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Editor's Note: The Taco Issue

On January 22, 2010, the world lost a great man. Taco Bell founder Glen W. Bell Jr. died, far too early, at the age of 86.

Back in 1948, Bell opened Bell's Drive-In, selling the traditional drive-in fare of hamburgers and hot dogs. Soon, though, Bell decided to spice things up by adding a variety of Mexican dishes to the menu. (I'm so sorry about the pun.) And, yes, the Mexican food was really more like a poor attempt to replicate Mexican food, but that was OK. Bell was serving go-getting, 1950s' Americans, and what the fuck did they know about authentic Mexican food. The tacos and burritos were a hit, and, in 1962, Taco Bell was born.

Seeing as how this issue begins at The Burrito Palace with Andrew Frankel's "The Golden Streams of Babylon" and ends with a man in a desperate search for the perfect Taco Bell in Louis Wittig's "Run for the Border," I thought it was only fitting to dedicate this issue to Mr. Bell.

Sure, Brandon Blackburn's "52 Pickup," Dawn-Michelle Baude's "My Walk to Gamal Abdu el Naser," and Marc-Anthony Taylor's "Kali's Dance" have nothing to do with Mexican food. But they do take us to Heather's apartment, Egypt, and the end of the world, respectively, places I'm sure Mr. Bell would have loved to visit. And if he wouldn't have, then I'm sure he'd have loved to read about them. And if that's not true either, then screw him. These are five excellent stories, God damn it, and I will fight his ghost if he says otherwise.

Anyway, here's to you, Mr. Bell. May your poorly constructed tacos live forever.

-- Eirik Gumeny

The Golden Streams of Babylon

Andrew Frankel

I was desperately in need of a piss so I ducked into The Burrito Palace. There were many people inside; I asserted my way to the counter and asked the girl behind it where I'd find the bathroom. She shook her head, saying that it had been out of order all day. I swore aloud.

"But there's a unicorn out back, in the alley, who's just begging to be pissed on. You should go piss on him." She smiled, sexy.

This struck me as terrible, but I knew that I'd heard her right.

"But why?" I demanded. "Why would anybody piss on a unicorn? In an alley?"

The girl narrowed her eyes at me and spoke in a tone at once sharp and vague.

"You'll see," she said.

Out back, just a quick moment later, I was having the time of my life pissing on the unicorn in the alley. I looked at the heavens and laughed a hearty laugh. When I'd rushed into the alley and come upon this unicorn, I'd realized at once that the Burrito Palace girl had been right. Here was a unicorn who truly was just begging to be pissed on; he spoke with a pissy rasp and had that defiant "piss on me" look set hard in his eyes. The soot all over his coat and his Cockney accent suggested to me that perhaps he was a down-on-his-luck chimney sweep, one who had fallen from grace for the sake of cheap thrills.

"Well, what's this then? Man about town, out for an evening piss?" He winked.

“You bet your unicorn ass,” I said.

And I pissed on him. I think it delighted us both. After, we had a seat, he in the piss and I beside it, and smoked cigarettes.

The unicorn seemed to revel in a feeling of contentedness. He swayed, spoke of summers he’d spent in his youth. When he paused to sneeze, I asked his name.

“Larry,” he said, “Larry Green the Third, sir.”

“But you’re red,” I said, chuckling at the small irony.

He turned his Cockney unicorn eyes to the night sky and drew long at his cigarette.

“That’s because I’m a bloody failure.”

He sniffled, coughed, and spat on the alley floor.

I felt as though maybe I ought to say something to Larry Green the Third. His change in mood had been abrupt; perhaps he was unstable. It had occurred to me earlier that this probably wasn’t the first time he’d been pissed on today.

“Listen, Larry. It’s not all that bad. You know. Maybe you just need a change of scene.”

Again he sniffled. His gaze looked thoughtful and I followed it, and saw two policemen rushing toward us with angry faces.

In the jailhouse, there were strange biblical screeds and illustrations scrawled on the cell walls. I considered them. Maybe I had gone wrong somewhere. I had never intended to get locked up for something like this. Larry smelled like pee. The charges were public urination and eliciting a lewd act in public, respectively. Larry looked crushed when they saddled him with his charge, and I understood. There was nothing sexual about what we had been up to in that alley when the policemen happened by.

Just a unicorn who wanted to be pissed on, for reasons that were his own, and me obliging him.

“But why are you locking us up?” I asked the policeman. “Can’t we just pay our fines and be on our way?”

“Yeah,” Larry added defiantly. I glared at him, wishing he would shut up for a while. He’d started running his mouth as soon as they cuffed us, and I felt this could only affect our situation negatively. They don’t much care for Limeys in these parts.

It turned out my feelings of anxiety were not unfounded, as the cop got up from his desk, pulled his gun from his belt, unlocked the cell door and proceeded to savagely pistol-whip Larry. The unicorn collapsed and spit blood on the cell floor; the cop turned to me but I only shook my head and raised my hands. He returned to his desk and reclined into his seat, a look of disdain and repugnance on his face.

“The reason I’m locking you boys up,” he said, “is I don’t like the idea of some freak and some unicorn roaming the streets of my city and pissing on each other in alleys. I don’t know where you degenerates come from, but that’s not how we do things around here.”

I felt the need to defend my honor.

“Sir! Please, listen! This unicorn never pissed on me! The girl at the Burrito Palace said their bathroom was out.”

And then I stopped. How could I make this policeman understand my story? Until I’d tried it a few hours ago, I myself had never dreamt of the thrill that came with pissing all over a willing unicorn.

Larry spoke up again.

“Listen, please. Do you have any Three Dog Night?”

The policeman turned slowly to face him, pulling his pistol and leveling it at the piss-soaked Cockney. Larry shrunk into the back of the cell. For a long time no one spoke, and I took advantage of the silence to try to clear the tequila from my mind. There was no way in hell I was spending the night in this damned cell. The smell was almost too much; it would have been too much already if the piss on the unicorn had belonged to anyone but myself. I've always prided myself on the clean, somewhat minty aroma of my own urine. But a fat lot of good that urine had done me tonight.

Some hours passed and, failing to come up with anything intelligent to say to the policeman to clear our names, I decided to get a little sleep. I was dreaming about a cat that turned into a spider and wanted to bite me when I awoke to a quiet beseeching from Larry Green the Third.

"Shut the fuck up," I hissed at him. "You've gotten us into enough trouble already. Just go to sleep. We'll figure something out in the morning."

"But look," he whispered, pointing a hoof toward the cop's desk. The policeman was dozing, his feet up on the desk, left hand tucked neatly into his pants.

"What's your point?" I demanded.

"We have a chance."

My gaze met his, and I fell headlong into his crystal green eyes. All of a sudden, my bladder was furious, ready for action. I guess one more couldn't hurt, I thought to myself, and instructed Larry in whispered tones to assume the position. Then, very quietly, I pissed on him once more.

With the morning light came the changing of the guard. The new officer reviewed our paperwork and stared at us a while. At length a smile cracked on his round face. I feared trouble. He sauntered over to the cell door and cleared his throat.

“Well,” he drawled, “I imagine you boys have about learned your lesson by now.” He looked me in the eyes, and there was a flicker of something like kinship behind his glasses. “You pay your fine, you can be on your way. A hundred dollars ought to do it.”

