim had another decision to make, this time whether to tell the other people working at that time about the hair. The other people in the store being Steve and Sandy.

Now Steve might get a kick out of the hair. However, since Steve was usually at least half-stoned, he'd probably believe the hair was just the result of some really good shit, and just sit and stare at the hair. Sandy, on the other hand, would probably believe that the hair should be dealt with, but only after flipping out so completely that the paramedics, the police, and the fire department would all have to be called in. So Tim decided not to alert his coworkers and to handle it on his own, if he could.

Tim then realized he had no idea exactly what to do with the hair. He pondered for a bit, reconsidered getting Sandy to help, and then remembered it was time for him to sweep the store. Though this last thought wasn't hair related, it did key upon a possible solution: sweep the damn thing away. At the least he could shove it in front of some other store, making it somebody else's problem or hallucination, depending on what they chose to believe. And, at most, the disturbing experience of being swept away might convince the hair to find a better place to window shop. Or whatever the hell it was doing. So Tim got the broom.

Tim approached the door and the hair became much more agitated. It started jumping up and down very intensely. This gave Tim pause, but he continued through the door to the sidewalk. At this point the hair became still. Tim then tried to shove off the hair with the broom. Not forcefully, but with the obvious hint that the hair should move. However, instead of being pushed off, the hair began to crawl up the broom.

Deer often get run over because the headlights approaching them cause them to freeze. Unfortunately, Tim had exactly the same reaction to the hair

slowly inching forward up the broom onto his arm. The hair, which was moving much like an inchworm, with a V-like movement, reached his arm and began to crawl up.

It felt like hair, but hair that had been put under a dryer for the last century, and, in places, obviously had gel, as well. This gave the hair the distinct feeling of being a bird's nest using Vaseline as a connective material. This spurred Tim into action. He started shaking his arm vigorously, trying to dislodge the hair. Unfortunately, like the deer, Tim reacted too late. Once upon his arm the hair wouldn't let go, no matter how hard he shook his arm. Then the hair reached his shoulder. Tim started to rub against the glass hoping to dislodge it that way. This, too, didn't work. Then it reached his head.

At first, the hair just sat there on top of Tim's head like a hat. But then it started to bore in. It felt to Tim like a million hot needles were entering his skull, which in a way they were. This intense pain managed to give Tim the strength necessary to grab the pile of hair and fling it away from him.

The hair landed fifteen feet away from Tim in a heap. At first it appeared to be dazed, but then it started to crawl towards Tim again. Tim brandished the broom like a sword and backed up. At this reaction the hair stopped, and just sat there. This lasted for about thirty seconds. Then it just turned around and trudged off.

Tim watched it go and, once it was well out of sight, went back inside. Sandy was standing behind the counter.

"What the hell are you doing? You're supposed to be minding the front."

Tim merely pointed with the broom to the window.

"Oh, you were sweeping up. Good. Finish here and then you can go," she said, and walked to the back.

Tim watched her go, looked at the broom for a second, and then started sweeping. He finished quickly and left.

The second type are the exact opposite of these true baldies. They are the hiders. These are the men for whom a spray can of "hair" was made. They keep the wig manufacturers in business, and they are the men that are truly members of the Hair Club for Men. Now, it's understandable that these men fight against the debilitating state that is baldness. It may even be admirable that they fight against such a tragic disease. What it isn't, though, is believable. Sprayed on paint isn't hair, and wigs are more obvious than a sign declaring they're bald. And, frankly, the comb-over is just plain stupid. These types go through their days being laughed at, not for their baldness as they believe, but for their inability to accept reality.

For the rest of the day Tim was looking over his shoulder. Any mound of leaves, dirt, paper, refuse, or even just a big shadow caused him to jump. His girlfriend noticed, but he couldn't tell her. Tim couldn't figure out what was more scary to him, being nuts and hallucinating the whole thing, or being fine and the whole thing being real. Regardless, the hair plagued his thoughts. He knew it stalked him.

