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Editor's Note: Hyperbole Free

Word up, peoples. Here we are with the sixth sensational issue of Jersey Devil Press. I'm in the middle of both moving AND getting laid off, so, for the sake of not overtaxing my brain, I've decided to skip making ridiculous connections between our stories and just dive right into the awesomeness that is this issue.

I know. It's rough for me too. But I think you'll survive.

Starting us off is yt sumner's beautifully bleak "Big Girl," followed by Jim Walke's epic tale of brothers and pants, "Hand Me Down." Next is Morowa Yejidé's stirring "To Do List" and the snooping sisters of Chris Yodice's "Normal After All." We close the issue with what might be my favorite title of all time: "Out of Steam Punk and Zombies Comes Bruce Lee," by Jenny Ortiz. It is absolutely as wonderful as it sounds.

So there you go. Read them, enjoy them, tell the authors that you love them. We'll be back in thirty with issue seven, and I promise to make the most strained, ridiculous associations you've ever seen.

-- Eirik Gumeny

Big Girl

yt sumner

I'm getting bigger.

Andrew wags his tail and it thumps on the floor. Andrew's big too, he's an Irish wolfhound and that's the biggest dog in the world. I know I'm bigger because my yellow dress is tight and it was baggy when I first got it. That was when Mum was watching the TV a lot and always frowning. She'd say shoo, when I tried to look over her shoulder and see the fires and the bad men.

Mum said not to worry and not to watch the TV. But just before she went to get help, the TV and the lights went out for good. It's not that bad though. The red sky hurts my eyes a bit in the day, but it's real pretty at night. Like a nightlight's always on.

Mum's been gone to get help for a long time. I don't know how long but I find an advent calendar to count the days. It's one that shows Christmas in the snow, like it was in England. I stop counting the days after I eat baby Jesus.

I sleep a lot.

I'm T-Rex. I'm a lizard king. I start in an egg. I grow a tail. My teeth get huge. I scratch out and I hatch. The sky isn't red and howling. It crackles like the sea. A bath big enough for me to swim in. I get hungry so I start to eat. I get bigger. I munch on little dinosaurs that munch on leaves. My tiny claws pick their bones out of my teeth.

I wake up a bit upset because I don't even eat meat and hide my tears in my pillowcase. But then I remember Mum isn't here anymore so I get up and brush my teeth. I keep scrubbing until the taste of baby dino is gone then I go out to the porch to check on the speck.

Mum said to watch for the speck. Watch carefully and make sure it's help before I run out and wave them in. She told me about the bad men and how they were hungry and I said I could just give them some cans and she reached up and held my chin and said if the bad men came, they wouldn't want cans. I had to run the other way. Into the black trees and ugly bushes.

At first I was excited about all the cans in the basement. I stacked them up against the wall in the kitchen as high as I could. There's lots of spaghetti. Most days I walk around the house eating spaghetti worms out of the can then I watch the horizon. I watch for the speck of dust that is going to grow like a thundercloud between the black peach tree and the well. Mum said not to go near that either. That I might fall in.

One night it rains. I love the sound it makes on the cracked tin roof. But I love it more on my skin. Boom. Thud. Smash. I run outside and Andrew is barking next to me. The sky is the darkest red and I run under it. I dance around on the black dirt and I yell that I'm a big girl. The biggest in the world. Andrew is barking and he starts to howl and growl he runs near the well and I run after him and put my hand out to grab his wet fur but he snaps at me. I say don't be scared Andrew but he runs for the gate. He runs and he doesn't look back. Something in the rain sounds like it's screaming and I run inside and hide under my bed the best I can fit.

Andrew doesn't come back.

Things were sort of okay with Andrew still here, even without Mum. I didn't like being told by other kids that Andrew wasn't a good name for a dog. I don't remember anything else about school and I wipe my eyes and eat some spaghetti. I don't know why I stopped going to school. Maybe I got too big.

I wait for Mum to come back. Or Andrew. I don't like spaghetti as much as I used to. But I still eat it, and it's nice to paint the empty cans when it rains. I don't like the rain as much either.

One night I dream there are angels at the window. They spread their wings and tell me a story.

You were born on a night where the moon was full and pink, just like fairy floss, in a room where silver sparkles tickled the clouds, trapeze angels flew and danced in celebration, and when you came out you didn't cry, you just smiled, and you said hello. You were the biggest star of the show.

I wake up and smile. If the Circus came and found me they would be so proud of how big I'd got. Then we could go and find Mum. It starts to rain and I cry a bit because somewhere out there Andrew is scared too. I get up and paint some cans with the colour of his fur. I paint one with his big black nose.