I felt as though a great load had been lifted from me, and for a moment I was filled with happiness at this fortuitous turn of events. Then I heard Larry shuffling around beside me. It occurred to me that the policeman had said that I was free to pay my fine and go; there had been no mention of Larry’s charges.

“Well, then,” Larry began, trying to sound casual. “How much will this little adventure be setting me back?”

The policeman looked Larry up and down, the slightest trace of a smirk detectable on his face.

“Well, son, your charge isn’t quite so light as your friend’s here. But seeing as you seem to be an intelligent enough unicorn, and Cockney, I think we could work out some sort of work release program for you.”

Larry hesitated.

“Work release?”

The policeman opened the cell door and beckoned to me to step out, telling Larry Green the Third to sit tight a moment. I paid the cop the hundred dollars and retrieved my possessions, and he told me good-heartedly that he hoped it would be a while before we met again. As I left the jailhouse, I turned to look at Larry one last time. He winked at me as the policeman entered the cell with him, hand to his fly.

After that night, I did a lot of soul-searching. It seemed to me that my life was headed in the wrong direction. Unicorns, Cockney accents, nights spent in jail—what was I hoping to accomplish, traveling such a path? I decided to go straight. It was really hard at first. The urge would rear its ugly and relentless head on certain nights, and I wouldn't know how to assuage it. Once I cornered a cat behind a warehouse and pissed on it, but it wasn't the same. And the hurt look in the cat's eyes as he ran away afterward had burned straight to my heart, telling me that this was not the way. No, I told myself, harshly. This will be the last time.

I went to see a therapist the afternoon after the episode with the cat. He listened to my story with his back turned to me, gazing out the window at a lush courtyard below. When I'd told all I had to tell, he waited a while and then spoke.

"You know," he began, "your story is not such a unique one. Since the dawn of man and unicorn, the temptation has been there. And many great men were known to urinate on a unicorn or two at some point in their lives. Abraham Lincoln, for example. And Donny Osmond."

I was relieved to hear this. He went on.

"The thing is, all of these men, sooner or later, came to realize what you must come to realize. Pissing on unicorns won't solve your problems. No matter how great the thrill, that is all it will ever be. Look out this window. There's so much life to be lived out there, and it'd be a crime to piss it all away. Even on unicorns."

The therapist's words struck a chord deep inside me. He was right; it was time to pull up my fly once and for all, and step into the sun. But first, there was someone I had to find. I thanked the man sincerely, left the office, and headed downtown to the Burrito Palace.

It was night by the time I reached my destination. Again it was busy, and again the same girl stood behind the counter. I could tell by her eyes that she recognized me.

“Well, hey,” she said, eyelashes fluttering. “I was wondering if I’d see you again. Was I right about that unicorn or what?”

For a second I was overcome with nostalgia, but I fought it back and spoke.

“You were. But it was all wrong.”

She gave me a look that said she didn’t understand.

“What do you mean?”

“Listen,” I said. “Have you seen that unicorn? I need to find him. It’s hard to explain. Has he been in?”

“Yeah,” she said with a confused smile. “About a week ago.”

“What did he say?”

“Not much really. He ordered a bean burrito and three margaritas. Then he asked to use the bathroom.”

My eyes widened at the mention of the bathroom, but again I beat back the wave of longing and asked the girl: “And then he left?”

“Then he left.”

“And he hasn’t been in since?”

“Not while I was here.”

I felt at a loss, thanked the girl and on an impulse asked if I could use their bathroom before I was on my way. She handed me the key and I made my way back and unlocked the heavy door, flicked on the light. I couldn’t believe what I saw. A giant mural drawn with a thick red pen spanned the entire wall behind the toilet. There was Larry Green the Third, rolling on his back in ecstasy. And there I was,

pissing on him with a celestial smile. The drawing was crude, but in a way I'd never seen anything so beautiful in my entire life. The mural was signed, at the bottom, with a brief note.

"Drew," it read, "here's wishing you well, and a little something to remember me by. We lived like kings in our time, but every king's reign must sooner or later come to an end. I'm hanging up the old piss racket, and I hope you will too. Keep looking for grace, and I know someday you will surely find it. Until then, keep the faith, and stay dry. Larry."

I reread the note a few times, then shut off the light and left the bathroom. Never before had a unicorn so changed my life, nor has one since. When I handed the key back to the girl at the counter, she flashed me another sexy smile.

"You want to go ice-skating later?" I asked her.

"Sure," she said.

ANDREW FRANKEL was born and raised among the pines of Southern New Jersey. He lives in Boulder, where he has been studying the writing of fiction for the past several years at the University of Colorado. He is currently working on an honors thesis in creative writing.

52 Pickup

Brandon Blackburn

They began the evening heavily encumbered. Heather answered her apartment door wearing five tops under a vest and a peacoat, boots over jeans, several dangling necklaces over a choker, three pairs of earrings, and a headband. No doubt she would also be wearing stockings and numerous pairs of underwear. She'd outdone him. Even with all his rings and – the coup de grâce – the ten pairs of boxers he wore under his jeans, she had much more to remove than him. Beginning the evening heavily encumbered was important when you played strip Texas hold'em with rules dictating that up to three articles of clothing could be wagered on any hand.

Really, Greg couldn't believe his luck. Buzzed already, he'd had little hope that Heather would be planless at 11 on a Friday night. Whether by luck or maybe something more, she'd invited him over anyway and had been amenable to his suggestion of a friendly competitive game of cards. He sped from the bar to his place to throw on more clothes and sped faster to Heather's fourth floor apartment. I mean, Heather was fucking gorgeous, man, and these kinds of windows tend to close pretty fast.

So they began the evening heavily encumbered, but they'd both taken their losses. Their jewelry was all piled up together to one side of the table where they were playing their game, thin gold and thick silver rings thrown into the tangled morass of Heather's necklaces. Greg was down to his last shirt. He was pretty sure Heather was too. He pulled up the corners of his two cards, which were face down on the table in

front of him, then took a swig of his Jack & Coke, watching over the rim of his plastic cup the way Heather's padded bra pushed against her sheer white top. He forgot what his cards were and took another glance.

Heather watched Greg's eyes roam over her breasts, turn to his cards, then return to her breasts. She considered using the goosebumps popping up on her pale arms as an excuse to end the game then and put her cable-knit sweater back on. She didn't know why she'd let him come over when it was just going to be the two of them and she *really* didn't fucking know why she'd agreed to strip poker. She'd been buzzed. She'd been bored. She'd been watching Shark Week on the Discovery Channel alone. Moreover, she'd been bored and would probably be bored again once the mild humiliations of the night were over and she was dressed again and he had left. She looked at her two cards and wagered one article of clothing. She took a swig of Jack and Greg said, "I call."

Heather dealt three cards face up onto the table between them. This is called The Flop. They re-examined their cards and both decided not to raise their bets above one article.

"You know," Heather said, delaying the drawing of the next card, "cards are a metaphor for life in a lot of ways."

"Yeah?" Greg looked impatient. His eyes were still on her tits.