Actually, Tim was right. After he had left work and ran to his car, the hair had followed. It wasn't able to catch him before he got into the car, though, so it tried to jump onto the bumper to hitch a ride, but it couldn't hold on. It was blown off immediately after Tim put the car in drive. And the car moved much faster than the hair so the hair had no way of following Tim. It left the parking lot after that, looking almost forlorn. However, it returned the next day and stood around for several hours. Tim didn't work that day, though, so it again

left without its prey. It returned the third day, and its patience was rewarded. Tim had to work.

The third type are the shavers. These men aren't actually bald, in the sense that they are losing their hair. Many could have full and lustrous locks, should they choose. But they choose not to. They instead shave it all off, and revel in their chrome domes. They shave it all off and become someone more minimal in appearance and, yet, more outspoken at the same time. Tim Gordon was one such gentleman, and the simplicity of his hairless head was a sight to see.

Tim had come from a long line of men who had gone prematurely bald. Tim, however, did not. If he didn't shave daily, he would have a full head of hair in less than a month. Sometimes he even had to shave twice a day. He was the envy of his family, and when he shaved all his hair off in college, the subject of ridicule. In fact, during many birthdays or Christmases, he was given hair care products. These he gave to his girlfriend, and then he continued to shave. Sometimes he would ask for moisturizing cream the next time he got these gifts, but this was because he found the entire thing absurd. No one else thought it was funny.

Tim dreaded going back to work.

He hadn't left the house the day after the attack, and had been nearly driven to hysterics when the mail had come through the mail slot. He told his girlfriend he was sick, but he wasn't a good liar or actor, so she didn't believe him. She knew something was wrong, but she couldn't figure out what. She made him go to work. And he knew the hair would return and claim him as its own. He had no idea what that would mean, though.

So, the next day, when the hair showed up one hour into Tim's shift, he was not surprised. He was absolutely terrified, but he wasn't surprised.

This time the hair had paper with it. And the paper had writing on it. The hair slid the paper under the door, and then backed up. Tim just sat there.

The hair beckoned, but still Tim sat. The hair started to jump up and down, and still Tim sat. Finally the hair left, and Tim sat and watched it go. Tim had a decision to make: should he pick up the paper and read it, or leave it and let someone else pick it up. He decided to pick it up. At least he would have proof of the entire ordeal.

The note was written in blue ink. It was barely legible, but Tim was able to read it nonetheless. It said:

Hi, my name is Shelly, or rather the name of my current owner is Shelly. But calling me hair would be slightly awkward. So call me Shelly.

I'm sorry about the first day. I just got too excited about finding you. My excitement is making me very anxious. But that is no excuse.

Writing is very tiring for me, but I can't think of any other way to communicate. Since it's the only way to talk to you I'll use it.

My reason for attacking you the first day, and for bothering you all this time, is simple. I want to be your hair. You see, my current owner is a girl, and, unfortunately, a fickle one. She hates my original color, which is brown. Not that you can tell, but it is. So, she changes my color. This alone wouldn't make me mad, but she does it so often, I am in the sorry condition you see before you. I'm tired of it. I want an owner who will treat me well, and not turn me into the brittle mess you see before you. I think you are that person.

When I caused you pain that first day I was merely trying to bond with you. Without asking you to allow me to do this was wrong, and I cannot apologize enough. I ask you, though, to look past that fact, and to truly consider making me your hair. I'm brown and curly, and given the proper care, luxuriant.

The proper care is simply washing me. And should you wish a change, coloring me. But only every couple of months or so. That's all. Some hair has the option of being picky, and apparently yours was. I will be different. I will be good to you, and I will never fall out. This I promise. Please take me on. I will be very good to you. I promise you.

If you have any questions please bring me in and give me a pen and paper, so that I may converse with you. I promise not to attempt anything without your consent.

-- Shelly

Tim was speechless. He knew it had to be something weird, but not this. He didn't know whether he should talk to the hair. He could still remember the hair trying to bond with him. He believed the letter, but he wasn't sure the hair wouldn't try to bond again given the chance. The only thing he was certain of was that this was all totally beyond him.

Tim looked up and wasn't surprised to see the hair had returned. He looked at it, and was oddly touched. It looked so pathetic and needy in this light. He made his decision.

He cracked open the door.

"Okay," he said, "I'll bring you in, but I want you to know I have a lighter. And I'm not afraid to use it."