In the morning I find a lizard on the porch.

He's baking in the sun, a little sizzly steam coming off his back and I pick him up to say hello and he breaks. Right in two. I hold his squiggly tail as he slithers off. I feel a bit sad. That he would rather break than sit in my big hand. Also that my dress

tears in a couple of places when I bend down to pick him up. But mostly because he breaks. I take the tail inside and I put it inside one of my Andrew cans. He already had four legs and big floppy can ears. When I stick the tail on the end it wiggles and wags and he looks pretty happy.

Now I'm glad the lizard broke.

The Andrew cans start sleeping in my room, he comes for walks on the porch while I watch for the speck. But last night I forgot to bring him in with me.

The Circus is coming. They sing songs and do cartwheels. The Alligator Man snaps his teeth. The Fat Lady sings. They throw spaghetti worms into the air, and I look down and see that they're really lots of tiny lizards, and they all have Andrew's head.

I wake up and my hair was sweaty and it's the morning. My legs don't hurt. But they're so long. I get up and hit my head as I walk out of my bedroom. I think maybe the house shrunk a bit when I was asleep. I grab a new can and go out to the porch and sit on the steps next to Andrew. He's watching the horizon and something's different. My eyes feel funny. I open my can and see they're pears.

I look at the pear tree.

And see it.

The speck.

Finally.

I step off the porch and my toes get dusty. I run to the gate, right by the well and the speck gets bigger. Maybe it's Mum, I think. But it starts to make a sound.

The Circus is coming!

I yell at Andrew Cans and he wags his tail so hard it flies off.

I clap my hands and wave them in but then a sound comes from the well.

Help.

I lean over the edge and look into the black.

Hello?

Help.

Mum? What are you doing down there?

I put my ear right over the hole but Mum doesn't say anything else.

It's okay, Mum, the speck is nearly here. The Circus is coming to help us.

I walk back to the gate and wave my arms up high. But as it gets closer, Andrew Cans comes closer and whines a bit, he clatters as he shakes.

It's okay.

I say as I smooth my tight yellow dress, bursting at the seams.

I'm going to be the star of the show.

yt sumner likes words and people that write them. People that listen to them. People that read them. Eavesdroppers. Stutterers. Silvertongues. She was born in the UK, raised all over Australia and settled happily in Melbourne. Her short stories have appeared in various literary journals, anthologies and magazines and she's currently coaxing a motley group of them into a collection.

Hand Me Down

Jim Walke

The pants were the blue of a police strobe. They had cuffs large enough to smuggle an immigrant family into the country, and corduroy rows as deep and straight as Russian veldt farmland. Over their lifetime, they survived extremes of fire and cold, water, even immersion in concrete and Detroit steel without losing that damned perfect, permanent crease.

Gil's older brother, Theo, unwrapped them in the same year in which Gil received his toy carpenter's set (an odd gift for a boy who wanted to be an astronaut) with the hammer too light to pound anything significant and a handsaw too dull for wood but fine for sawing hands, thereby introducing both boys to the delicate art of lying to women — Mom first, then others as the years went by — about the origins of unique scars.

The origin of the pants, however, was lost to history. The brothers speculated about Great Aunt Felma, who would wrap any random object that caught the fancy of her lazy eye, things like red shoelaces and pimp jewelry bought on street corners. She didn't take credit for the pants, though, and Mom shook her head.

"Maybe they're from Dad," Gil said.

"Maybe they're from Santa," Mom said.

"Santa's not real," Theo said.

"More real than your father, at this point," Great Aunt Felma said. She took a deep, soulful drag on her Marlboro. On the exhale, her lazy eye seemed to trace the

path of the smoke as it curled around the threadbare Christmas tree and up to the popcorn ceiling.

“Who wants cookies?” asked Mom.

So, the pants entered their lives as a mystery. Mom insisted that Theo try them on. When he emerged from the bathroom, Gil stared, but Aunt Felma snorted like the cat when it had a hairball.

“My word,” was the only comment she could get out after her hacking fit.

The pants had a rise of about a foot, which would have simply looked odd on a grown man, but on a thirteen year-old it meant that if Theo got the crotch close to where it belonged, the belt loops hit him around the ribcage. Other parts seemed fractionally out of place, as if the trousers had been assembled from a grab bag of fabric pieces rejected from different sizes and styles, even time periods. It was a golem of a garment. The blue reflected shockingly against human skin, the sort of color that governments might paint nuclear waste containers in a misguided effort to reduce panic. The unknown tailor had used thread of a lighter blue, which gave the unfortunate effect of drawing lines across Theo’s body. To Gil, his brother looked like an animal divided into steaks and chops. Theo stood wall-eyed with fear.