"Yeah. Have you heard of telomeres?" Greg shook his head, making fleeting eye contact, then lowering his eyes to her tits again. "Well," she continued, "every cell in the human body has this thing in it called a telomere. Every time our cells divide, their telomeres get a little shorter. Once our telomeres shrink down to half their original size, our cells can't divide anymore and we die of old age. In total, our cells can divide 52 times before we die. 52 cards, 52 cell divisions 'til death. Neat, right?"

“Yeah, neat. Well, that’s why I always say seize the day. I mean, we never know when our last day might be, so we have to make the most of each day that we *do* have.” He meant, of course, *Come on, Heather. Let’s fuck.*

“That’s a good philosophy, I guess,” she said. She meant, of course, *You’re sweet, but no.*

Greg ended up losing that hand and took off his belt. He went to use Heather’s bathroom. He’d been drinking whiskey for *days*, man. While he was out of sight, she shuffled the deck and then flipped the cards face up and moved some of them around to strategic points, making sure the right card would continue to be dealt at the right time, keeping the night’s events on schedule.

Greg sat back down and Heather dealt the next hand, two cards to him, two cards to her.

“You know,” she said, “it’s more than just the telomeres. There’s lots of other coincidences.”

He took a peek at his cards and couldn’t help but smile broadly as he uncovered the Ace of Spades and the Ace of Hearts. He wagered two articles. She hesitated and he felt a momentary panic: he’d wasted his advantage. He should’ve bet *one* to start with. She might fold and the hand would be over and they’d both still be equally as clothed as they were before the present hand.

“I call,” she said at last. He let out a breath he’d been holding. He was taking things very seriously.

“Anyway,” she continued, “52 cards, 52 weeks in a year. Just for instance.”

She flipped three cards face up onto the table: the Ace of Clubs, the Two of Clubs, and the Ace of Diamonds. Greg’s eyes widened. He raised his bet to the max: three articles of clothing. “I call,” Heather said quickly.

“And did you know there’s 52 white keys on a standard piano? Did card makers and piano makers base their products on the weeks of the year? Or did they have some inkling about cell division and the mathematics of death?”

The last two cards of the hand were inconsequential – a king and a nine. Four aces in hand, Greg couldn’t help but laugh. The whiskey was working its simple magic and he felt warm and alight and *alive*, man.

Heather looked to Greg’s mouth, which had been laughing but now was just a tongue licking lips in anticipation. He was watching her breasts rising and falling with her breathing. She was breathing heavier now from drinking too fast. She peeked at the two cards face down in front of her: a four and a seven. With the five cards face up on the table, that gave Heather a handful of exactly nothing.

“Two aces,” she said, flipping her two concealed cards over.

“*Four* aces!” he practically howled, flipping his cards over.

“Wow! What are the chances? Okay, so I take off three articles?”

“Looks like it.” Greg couldn’t conceal a quick smirk.

“Okay. Hey. Have you also ever thought about the fact that there are 52 cards in a deck and 52 letters in the English language if you count upper and lowercase letters? Neat, right?”

“Yeah. Neat.”

“What should I take off? My socks count as two.” She removed her rainbow-striped socks. “What for my third?”

“Your choice.”

“*You* choose. What should I take off?” She smiled.

He pursed his lips, acting as though he had to think about it really hard. He couldn’t keep his eyes down, though. They danced on every part of her. They did

cartwheels over the hills of her breasts. She loved it. She fucking loved it, man: the attention, the desire she drew out of him without his consent, the way he could barely control himself, the tremor running through his fingers, and knowing that his fingers wanted to be all the places his eyes had just been. His face brightened as though he had solved a particularly difficult riddle.

“Why not take off your shirt?” he asked.

Heather gasped in faux scandalization.

“Dirty boy!” she exclaimed. Then, as she removed her aforementioned sheer white top, she asked, “Did you know the Mayan calendar is based on cycles of 52 years?”

“Really?”

“Yes. Do you like my bra?”

His eyes said yes. “Yes,” he said. “Leopard print. Very nice.”

“Thank you.”

She’d drained her cup. “Can I make you another drink?” he asked. He meant, of course, *Would you like to get just hammered enough to let me do you?*

“Sure, I’ll have another. Thank you. It’s your turn to deal, by the way.” She slid the cards over to his side of the table, leaning over to give him a view straight down between her bra’s two leopard-print padded cups. Then, as she predicted, he disappeared into the kitchen for a minute and returned with a drink much stronger than the last one he’d mixed for her. She would slow her drinking pace to compensate. She smiled to herself, then smiled at him as he shuffled the cards. “Thanks,” she said, gesturing to her cup.

“You’re welcome.” He smiled.

“You know,” she said, “I think the Mayans are really interesting. They knew a lot about technology and astronomy and medicine and things. I have a couple of books on them.” What she meant by this change of subject was, of course, *We’re friends. Why would I ever complicate our friendship by sleeping with you?*

The conversation, despite all the whiskey, wasn’t going in the direction Greg wanted. If nothing else, at least he got to see Heather topless, but still he decided to try another tactic and show some interest in *her* interests. “Wow, really?” he said. “I’d love to see those books. Do you have them here?”

“They’re in my rom.”

“Let’s go check them out!” He began to stagger out of his seat, leaning on the table for support. It’s an unwritten, but time-honored tradition: the closer one’s proximity to a woman’s bed, the greater the chance that sex will occur. Getting into Heather’s living room for a game of poker, then getting into her bedroom would be back-to-back victories in Greg’s mind.

It’s not a truism, but it’s certainly a long-established tenet of belief: get into a woman’s bedroom and sex might very well follow. Greg would note that pornography, for instance, bears out this tenet again and again. Porn storylines revolve around men who have chosen professions like pizza delivery person or plumber or cable repairman because they understand the importance of one’s proximity to a woman’s bed, know that when you step off of the street and through a woman’s front door, one’s chances of hooking up with said woman *skyrocket*. And how many times has a man driven a woman home from a bar and – seeing she has no intention of inviting him inside – asked in desperation, “Could I come in and use your bathroom real quick?” The man thinks a foot in the door is all he needs. Sometimes, man, *it is*.

Heather stood up from the table and led Greg into her bedroom. She loved that burning feeling between her shoulder blades, the sensation of being watched, being watched intently, his eyes abusing her bare back, roving up her spine, up and down her bra straps. She got down onto hands and knees, searching under her bed for the books in question. His eyes traveled down her spine, down her thighs still covered in tight-fitting jeans to the carpeted floor, then returned to caress her bare arms as she reached into the darkness below the bed, shuffling through piles of books.

“Here!” she said after some time and produced a thick red paperback: *The Mayans and Their World*, by Bazine Naodook.

He flipped through it and said, “Neat! Do you think I could borrow this sometime? It looks really interesting.” Which she took to mean, *Come on, Heather. Let’s fuck.*

“Take it now if you want,” she said. “Wow, it’s like 2:30. I think I’ll get some sleep if that’s cool. Are you okay to drive?”

“Shit. I don’t know. Not really.”

“Here, you can crash on my couch. I’ll get you some blankets.”

She went to get some blankets. What could Greg do? He decided he was okay to drive after all and he left, *The Mayans and Their World* in hand, otherwise empty-handed. He went home and downloaded an adult film in which almost the entire staff of a moving company hooks up with a busty blonde homeowner who was having them load up her furniture for a move to a house in a better school district. Then Greg went to sleep.