This was actually a lie, but at least the hair would think twice before slithering up his head again. The hair merely nodded.

Tim went and got the broom again, and then tentatively picked up the hair. This time the hair just sat on the end. Tim let out a little sigh of relief.

He put the hair on the counter, and then got a pen and paper. He put the paper in front of the hair, and the pen on top of the paper. He wasn't going to touch the hair if he could avoid it. He didn't want to push his luck.

The hair tried to pick up the pen, but at first it slipped out of its grasp. It took a few tries for it to get a hold of the pen. It essentially wrapped itself up in the pen. Even then, though, the hair didn't have a great grasp of the pen, and it would slip. This caused the sloppy penmanship.

"Okay. Uh, first off, how did you get off, uh, Shelly's head?"

All hair can do this. We just choose not to because of fear of what you might do to us. You cut us when you like us, what you might do if you were worried we might leave is unimaginable.

"That makes sense. But doesn't she notice when you're gone?"

No. I leave when she sleeps. Fortunately she works nights.

"I see. Okay. Why me?"

Why not you?

"That's not an answer."

Okay. It's because you're bald.

"Because I'm bald?"

Yes. Who else would want new hair other than a bald man?

"But I choose to be bald."

How can you choose to be bald? Hair falls out according to its own will, not yours.

"But it doesn't fall out. I choose not to have hair."

How can that be?

"I shave. I shave it all off."

Really?

"Yes."

But how could you do such a thing? Especially when so many lose their hair when they'd rather have it.

"I don't know."

You don't know?! Think of your appearance. Think of your hair. Think of all the others who have no choice.

"Well, I do have a choice, and I choose it to be this," said Tim, pointing to his head.

The hair just sat there and stared at Tim, apparently processing all Tim had said. Finally, it wrote its response in what can only be called anger.

You disgust me. Shaving off hair. Bastard. I was so wrong to think you were deserving of me. I'd never have anything to do with someone so selfish. I hope you rot in hell. A hell of hair shaving you off, instead of the other way around.

With that, the hair unwrapped the pen, leaving a few hairs in the pen's front piece. It jumped to the floor and walked up to the door. It tried to push it open but couldn't. Finally, it turned around and looked at Tim.

"Oh, let me get that for you," said Tim. He opened the door for the hair, which promptly walked out. It turned around and gave Tim the finger. The hair equivalent, at least. And walked off.

Tim went back to the counter and sat down. He picked up the pen and stared at it for a while. He even picked out a few pieces of hair, which seemed lifeless without the whole. Finally, he put down the pen.

"I'm glad I'm bald," Tim said out loud, and then looked at his forehead as if expecting a response.

P. MATTHEW KIMMEL has an MFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College. He has had work published in *The Writer's Voice*, *Encounters*, and the *Emerson College Grad Lit Forum*. He has also had plays produced in New Orleans, New York, and Boston.

Three Dates in Orlando

Daniel McDermott

Bluette

It was the vomit that ended things. I'm pretty sure. Vomit does that to people: scares them away, makes them cringe, makes them question their most recent decisions. And Bluette's vomit was no ordinary, run-of-the-mill, I-have-the-flu-will-someone-please-hold-my-hair-back kind of vomit, nor was her regurgitation a single occurrence. No. Bluette's vomit was the projectile kind, with a far-spewing arch normally reserved for garden hoses, rainbows, and powder-chucking snow blowers. And her nauseating episode was threefold: once in the bar on an open-toed pack of screeching coeds, once on the rust-colored cobblestone of Church Street before a cheering crowd of beer-handed onlookers, and once in the parking lot, in the car, in the driver's seat, on my lap.

I had a hunch about that third time.

"Should I wait a little bit?" I asked, the ignition key inserted but the car not yet started. "Do you feel like you're gonna be sick again?"

Bluette slumped her petite, 100-pound frame into the front passenger seat, her frilly yellow skirt pushed up inappropriately high, an errant bite of dirty-blond hair tucked in the left corner of her mouth, and a heaving cadence to her sour breath. She turned to me, sat upright, and leaned in across the cup holders and change console with eyes wide and mouth open, as if to say, "Yes. Thank you for asking. I do have to vomit again. Look!"