Heather didn’t go to sleep right away. She finished her drink and she read Agatha Christie until 4 in the morning. At 4, when she was sure Greg must be asleep, she sent him a text, deliberately misspelling words, soberly making sure it could not be

interpreted as anything but a “drunken text.” If spelled properly, the text would have read, “Why did you leave? I totally want to fuck you right now.”

Greg will bring bottles of booze over to Heather’s apartment nearly every weekend for the next three months. Heather will drink with him, but never more than a glass or two at a time. She will apologize for her “drunken text” and promise to never let an indiscretion like that happen again, promise to never get that drunk again. And soon enough their game of pursuit and denial will get old for both of them. Then the game will end. Then their friendship will end. That’s what games *are* when you really break it down, man. One thing happens and then another thing happens until nothing’s happening anymore and we all get bored and then we move on to other things. That’s it. Repeat that until your cells have divided 52 times and then they stop dividing. And then, man, you fucking move on again.

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My Walk to Gamal Abdu el Naser

Dawn-Michelle Baude

Are you ready?

Put on the long, baggy skirt—black, of course—down to the ankles. Loose white shirt. Black-and-white striped socks and black boots. (Closed-in shoes are required.) Sun block? Check. Hat? Check. Black backpack? Check. Take the trash—wait! This is tricky.

Things you don't mind your neighbors pawing through go in one bag. Foodstuffs you won't eat but some starving person will, another bag. Finally, the beer bottles. This is the trickiest part of all. The clinking part. The best bet is to double-bag-tie and put them in the backpack for disposal a good distance from home.

Now yank open the door (it sticks). Sparrows? Pigeons? Doves? Third floor, second floor, first, past the broken window and vacant apartments—don't touch the banister! Deadly bird-flu virus may lurk in the droppings. Ground floor: out into the beautiful Alexandrian day. Around the front porch, delicate jasmine and honeysuckle grow, while aloe plants, with strong tentacles, wave from stone planters. Down the porch stairs to the bawwab's shack and the first trash bin where the innocuous stuff goes—try to sneak out the gate so as to escape conversation with the bawwab. He'll ask, as usual, where you're going.

Look both ways before you step off the curb—although it's a one-way street, cars surge forth in both directions. Since the sidewalks are parked-up, it's better to walk

rapidly down the middle of the street so as to minimize conversation with the numerous soldiers guarding the backside of the British Consul's property. The soldiers want to hear you speak poor Arabic while they pose questions in poor English. Some days you are in the mood for halting conversation; some days not, even though it is your job to build bridges between peoples, cultures, nations.

Watch out for the needles and syringes at the corner—it's disagreeable to step on them. Turn right, and start down the hill, past the front of the consul's house. The poor, poor consul. He has one of the best examples of 70's architecture you can lay eyes on—a two-story ranch-style, brick with white-wood trim, banks of glass. You can almost imagine the stretch pants and bridge parties inside. But all the shutters are closed tight. There's no way to look from the house onto the enormous garden brimming with roses and laden with fruit trees. The fence is wired, soldiers and cameras posted every few feet. You've never seen the consul, never seen anyone in the garden except the gardeners, never seen any shutter or door or frosted window open even a crack. But it is all perfect from the outside. Just perfect.

The trash in the street begins to thicken as you descend the hill to the main road. You'll pass two gorgeous art-deco villas, both with long balconies and stained glass, and three or four Italianate villas with extravagant turrets. But it's hard to admire the houses through the crowd of cheap, concrete buildings hemming them in on all sides—unpainted concrete, crumbling, sprouting rebar and complicated hosing. Drip. On the ground floor of one of them is a clothing store, and further along there's a wooden bench in the shade of the sycamore tree where a bawwab in turban and gown often sits. You've seen him hundreds of times. You've never spoken. He knows that a respectable woman avoids speaking to strangers.

Keep your eyes open for the trash-pickers as you go. They will be happy with your leavings. They usually have a welcoming smile—they're not wary of you, trying to get your money, or predisposed to thinking that you're politically, socially, sexually or religiously disreputable. They simply seize upon the moment to exchange a few, pleasant sentences the way they might seize upon an unfinished falafel.

Remember the handsome boy with excellent English? The one who was licking a piece of technology before you talked together of the sandstorms? It looked like a circuit board—maybe it was covered with honey. Or the lovely young girl with slightly Asian, almond-shaped eyes, bone-structure to die for, and rich, caramel skin? The one who could grace the cover of Vogue? You had asked her name. "Trash," she said. And you, embarrassed, had said, no, no—that's not your name, that's what you do, that's your job. "Job?" she echoed. "Job? Sexy. Hot. Wet." You had neither the English nor the Arabic to sort it out. "I have go," she said. "I am working." She shut the lid. "Enjoy Egypt!" And she left you there, standing by the bin.

As you are standing by the bin now. No one close by on the street, cars in the distance, but someone may be watching you from behind the curtains. Someone is always watching you. This is not idle fancy. The handful of other foreigners in Alexandria will all tell you the same thing. You are always being watched because most people who catch sight of you are intrigued, fascinated, repelled, perhaps dumbfounded, by your blond foreignness. When you lived in the tenements of Moustafa Kamel, you could not open the window and gaze outside because of the faces of the people in the other towers, the ones you could see. On the hill of Kafr Abdu where you live now it's not so bad, but elsewhere in the city—depending, perhaps, on chance alignments of the stars—you can halt conversation in a store or a cafe with your presence. You cause people to open their mouths so that you can see

the spittle gather between the tongue and lower teeth. Some children who look upon you run to their mothers, hiding in their skirts, just as they do in the movies. This is not an exaggeration. You are being watched.

Constant, irrational scrutiny makes disposing of the beer bottles all the more challenging. You stand there, posed at the intersection of cliché. Drunken Westerners, sexually depraved Westerners, morally corrupt Westerners, spiritually bankrupt Westerners all converge in your person. You want to explain that it's just one bottle of beer, if that, a night. But they wouldn't understand. And besides, only you are listening. You take a step back, on the sidewalk, squeeze in between the parked car and wall while you unzip the backpack and remove the bottles. Quick! Slip them into the bin along with the rest, and hurry on your way.

The residential feel of the neighborhood now starts to change. The exclusivity that somehow still clings to the streets fades after you pass Nour's villa. Ah, sweet Nour—she is from Libya, Palestinian in origin, you suspect. In fact, her eldest son, the one doing his graduate degree in math at Cambridge, had almost mentioned it. Perhaps he did mention it. Like many of the Palestinians you know, the ones whose families could get out, Nour is discreet. She is small, perfectly proportioned, and beautiful, one of those buoyant women who are always genuinely cheerful in spite of themselves. She has decorated her home with objects from estate sales from all over Egypt—Ottoman rugs, Nouvel Empire sideboards, Japanese silk. You have to restrain yourself from oo-ing and ah-ing even when you stand in the vestibule, waiting to collect your son.