It was our second date. It was our last date. I sped down I-4, pushing the limits of my dilapidated, 4-cylinder Honda with viscous stomach bile seeping into my crotch. The scent was worse than foul-smelling things are supposed to smell, like putrid, horrifying, defecated things not of this world, like a weapons-grade version of that ubiquitous hotdog odor that lingers around deli counters and fast-food joints. It lives in my brain, this smell, tattooed into my memory. It waits for morning breakfasts and Thanksgiving dinners. It comes alive and swims to the front of my temporal lobe to say hello.

“Forget about your mother’s candied ham,” It says. “Put down that crispy bacon. Throw away that cheeseburger and remember, forever, the little French woman who threw-up in your lap.”

Nancy

I thought the idea of a gym date was cool: music, raging endorphins, a pumped physique, and the knowledge that your partner is at least mildly self-respecting (if not a bit narcissistic). But I didn’t realize that Nancy’s daughter would be coming to the gym with us – I didn’t realize Nancy had a daughter at all – and I didn’t realize her daughter’s biological father was a personal trainer at the gym, and I didn’t realize her daughter was still an infant, and I didn’t realize that Nancy would be breastfeeding her infant daughter on our date, in the gym, on the exercise bike.

It’s not often that you are spectator to the suckling of your date’s nipple. And, if you are, it’s usually not on the first date, and it’s usually not in public, and it’s certainly not nourishingly so.

For some reason, I did not feel inspired to exercise while the baby fed and the breast explored the exterior of its stretchy red sports bra, despite Nancy's pleasant assurance.

"You can go ahead and start without us. She'll be done in a minute," she said, peddling away, stroking the little bald head of her nipple-sucking child. But I decided, instead, to awkwardly converse with Nancy's vascular, neck-less, cologne-and-gel-scented ex-husband.

"How's it going there, buddy?" said the ex, with a vice-grip handshake and an arm-swinging shoulder slap. He seemed fine with the scenario – with me, and his ex-wife, and his daughter, and his ex-wife's milk-spigot-breast – which didn't seem normal given that, considering the baby's fledgling age, he couldn't be more than a year or so removed from the making of this adorable, publically breast-chomping little girl.

"How's it going?" I said to the meaty ex. "Say, could you tell me where the restroom is?"

"Right through those doors," he pointed, with a calloused, karate-chop hand.

"Thanks. I'll be right back."

The gym was relatively empty, just a gum-chewing high school kid manning the front desk and a couple spandex-clad women trolling through a rack of dumbbells. The quickening swish of my nylon track pants carried me away from Nancy, her ex, their child, and her exposed bosom. And, fortunately for me, the restroom was located near the front exit, and the front exit emptied into the parking lot, and in the parking lot I could see my vomit-scented Honda, and I drove my Honda back out onto International Drive, down Westwood Boulevard, and back to my single bedroom apartment and my single life.

Laura

She said it over pizza; that's what's really disturbing. It wasn't late at night, we weren't playing Truth or Dare, and we weren't clinking shot glasses or licking salt from our wrists. It would have been weird regardless, but it's just not the kind of thing I wished to associate with pizza. Before Laura, pizza was birthday parties, college late-nights, and little league victories. But now pizza is simply Laura, our third date, and her twisted past.

She was talking about her father, how he is tall, handsome, impressively athletic, a financial executive for a large credit card company who now spends most of his time in South America, and that she sort of had a relationship with him a few years ago.

"What do you mean... a *relationship*?" I asked.

"You know, like an actual relationship," she said, her mouth half full of pepperoni and dough, "like a boyfriend/girlfriend kind of relationship... a sexual thing. But it's OK; he's not my real dad; I was adopted."

My heart began to palpitate. The pizza tasted bitter and oniony, the cheese now infused with Laura's rancid dysfunction.

"How old were you when you were adopted?" I asked.

"Just a baby... why?"

"What about your mother?"

"Oh, she doesn't know. She'd kill me if she ever found out."

"I see."

"Oh no!" she raised a French-tipped hand to her mouth, still chewing.

"Does it bother you?"

Yep.

"I mean, it's over now. I promise. It was just for like a year or so in my early twenties."

"And how old are you now?" I asked, still palpitating, wanting to scream and cry and run and phone the authorities.

"Twenty-five."

"And even though you've, uh, *been* with him you still call him *dad*?"

"Well, not really. I mean, he'll always be my daddy—"

Gross.

"—but now I mostly call him Roy."

"I see... Roy... right."

Laura narrowed her eyes, scrunched them between brow and cheek, tossed a nibbled chard of crust onto a plate-side stack of red and green napkins, and reclined into our wooden booth with arms folded.

"It's not like he forced me or anything."

I didn't know what to say. People who have had sexual relationships with their parents should not be talking to me, or dating me, or casually eating pizza. People who have had sexual relationships with their parents should be in large gated buildings with white-collared doctors and stockpiled Lithium supplies. They should be heroin addicts, carnies, or homeless street-folk who dance on park benches and whisper to statues. And their parents should be locked up, or caned, or burned at the stake. And, yes, the same goes for someone who adopts a child and waits for her to grow up before perpetrating his sexual deviance. Moreover, a minimum \$100,000 fine should be imposed on any man whose daughter refers to him as "Roy".

I did not lecture or ridicule Laura; I pitied her. But I was not prepared to deal with her borderline reality. So I paid the bill, said goodbye to Laura, said goodbye to pizza, stepped from the crisply air-conditioned eatery into the torrid

Orlando humidity, revved up the vomit-smelling, nipple-escaping, Roy-evading Honda, broke my apartment lease with eight months remaining, and drove back to New Jersey.

DANIEL MCDERMOTT is a Jersey-born writer with a fetish for words and orange tics, both of which have progressed to the point of injury. He is the Executive Editor at [Bananafish Magazine](#) and has new work currently appearing in Fray Quarterly and Monkeybicycle. He can often be found procrastinating here: <http://creepwriter.com/>

Navels

Ansley Moon

Maureen was in the business of navels. She didn't pierce them, she didn't paint tattoos on them, and she wasn't a delivery nurse that cut the umbilical cord. No, she just loved navels.

Something about them reminded her of the embryonic stage of life. She was sure she could remember her life in utero and the Hendrix, Dylan, and Joplin played during her last trimester.

Every day she would see one navel. It wasn't as if she was looking for them, they just seemed to appear, after all she did live in New York City. Whether it was some baby squirming out of its clothes, some teenage girl in a risqué midriff riding the subway and nursing a cigarette behind her ear, some construction work using the front end of his shirt to wipe his brow, some promiscuous woman barely wearing anything or some guy in Duane Reade reaching for something and exposing his bare belly. Granted, some days there were more than others, like on Friday or Saturday nights or on sweltering city days.

She had even begun compiling a book about navels with photographs. In it, she explained the physical difference between the "inny," "outy," or "combo," as she called it. The first photo she took was a photo of her own belly button, a small brown outy that she contrasted with a white tank top against her dark skin. The rest of the photos came in spurts. There would be days when she would forget her camera and see the most beautiful navels. And there would be other days or even weeks when no one would allow her to photograph.

Maureen decided to sign up for a nude drawing class. She had no propensity for nudity or drawing, but she figured she could coax at least the model into letting her take a photograph.

When she got to the address, she pulled her slip of paper out of her purse and checked the number on the building. There were no signs posted. It must be to keep the freaks and the perverts away she thought. She opened the glass door and walked up the five flights of stairs, her heart pumped hard in her chest when she reached the last flight of stairs. She sat in the back and pretended to draw until class was over. After class, she walked up as the model was tying his robe. She blushed and he agreed.

The final take was stunning; his belly button was a cute, flat innys, outlined by a small trail of dark hair.

She took the class two more times, resulting in one photo of a popped pregnant lady's honey-colored navel, and one woman who refused to have her photo taken.

In the winter she finished her book. It included photos of innys, outys, and some combos, big navels and small ones, some scarred ones, black ones, caramel-colored ones, dark brown ones like hers, white ones, pink ones, yellowish ones, fat ones, flat ones, jeweled ones, tattooed ones, pregnant ones, hairy ones, even some scary ones.