Recently, you had lunch in her kitchen, and you relaxed, and you thought, this is so good, so right, to have lunch with a friend. You could have been in Geneva, Chicago, New York, Rome, Paris, San Francisco. You drank in the modern cleanliness

of the room, the glistening porcelain tea cups on the table, and smiling Nour herself in a lacy décolleté (you've forgotten that women wear décolleté). Her phone kept ringing—she chatted in three or four languages while making fresh orange juice for the boys. Yes, you drank in the home—a home you might dream of. If you were going to live forever in Alexandria, Nour would become a dear friend—you laugh easily together, your observations interest her and your children are already close. But the die has been cast. You are not going to live in Alexandria much longer. You will say good-bye to the man who has touched your heart. You will never be able to deepen the love that you've found. Some questions will remain unanswered. Others you've learned to stop asking.

The door to Nour's villa is tightly shut when you pass. Like other private homes on the hill where you live, it has a high, opaque wall around it with broken glass and barbed wire at the top—too high even for the sick and desperate cats to scale. There darts one now, under a car. You try not to look at the cats under the cars because sometimes they are sleeping and sometimes they are dead. The trash men dispose of their bodies, you suppose. The trash men! With their toothy brooms. The work of Sisyphus.

Now you have to really watch where and how you walk. The street narrows so that you can't simply lean against a parked car to avoid the one speeding up the hill—you have to take to the sidewalk when they roar past. Sidewalks always pose a challenge. You tell yourself that sidewalks are a Zen exercise in awareness, balance, coordination. Deep holes appear from nowhere, strange rusty rods protrude from the broken concrete, and live electrical wires dangle from above (just the other day, a driver from Alex's school was hospitalized from electrocution). If there is hosing protruding from an adjacent building, you may be doused with a disagreeable liquid,

as you already have been, twice. If there's construction, tools or materials may fall. You have seen death, in the form of aluminum siding, land just in front of you. An odd cable may catch at your ankles. The fact that the obstacles are intermittent makes navigation all the more challenging. It keeps you alert. A sprig of bougainvillea, a blue-glass vase, a brass bell—some small trinket may catch your eye when you should be avoiding the box of rusty metal in your path. The big cartons sometimes serve as beds. Once you thought you were looking at a carton full of trash and it moved.

Now you are almost at the main street. You will stop and buy a paper, as you always do, from the newsman at the corner who repairs his portion of the sidewalk, sweeps the concrete clean. He is old enough to have lived through Nasser, Sadat and thirty years of Mubarak. He remembers when Egypt was a cosmopolitan center, when foreigners bought out his international press, when women showed their faces, legs, arms, and the city streets were tidy and clean, the buildings kept up, the roads and sidewalks freshly paved. You represent, in your own humble way, hope—you can see it in the pleasure he takes in handing you a perfectly folded paper. For him, the odd foreigner is a sign that perhaps Egypt can emerge from decades of oppression, that perhaps the extremists will be mollified, that the rot could be incised from the infrastructure and wounds heal. You feel sorry for the newsman because week after week the same costly *National Geographic* is stubbornly on display. Occasionally he has a *Newsweek* or a *Decouvert*, and occasionally you buy it, although it costs fifteen dollars. Most of the time you give him one Egyptian pound for the *Egyptian Gazette*, thank him kindly, and continue on your way.

As you do today. You are always, it seems, continuing on your way. No matter what happens, you keep moving. It's something that's hard to understand about yourself. You look at yourself and wonder. Sometimes it's even hard to think of

yourself in the first person, the one who has experience instead of the one watching.

As you are now.

DAWN-MICHELLE BAUDE is the author of several poetry volumes, including *Finally: A Calendar* (MindMade 2009) and *The Flying House* (Parlor Press 2008), among others. Her prose has appeared in *Exquisite Corpse*, *Newsweek International* and *Vogue*.

Kali's Dance

Marc-Anthony Taylor

They danced as the world fell around them. Her head on his shoulder, his hand placed delicately on her waist. Steven could hear people scream in the distance, causing him to start.

"Shhh," her soft voice tickled his ear. "It will be done soon." He swept her round in a spin as lightning flashed above them, followed immediately by the cymbal crash of thunder.

Not long before, the sun had been shining and children had played on the streets. They called out to one another in their games of hide and seek or tag. A girl screamed at the sight of a slug in her brother's hand, teasing a squeal of joy from the brother. Water balloons were thrown and footballs kicked.

In the shadows of his living room Steven sat, tapping his nervous fingers on the threadbare armchair that had once belonged to his mother. Usually when he sat there memories of his mother brought him calm. The smell of her perfume, soft and sweet, would fill his nose bringing comfort and security.

Not today though. Today he was going to go too far.

Eyes squeezed shut, Steven, somehow, managed to lead his partner. He had never danced before, never had the opportunity, and yet he felt graceful. It was a strange feeling.

"What will happen to them?"

He couldn't bring himself to look. His ears were filled with a music now, at once violent and gentle. His own voice part of the melody.

When she spoke it was a gentle soothing kiss in his head: "What do you want to happen to them?"

"Shit-head Steven! What's the matter, mummy's boy? You shit your pants?"

Brian Denning, Steven's tormentor since primary school, towered over him drawing back his foot for another kick. Fanned out behind him were his usual squad of vapid goons. Not an original thought in one of them, his mother had always said.

The size twelve landed with a dull thump on Steven's backside, eliciting a yelp of pain.

Denning beamed down at him, "I heard you get it worse from your dad." One of the goons plucked up the courage and aimed a kick at the prone boy's head.

Steven felt it connect, warm blood trickling down his face.

The whole group laughed and a wad of spit hit his hair.

The beat was faster now, punctuated by explosions and screams.

All around them things were launched into the air, flung about as if in a tornado. Somewhere, in the background of the song, Steven could here other things, discordant notes, calls that he wasn't sure he wanted to be real.

Eyes still screwed shut, his hand tightened on his partner's waist.

"I-I don't know."

Faces of the people he knew filled his mind. They weren't all bad, just most of them.

"Will it happen to everyone?"

She let out a deep laugh; Steven was embarrassed to find himself aroused by it.

"No, little one. You do not have so much power."

Despite the laugh he didn't feel like she was mocking him.

"Only those in your little world."

"You are always off on your own little world, ya wee shite!"

His dad was drunk again.

Steven had made the mistake of doing his homework with his headphones on.

His father had come in drunk, wanting someone to shout at, and didn't appreciate not being heard.

"Just like your useless mother."

A hand lashed out, leaving a red mark on the boy's face.

"You should have died when she did."

Steven thought his dad might have went to bed. Then he heard the belt buckle being undone and began to shake.

"I'll show you, boy."

If he had thought it would have helped Steven would have screamed.

The discordant notes started to incorporate themselves into the tune, no longer sounding quite so dangerous. He knew those sounds were made by nothing human, but he didn't care. He shouldn't have to suffer anymore.

"I want them to pay," he whispered, afraid of the words he was uttering.

"To do that you have to open your eyes, honey. Look at me." There was a smile in her tone.

Gently she pushed him back, so that they were standing face to face. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

At first they darted from side to side, unable to take it all in, then his mind began to separate things.

There was fire everywhere, not red and orange but blue and green. Bits of the sky were crashing onto streets already cracked and torn; cars were crushed or ripped apart. The roofs of houses had collapsed leaving ragged scars on the facades.

People ran in all directions, some cut and bloodied, others with a look of madness that was infinitely worse. Behind the people came creatures cloaked in shadow, threatening shapes with hints of violence. Their voices now sounded sweet rather than terrible.

Then his eyes landed on her.

Her smile was sharp as a diamond blade, but stunning. She was the most beautiful creature he could ever have imagined. Like something out of a film, with alabaster skin, blood-red lips and almond-shaped eyes. The eyes caught him: black orbs that looked so deep, he could easily lose himself in them.

"See what I do for you, my boy?"

She pulled him closer once again, making him take the lead in their dance.

"Now we come to the question of price."

Steven pulled his head back slightly, saying, "Price?"

Her smile was still sharp, still stunning, but was now more terrible than the monsters had been.

"Nothing is free, my darling. Nothing."

She kissed him, and he fell into darkness.

MARC-ANTHONY TAYLOR recently had his first story published in the eZine Estronomicon. You can find more flash fiction from him at gileaslostson.blogspot.com.

Run for the Border

Louis Wittig

Jim Manzlyk did not see the cop car idling under the lamp post in the parking lot on his left. Or his Grand Am's speedometer, or the blinking yellow traffic light, or the curb. He saw the Taco Bell and when it filled the windshield he slammed the brakes.

Hurtling out of the car he grabbed the restaurant's locked front door with both hands and jerked back with all his weight. He sprinted around back, praying under his breath and sweating everywhere else. The drive-thru window was dark. Still, he wheezed up to it and peered in. A perfunctory fluorescent bulb hidden deep in the kitchen dropped threads of pale light along the edges of wire shelves and sleeping registers. Jim pushed up onto his tiptoes and wrestled back his breath so he wouldn't fog the glass.

He needed an angle or shape or clue or anything to surface from the shadows and show him that this was the Taco Bell he had been at two days ago. He would have settled for anything that suggested it wasn't one of the six other Taco Bells he'd tried since midnight. He just couldn't tell.

It was at that same time of night, years ago, that Jim had pulled in to a rest stop on I-90 for a Coke. As he waited in line to pay, an old man sidled up next to him and claimed that his brother-in-law swore that he could taste the difference between bottles of Coke.

"Like they were bottles of wine. Can you believe that?"

No, Jim couldn't. But the old man's eyes had grown in anticipation of Jim's answer, so he said the man's brother-in-law should work for Coke, as a taster.

"Oh, he died years ago," said the coot, unmoved. "Heart attack."

This memory floated up underneath the silhouettes of upturned chairs and stacked trays like the ghost images in those Magic Eye puzzles that eluded and humiliated him for a brief period in the '90s. Higher on his tiptoes now, Jim's calves were burning. The thought slipped out that all these places were identical.

He knew that wasn't true. It had been the day before yesterday, driving down Central Avenue after lunch, when Jim had seen the cheddar orange blur of a Taco Bell roof out of the corner of his eye. It was unexpected and obscured behind a Mr. Subb he knew well. It must have been new. Jim had already eaten, but it had been forever since he'd been to Taco Bell. He turned around at the next light.

Before he got up to the counter he was already thinking he should leave. Just from the walls—lush red and irregular like hand-smearred clay—he suspected that he'd wandered into an unadvertised line of members-only Taco Bells. The windows flared into Mission-style arches with crosses at the top. Between the windows, framed black and white photos of single clouds in desert skies and soulful pottery forced him to consider the alternate possibility that Taco Bell had been bought out by a chain of art galleries. Either way, he was about to head back to the door when he saw the only other customers: Two black kids, boys, one older and one younger, leaning over a table, concentrating on a wordless game of rock–scissors–paper.

"Welcome, sir," said a voice from behind, jangling Jim. "Is there any way in which I might help you?" The voice had a British accent.

Jim turned around and the man behind the counter put down the lint roller he had been working over his uniform. He looked like Santa Claus' aristocratic older brother—slimmer, with a cleaner, closer beard—but every bit as sincere; maybe more. His nametag said Gordon.

“We're serving our complete menu today,” Gordon chuckled.

Jim ordered a chicken quesadilla combo with a crunchy taco: a pure reflex.

“Excellent, sir. You are number 175,” Gordon nodded towards the pick-up end of the formica bar. “Shaniqua will serve you shortly.” Gordon resumed his grooming.

Jim meandered down-counter, running his fingers idly along the condiment station and bringing them up cleaner than they'd gone down. He noticed the two boys weren't playing anymore. The older one had curled up into a peanut on the seat and fallen asleep. The younger one had disappeared.

“175.” Shaniqua called it out like a nickname she had made up for him. Jim looked up and beheld her. She was so lithe and perfectly proportioned that if she had been playing an employee on a Taco Bell commercial, he would have taken it as insult to his intelligence. She held his tray out to him with elegance. And just as he took it, the small boy darted out from where he'd been huddling behind her leg, vaulted himself up on the counter and shouted, “175!”

He fell back laughing and darted away into the kitchen.

“I'm sorry, sir, I could just not find a sitter today. Now let me guess: You're a hot man.”

Before Jim could stammer, she was sprinkling a handful of hot-sauce packets on his tray. Jim was actually a mild-sauce man, which made him love it even more.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” she asked.

“Not that I can think of,” he said.

It was true. He couldn't think of a thing. He felt that his mind had been washed, dried, fluffed and folded. Jim floated back to a corner booth. The dining room and the world outside it—barely distinct through the current of late afternoon light coming in through the window—relaxed as he did. His combo was exactly the same soft, unctuous consolation it had always been and would be forever.

He did not feel like leaving when he had finished. He bussed his tray and refilled his Wild Cherry Pepsi twice and sat, and he still did not feel like leaving. There was no one looking back at him. No glances wondering what kind of hopeless loser finds a Taco Bell comfortable, or thinking he might be homeless.

On the periphery of his hearing, Gordon murmured a joke and Shaniqua laughed. The hush that followed in the subsequent hours that Jim sat, then slouched, then laid there with his back against the wall, arms on the table and over the back of the seat—felt like a quiet dip in a conversation between him, Gordon, Shaniqua and the Yum! Brands corporation. Jim missed a meeting that afternoon, hanging out in a Taco Bell.

Jim never would have combined the words like that, or said them out loud. Nonetheless it was true. Jim believed in Taco Bell. Always had. And in McDonald's and Burger King and Wendy's and Pizza Hut and KFC and Arthur Treacher's and Nathan's and all their competitors, always and everywhere.

Deep in the flickering ball of Christmas lights that made up the sum total of Jim's existence, three neurons had knotted. One was a half-second memory of his mother holding his hand and opening a Dairy Queen door. The second one glowed blue with 39 years of commercials, playing and promising in an ever lengthening loop. The last held the chemically coded taste of a perfectly salted French fry.

This little lump was the nub of Jim's faith that the McRib sandwich would taste as good as it looked on the commercials; that he deserved a break today; that the 11 herbs and spices represented a genuine mystery; that individual locations were part of something larger than themselves, and that chains had discernable personalities; that the high-school girls running the registers upsold you because they wanted you to get the better deal.