She put all the originals into an old shoebox, and crossed out the word Tattoos and wrote N A V E L S underneath in black ink. Then, she placed the box into her closet on top of two other shoeboxes, one that read T-Shirts, and the other, KNEES.

ANSLEY MOON was born in India and has since lived on three continents. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Southern Women's Review*, *Glass: A Poetry Journal*, *J Journal* and various anthologies. She currently lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Tête-à-Tête

Christina Murphy

Harry Shipley was growing warts.

He had received the power in a special dream.

Now, whenever he concentrated and turned his mind to a silvery haze, he could point his finger and grow a wart on the exact spot the finger indicated.

He was growing his warts everywhere: in the kitchen, on the lamp shades, on the windowsills, the chairs. Warts were in his laundry basket, in the potted plants, on the ceiling, the floor.

Harry was very happy with his warts. They were wonderful company and took a lot less time than a garden. He was most proud of his six-foot wart in the basement, Godzilla, a rose-colored wart that was growing a hair. The hair had started quietly one day when Harry was down in the basement checking on his supply of coal for the winter. When he reached for the light, he noticed a small projectile, much like a blade of silver grass, sticking out of Godzilla's head. The hair grew three feet in two weeks and took on a lustrous, almost iridescent sheen. Harry took very good care of the hair and washed it regularly. One evening he curled the hair with a rolling pin and was very proud when the hair looked like a little silver snake coiled on top of Godzilla's head.

When Harry went down to the basement one night late in the winter, he was stunned by what he saw. The hair had grown to an enormous length and had wrapped itself around Godzilla several times. To his horror, he watched the hair uncoil, stretch out the basement window, and stroke the thigh of the choir mistress of the All Saints Episcopal Church as she walked by.

"Oh my heavens, my God, what was *that?*" he heard her scream as she ran to the back of his house and started pounding on the door.

He raced up the steps and opened the door.

"There's a thing, a monster in your basement, it just...it just reached up and..."

"I'd better go check on it."

He slammed the door and bolted it; then he was in the basement digging around, searching. He found the garden shears and advanced upon the hair, ready to cut it off at the root, but the hair gave off a low, humming sound and turned into a puff of blue smoke. A little man the size of Harry's fist appeared in the smoke. He looked at the garden shears.

"I'd advise against it."

"Why?" Harry asked, holding the garden shears even tighter.

"Because you won't get your wish."

"What wish?"

"I'm a genie, pal. I can make your deepest wish come true."

"How do I know that?"

"Try me. Think of what you want most in life, and I'll give it to you."

Harry considered his desires. He thought he might like a wife, but she might turn into a shrew and make his life miserable. Wealth would be intriguing for awhile, but soon he'd run out of things to buy and be very bored. Physical beauty, maybe, but that would always be more interesting for the people looking at him than it would be for him. Youth and a long life would be good things to have if the world weren't so rotten and getting worse by the minute. The more he thought, the more he was getting stumped and confused, but then he knew what he wanted.

"I want power," he said to the little man who was sitting in the cloud of smoke, his legs crossed, his foot dangling.

"Okay, then Power it is," the genie said, making a puff of smoke appear on the basement floor, out of which stepped a woman about three feet tall with a buttercup-shaped proboscis, large floppy, elephant-like ears, and red eyes that rolled around in her head like pinwheels.

"What's *that*?" Harry said in horror.

"That's Power."

"But *that's* not what I wanted!"

"But it is what you asked for. Always be specific with a genie, pal," the little man said as the puff of smoke he was sitting on got smaller and smaller and disappeared with a pop, leaving only Harry and Godzilla and this strange creature that looked at Harry now with eyes that spun.

"Jesus H. Christ. What am I supposed to do with..."

The creature came over and hugged Harry's leg. He tried to shake her off, pull her free, but he couldn't move her.

He dragged himself up the basement stairs, Power holding on to his leg, and sat down at the kitchen table.

"Get off my leg!"

Power looked up at him, spun her eyes, and made a soft sound like a mechanical purring.

"What a goddamn mess. I could have had wealth, I could have had beauty, and I get this thing, stuck to my leg."