It was a difficult faith to keep when staring down urine-draped toilet seats in anarchic bathrooms and surly 17-year-olds who shouted "Have a nice day" as they looked right through you. It wobbled when he opened his Popeye's bag to find they'd forgotten his biscuits and the only thing he had wanted had been those biscuits. It deserted him entirely after each meal and left him squirming on the toilet at home, feeling like a demon was inflating the spare tire around his waist.

Yet it was never away for more than a few hours. And even while it was gone, the hope that it rested on remained: The hope that somehow these places knew him as well as he knew them. Lolling his head around the dining room it seemed, for the first time, a reasonable hope.

Jim was able to leave only by planning when he'd be back. He didn't want to ruin the experience by getting sick of the food. He decided to come back for lunch the day after next. When he did, he found the doors locked and the lights off. The day after that it had become a Lens Crafters.

Back in his apartment that night, Jim clearly remembered passing the Taco Bell behind the Mr. Subb on Central, but the only explanation that made sense was that he did not actually remember this, and that his Taco Bell was actually inside one of the half-dozen other Albany County Taco Bells he knew. Traffic was light this late. He could check them out and still be back for *SportsCenter*.

What snapped Jim away from the nebulous kitchen was not what the officer said, but the officer's laughter.

"Hungry, sir?"

Jim tripped backwards off his toes and tried to stammer out that he was looking for a friend. The cop cut Jim off, to tell him how hilarious he'd been.

"Like a pig on two legs with its snout pressed—"

Laughter was coming out of the cop's nose. When he collected himself, eventually, he made Jim recite the alphabet backwards and left him with a ticket for reckless driving.

Google could only find one record of a Taco Bell on Central Avenue, and it was for a Taco Bell on a Central Avenue in a city in Indiana that Jim had never heard of. He eventually did get an actual person on the line at 1-800-TACO-BELL: a Hindu voice that rounded her vowels into pearls and identified herself as Roxy. Jim explained and Roxy listened so intently, he thought, that when he stopped to breathe he could hear through her, to the tiny sound of phones ringing in the background.

She asked him how he would rate his experience at Taco Bell: poor, fair, good or excellent? Definitely excellent. She quizzed him on cleanliness and customer safety measures. Excellent. Excellent. Excellent. He asked if all of these excellents would mean raises for Gordon and Shaniqua. Roxy dropped away into silence. After a moment, she admitted that her system did not contain the names of individual Taco Bell team members. Nor could she find any Taco Bell locations on Central Avenue in Albany. But his survey participation was very important in improving customer satisfaction throughout all Taco Bell restaurants. If he would provide his e-mail

address, Roxy said, she would like to e-mail him a coupon for a free soft or crunchy taco, for his feedback. Jim accepted only reluctantly.

He didn't have any use for it. He went back to the Lens Crafters once. He tried on sunglasses, and tried to think of a reason why they would know anything about the previous tenants, until a woman in white coat asked if she could help him. "Just looking," he mumbled, and hustled out.

On a Saturday, on the desperate chance that Yum! Brands had forced his Taco Bell to convert and relocate, Jim drove two hours to a new KFC in Syracuse and strained to hear an accent over the drive-thru intercom. Peeling away and gunning it out into the wide open range of the weekend afternoon, Jim told himself that these places had been lying to him his whole life. But what was he going to do about it? He had to eat.

A chicken place opened next to Jim's office. He couldn't leave the building without passing it, or the button-sized Mexican woman who stood in front holding out \$1-off "Grund Opening" coupons. He took one once and carelessly looked her in her needy eyes. Then he felt obliged to eat their mangy popcorn chicken for lunch every day until a rainy afternoon forced her off the sidewalk, after which point he took to walking on the other side of the street.

No place else stuck. Jim's colon was getting too old for McDonald's more than twice a week. Burger King had gone the way of the buffalo. Arby's was a roast beef novelty act. Subway was a refreshing change of pace. Jim felt healthy just for opening the door. Yet no matter how much rehearsed his order in his head—Italian bread, footlong, Italian sandwich, green peppers, extra olive oil—when he got to the front of the line he always blurted out the sandwich type before the bread, and the kid behind the counter would look at him like he was wearing a unitard. Denny's reminded him

how nice it was to be served. At the one on Wolf Road Jim could get a Grand Slam and a coffee, and if they weren't busy, the waitresses would keep refilling him, without attitude, all night. If they were busy, though, they would stick him at a table in the middle of the floor and it would be like eating pancakes in a crowded hallway, and he could be left there dangling over his empty plate for 45 minutes until they brought him his check.

Rolling out from a Dunkin Donuts lot and onto Madison Ave after dinner one night, Jim's half-full Pepsi tipped out of the cup holder and spilled on his leg. Irritated by the moisture nipping through his jeans, he clenched his tongue against the roof of mouth and tasted the dull fructose sap lingering there. And it just popped into his head: He was tasting the Pepsi through his skin.

He bantered with the idea like it was an absurd and giddy companion. He could turn his new talent in to a county fair freak show act. Or he and the guy who could distinguish between bottles of Coke could form a superhero team and use their powers to solve soft-drink related crimes.

The chance appearance of the memory of the Coke man choked off Jim's good mood. He still didn't believe such powers were possible. He'd seen the inside of a bottling plant on the Discovery Channel once: neatly stacked to the warehouse rafters with stainless steel monoliths hissing and spinning out an immeasurable chain of black bottles. What was ominous about this memory now was that it suddenly came with a fizzling hope that he was wrong, and that each sloshing plastic tub could have more to it than that.

Who was this Coke idiot anyway? A total nut job. A shut-in who assaulted the attention of relatives with preposterous claims. Maybe it was possible that he had,

once, gotten a bottle with a half-ounce more corn syrup than usual and being an isolated kook to begin with, had spun out that instant of sensory flux into an ornate delusion, festooning it for the rest of his life with mundane distinctions until it grew to be the only thing that people could remember about him even a few months after he died. Jim was still thinking about this when he blew past the turn for his apartment complex.

And he hadn't entirely squeezed it out of his head by the time he marched into Price Chopper ready to cook for himself. He stumbled early on in the produce department, forcing himself to search for an unintimidating green vegetable until he realized he's been there for 20 minutes, and if he didn't pick up something soon, someone would think he was a retarded employee. He fled the area with a bag of Granny Smith apples. Jim fought the urge to beeline for frozen foods. Things got baffling in the bakery department and he took three redundant loaves of bread. By the dairy section he was in despair. He saw the only thing he could make from the mess he'd gathered were apple sandwiches on paper plates with baking soda on the side. He seized an armload of Hamburger Helper boxes and five pounds of ground beef and kept his head down at checkout.

It turned out great, actually. The slow sound of simmering meat in his long silent kitchen reminded Jim of a crackling fireplace. Chili Cheese, Double Cheeseburger Mac, Cheesy Italian Shells and Cheesy Hashbrown took their places in the rotation. Each tucked an identical warm, saline blanket over Jim's tongue, which juxtaposed perfectly with the sweet bite of the Granny Smiths he cut up. So perfectly, that he was sure he was taking his life in the right direction when he decided to slice the apples directly into the Hamburger Helper. The next night he was at Wendy's.

Jim would have told you that he'd forgotten his Taco Bell right up until he saw the sign. It was almost six. A wall of clouds that had been incipient all day was finally pushing over downtown. The last state workers leaving out North Pearl Street towards 787 flicked their headlights on against the gloaming. Rain was already falling when Jim hurried out of his lawyer's building onto the alley where he'd parked. As he hesitated in the doorway he glanced over and saw a sheet of copy paper taped to the faded-yellow brick office building across the way, with a hand drawn purple arrow pointing to a service door.

It was the particular purpleness of the arrow that drew Jim down a series of cinderblock hallways, to an old marble lobby, to another arrow, pointing up, taped to the desk of a sleeping security guard. He rode the shoebox elevator to every floor and searched. The hallways were over-carpeted and airless. The opaque windows set in the ancient wooden doors looked like they should have had private detectives' names stenciled on them, but had nothing. The only difference on the top floor was that at the end of the last hall there was an aluminum-framed glass panel door pouring out white light. And through it was Gordon, standing square behind the register.

"Our first customer of the day! Welcome!" he called as Jim tentatively made his way to the counter.

Shaniqua appeared from the kitchen with her thumb in an accounting textbook.

"What a treat," she said. "I better plug in the microwave."

Jim wasn't entirely speechless. He could order a number seven combo. He couldn't tell whether either of them remembered him. Shaniqua held a tender, mothering note in her voice as called his number. That could have been the way she always was though. Jim wanted to ask her about what had happened on Central, but not as badly as he thought he would. What he desperately wanted to ask her was how

she was, what she was doing with her life, and how the boys were. Of course, if she didn't remember him, this would make him a stalker.

"This is a strange space," is what he managed to get out as she was turning back to the kitchen.

"Yeah, it is. Mr. Abdulkawan, he's the franchisee, you could say he has a different business sense."

The dining room was a mustard yellow box that had until recently been a waiting room in the office of an ancient and lonely doctor. Three booths huddled against the far wall. In front of them a single table tilted on the uneven floor. The only window was only part of a window, in the far corner, halved by the butt end of a hastily thrown-up sheetrock wall. The counter had never been meant for exchanging anything larger than insurance forms. If Gordon was working the register and Shaniqua calling out orders they would be shoulder to shoulder. Just to the right of the door, the hallway to the exam rooms was blocked by a bank of soda dispensers. A universe of incongruities had been miniaturized in here. To Jim, it was majestic.

He took the window booth, knowing that he should have been panicking. As he ate, he reminded himself that this could be a dream and that even if it wasn't, he would have to leave soon and this should terrify him. At the same time his head felt so pleasantly, thickly creamy, like a vat of melted cheese being stirred slowly and rhythmically, that all his efforts at reason dissolved.

He was asleep on his arms before his quesadilla was even out of the wrapper. When he woke, hours later the room was dim, except for a small light in the kitchen they had left on for him, and a Styrofoam doggie-bag box perched by his elbow, with a note taped on:

"The door locks behind you. We open tomorrow morning at 8. ☺"

Jim was back at 7:45. Gordon was already there, scrambling eggs for a special southwest breakfast burrito that wasn't technically on the menu. Jim returned at breakfast—and dinnertime—for weeks. Neither Gordon nor Shaniqua ever mentioned his nap. They remained bafflingly polite. When Jim got sick of tacos they didn't mind that he bought in McDonald's.

The only thing was, the small talk never grew. Jim took comfort in the fact that they weren't any closer to the handful of other customers. From his window booth, Jim saw a young man in a black double-breasted suit attempt to pay for a grilled stuffed burrito with a succession of maxed-out credit cards. He apologized as Gordon handed each one back, confessing first that he wasn't good at juggling so many cards; then that he was a complete and total fraud; and finally, that he was poor.

"No problem, sir. It costs Taco Bell about 15-cents to make these things," was all Gordon said. Shaniqua handed the man his to-go bag.

Then there was the old harpy. She came in, ordered, then returned her nachos supreme without touching them and sat back in her chair, sideways, waiting for her replacement like a gray flannel idol expecting a sacrifice. And Shaniqua sacrificed: she came out, put the new nachos on the table and kneeled in front of the old woman. She took the old woman's nearly transparent hand in hers and squeezed gently.

"I am so sorry," Shaniqua said. "You need low-fat sour cream. I know how it is. My aunt has high cholesterol, too."

The woman mumbled for a moment and gazed over Shaniqua's shoulder; partly embarrassed by the sincerity, partly stunned, as if she was seeing every eye-rolling salesgirl and non-English proficient gas station attendant she had suffered in her excruciatingly long life forming a line behind Shaniqua, waiting for their turn to apologize. Shaniqua held the woman's hand for ten minutes.

Jim did what he could to pry at the margins of Gordon and Shaniqua's pleasantries. How was Mr. Abdulkawan doing these days? How long had they been at this location? Their customer-service jujitsu was flawless.

"Feels like we've been here forever," Gordon would say and chuckle. "That's the way it is with work, right sir?" All he could find out about Mr. Abdulkawan was that he rarely came by.

Not long after he had decided to stop nursing his curiosity, Jim went for a Pepsi refill on his way out. The plastic nozzle coughed as he poked his cup under it, and what came out was still and bitter. Shaniqua and Gordon were back in the kitchen. Jim didn't feel right bothering them. It stayed broken for weeks.

Gordon was astonished when Jim finally told him. He tipped himself a cup and sipped thoughtfully, swishing and squinting more than he had to.

"I don't know sir," Gordon shrugged. "Tastes about right to me."

Jim took Gordon's cup and took a swig for himself.

"Are you sure? It's not even carbonated," said Jim.

"I could have Mr. Abdulkawan check the hoses when he comes in."

"But it tastes fine to you as it is right now?"

"It tastes like Pepsi."

Gordon apologized for the difference of opinion. He reached behind the counter and came back with one of the large-size plastic cups. He presented it to Jim.

"For our best customer," said Gordon, tapping his high-beam smile. "We really are sorry for the inconvenience. But consider this good for life. Any beverage. Any time. Complimentary."

Normally he liked these cups, for their durability and how they commemorated meals he would have otherwise forgotten. When he got one of them he always meant

to wash it out at home and keep it so eventually he would never have to buy another cup again. Invariably, he only remembered this plan after the cup had been sitting in the car for days and was caked beyond hope with tenacious globules of dried cola. Normally, too, “best customer” would have been the sort of compliment he noticed. Jim took the cup and half-filled it with Sierra Mist, just to be gracious, and left.

He knew that moping for a week and four days was an infantile way of handling it. Exactly how much did he expect from his Taco Bell? Should Gordon and Shaniqua have to wear their hair like him? It made as much sense as expecting them to have the same constellation of taste buds. They would have let him bring his own Pepsi. They would have let him make his own Pepsi in there. When his self-deprecation could make him laugh again he went back to find that it was gone.

It wasn't hard for Jim not to mention his Taco Bell to anyone. He only came close once. Picking at a plate a of bourbon chicken in the Colonie Center food court he overheard the wad of teenagers at the table behind him throwing straws at each other and complaining. Everything here sucked. Cajun Café sucked. Sbarro sucked. That sushi place was grody. One teenager felt like Taco Bell. Another remembered that there was one at the Crossgates food court. They all agreed on the awesomeness of Taco Bell, but by the time Jim decided to turn around though, they were gone too.

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