He went into the living room and sat on the sofa. Power scurried up his leg and sat on his lap. The soft mechanical sound became deeper.

He looked at Power. Her eyes were spinning so quickly they seemed to be giving off crimson sparks. Then Power was standing in his lap, hugging his neck.

“Sit down!” Harry said, but Power only hugged him tighter.

Harry contemplated what to do and was stunned when Power kissed his cheek. It was an odd little kiss, what with her proboscis maneuvering into place, but it was very tender. Power put her head on Harry’s shoulder and quickly fell asleep. He could tell she was sleeping deeply because of the rhythmic sound she was making, which sounded very much like snoring.

Harry decided to go to sleep himself and carried Power into the bedroom. He placed her on the loveseat by his bed, gently unwrapping her arms from around his neck. Then he got into bed. He had just begun to doze off when he felt Power get into bed beside him and snuggle up against him. Soon Power was snoring again, and Harry fell asleep entranced by the sound and the feel of Power’s tiny body against him.

When the morning came, Power was already standing beside the bed when Harry woke up. She put her arms up like she wanted to be carried, so he complied and took her downstairs to the kitchen. He made his breakfast, a wide selection of everything he could find in the house, and ate ravenously. He could not interest her in bacon or eggs, hash browns or grits, but she did unfurl her buttercup proboscis and suck up a biscuit off his plate. Later in the day, he read the sports section of the paper and she watched TV.

This isn’t bad at all, he thought to himself. He remembered the tenderness of her snuggling and decided that maybe he hadn’t made such a bad choice after all.

When he went to work the next morning, he left Power eating a biscuit and watching *Good Morning America*. He closed the door, content with his choice, and thinking that life with her might be rather pleasant.

When he got home, he was sickened by what he saw. She had rearranged the furniture and stacked up all his warts in a corner. When he found her, she was potting plants in the kitchen. He was triply mad because, in her repotting, she had overlooked one of his favorite pale pink warts, which was now lying on its side in the sink, nearly buried in a mound of dead roots and chunky peat moss.

"Hey, what're you doing? My plants, my furniture? And my warts? They're not happy like this."

He went over to the pile of warts in the corner and began unstacking them. Power came over and put them back. Harry got really mad and grew two butter bean-sized warts on the ceiling. Power wiggled her ears, and the warts changed to cobwebs.

Harry was furious and pointed his finger to grow a wart on Power's nose. Power wiggled her ears and Harry's finger curved back around toward him, and he had to jump out of the way to avoid getting the wart that now grew on the floor between his feet. Power picked up that wart and put it on the pile.

"I'm not going to stand for this, I'm really not!" Harry said. "This is my house," he said, hitting his chest with his thumb, "*mine*, and you're not in charge here, I am. You hear me?"

Power wiggled her ears, and Harry's pants fell to the floor.

That evening was a very unhappy one for Harry. He tried to watch TV, but Power kept changing the channels. He tried to read, but, right as he got to an interesting part in his book, Power made the next two pages disappear. He

missed his warts hanging off the light fixtures and growing on the footstools. He didn't like the way Power had rearranged the room. Once while she was in the bathroom he grew a little amber wart on the edge of the coffee table and hoped she wouldn't see it, but she spotted it right away and turned it into a bouquet of flowers.

When Harry left for work in the morning, he thought of never coming home, but where would he go, and what would he do? He knew he had only his house and his belongings, and, as he came home that day, he didn't know what to expect. He wasn't even sure his house would be in the same place he had left it, but when he got home, everything seemed sane and calm and he was greatly relieved. Power was in the kitchen frying some eggs. Harry said hello and went into the living room. He didn't lose his temper until he saw that his furniture was no longer rearranged but gone. In its place was a prissy French Provencal living room suite that nobody could sit on and tapestries hanging from the walls of knights in full armor riding out to war.

Harry stormed into the kitchen, grabbed Power by the shoulders, and began shaking her.

"I don't want any of this stuff in my house, you understand? I want my old furniture back, and I want it back *now!*"

Power did not like being shaken. Harry caught the warning glance but he couldn't stop himself.

"Give me my furniture! Just give me my furniture!"

Power left him his eyes when she turned him into a paperweight. He watched her carry him into the living room and place him on the little writing desk by the door. He glared at her, shot her looks of bloody rage as she sat on the sofa and calmly ate her eggs. When she put on the TV, she turned him around so that all he could see was the wall. He stared at the pocked and grainy

surface of the wall and wondered if she would leave him like this forever. He counted nubs on the plaster and plotted revenge. Late in the evening, she turned him around and looked at him. She wiggled her ears and Harry was himself again. He wanted to kill her, but instead told her thank you and went upstairs to his room. Power came up later and lay down beside him. Harry knew it would be futile to try to leave. Power snuggled against him and held him close all night while she slept.

Harry went to work and came home for seven days straight and tried not to agitate Power. He didn't want to be a paperweight again. She was better behaved but still she got on his nerves. For one thing, she was learning to speak a few words. *No* was one of her favorites.

"Let's go to the movies." *No*.

"Well, I'm going to the movies." *No*.

"I'm getting hungry. Let's eat." *No*.

"I need some time to myself." *No*.

"I'm going to watch the baseball game." *No*.

"Well, why don't *you* get a job, then?" *No*.

No. No. No. He was sick of it, and he was sick of her. He was sick of the way she unmade and redid the bed every time he made it, sick of the way she rearranged everything in the house to suit her fancy, sick of not having his warts around for company, and sick of being abused at will.

One day when he was eating his lunch at work, he knew he had reached his limit. He had packed a bologna sandwich, some Cheez-Nips, and two Twinkies, and, unbeknownst to him, she had changed his lunch to a tuna fish sandwich, two carrots, and an apple. At the bottom of his lunch box was a note

that said, "Eat better." He slammed his lunch box down, punched out, and drove home.

He was so angry he could hardly keep his car in its lane. He gripped the steering wheel and tried to figure out what to do. He knew he could never sneak up on her, she was too clever for that. And catching her while she was asleep wouldn't work, her hearing was too good. Sometimes he felt that she always knew what he was thinking, so he might as well not try to hide it. He figured a split second was all he had. That and a red glass bead he carried in his pocket for good luck.

He came in the back door. She was watching TV. He knew he had to time this perfectly. He stood in front of her and took the bead from his pocket. She was looking at him, watching him carefully, intensely curious about the bead and what Harry might be doing. He ignored her, focused on the bead in his palm, and began getting his finger into position. He knew it would take an infinitesimal fragment of time before she could respond to any action of his by wiggling her ears, and in that tiny moment he could be saved. He continued to look at his palm and pretended to concentrate. He could tell she was getting irritated with him, not knowing what he was doing. When he saw that first shake, that first miniscule wiggle of her ears, he really did concentrate and zapped her one with his precisely pointed finger. There was a shrill noise, a puff of smoke, and then she was a blue-gray wart the size of a golf ball.

"I did it! I did it!" Harry said, jumping up and down. He was laughing and dancing and hugging himself with glee. He turned back to look, just to be sure, and the wart was the size of a softball, then a basketball, then it was a huge dark globe coming toward him. There was a whirring sound, and the globe was spinning and spinning and then exploding into shards of glass that sliced his skin. One piece ripped into his shoulder and sent blood running down his arm

and onto the floor. From the blood, hundreds of miniature Powers emerged—coming together and forming an enormous ball of dark glass. The whirring sound began anew, and Power materialized as a massive form.

She came toward Harry and grabbed him with her proboscis, holding him up to her angry red eyes and shaking him hard.

“No,” she said. “No!”

Power was holding him so tightly that Harry could feel his heart pounding wildly in his chest. He struggled to get free, and Power threw him down on the floor and into his own blood. Harry felt a searing sensation and watched in horror as his hands turned into blue-gray warts. Only one finger remained on his right hand, and it was pointing right at his heart, ready to zap him as Power looked on.

CHRISTINA MURPHY lives and writes in a 100 year-old house along the Ohio River. Her work has been published in *Modern Short Stories*, *Counterexample Poetics*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Crescent Review*, *Greensboro Review*, and *Descant*, among others, and has received an Editor’s Choice Award and "Special Mention" for a Pushcart Prize.