“Oh,” Mom said. She sighed. “More cookies?”

The pants retired to the bottom drawer until the Growth Spurt the following summer, when Theo’s hormones organized and added four inches to his frame in the same number of months, and tossed in a surly attitude for free. Gil heard the G.S. referenced in spitting discussions in the car that made him cover his ears with his Mickey Mouse

sweatshirt. The Spurt appeared to strike indiscriminately. Gil examined himself in the mirror for signs of his own mutation.

The upshot of the Spurt wasn't fully realized until the night of the Halloween dance. Gil watched from under his bedsheet/costume as Theo tried on last year's ToughSkins. Even if he could have gotten the zipper closed, the cuffs, already let out to their limits, hit halfway up his shins. Gil learned three new swear words that night as Theo spat and struggled.

"You could wear the blue pants," Gil offered.

Theo shot him a look so full of rage that Gil added a pillow from the bed to his costume, making his disguise closer to a linen closet than a ghost.

"Try them," his mother urged from where she listened beyond the closed door.

"It'll be dark in the gym, right?" Gil added from behind his pillow.

The possibilities of the dance would have died on the floor, smothered by trousers, if it hadn't been for a blonde girl in the school's flag corps, a Norse maiden with great soft breasts barely contained by her band uniform — shapes so impressive that even ten year-old Gil wondered what they looked like under the bulletproof green polyester. Her name was Wendy, and she'd promised to wait for Theo by the concession stand so they could walk over to the dance together. Wendy the flag-twirler, Wendy of the décolletage, managed what nothing had since last Christmas.

Theo strode off in the pants, the corduroy threshing as rhythmically as a bag of mating zippers. As Mom led Gil to the sidewalk to start the rounds for his last-ever trick-or-treating, he thought he saw tiny arcs of light sprint across the surface of the electric blue, but he forgot it in the excitement of the first Butterfinger of the evening at the Cratchett's.

Later, Gil lay in bed watching the closet door for any sign of boogey-men when Theo slogged into their room.

“How did it go?” Gil asked. “Did you see them?” Wendy’s impressive chest floated into his mind at inopportune times, like zeppelins hovering overhead, equally capable of dropping bombs or toys.

Theo sank down onto his twin bed and turned to the wall, flinching when his face touched the pillowcase. He said nothing for a long stretch. Gil had already hefted a stuffed turtle to chuck at his head when Theo spoke.

“Well, these pants are not 100% cotton.” He’d always had a scientific bent. “They hold a pretty solid static charge,” Theo said. He sounded worn and small. “By the time I’d walked the six blocks to the football field to meet Wendy, and on to the gym, I think I could have jumpstarted Mr. Cratchett’s Buick.”

“He gave me a Butterfinger,” Gil said.

“Shut up, twerp,” Theo said, but his insult sounded tired. He rolled over onto his back.

“I would have been okay, probably, even during the slow dances.” Theo continued. “I couldn’t get that close to Wendy because of the — ”

“Boobs,” Gil said.

“Chaperones.” Theo shook his head, his hair zwish-zwishing against the pillowcase. “But she’d been to the orthodontist.”

That word gave Gil the image of a dinosaur in a white coat.

“I saw her new braces for a split second,” Theo said, “then everything went blank and my nose felt like it caught fire. I thought a meteorite had come through the roof. John and Mallory were dancing next to us, and they said the spark was six inches long.” He sighed. “It melted Wendy’s rubber bands.”

Gil lay still on his own twin bed, close by in the dark, and listened.

“I liked her,” Theo said. “I did.”

The pants went back into the drawer and Theo stayed home most Friday nights, and the tiny burn scar that looked like a parenthesis at the tip of his nose faded, but never disappeared entirely.

Gil grew and Theo simmered while the pants hibernated. Theo inflicted pain on his younger brother with a sense of determination and hard work only attainable with a sibling. Gil got in a few licks, usually while Theo slept, but there were times that he learned to be grateful for his brother’s diligence. In seventh grade, when Wes Schultz, who had been held back so many times that his voice had dropped twice, twisted Gil’s arm up between his shoulder blades, Gil discovered that it didn’t hurt as much as when Theo did it. Wes was a torture dilettante, a dabbler, while Theo verged on artistry. As Gil dangled, he took another lesson to heart and reached out his free hand to snag the flap of cartilage between Wes’s nostrils and pinch it between his thumb and index finger. The troll dropped him, and Gil proceeded to kick him carefully in the knee, the breadbasket and, finally, the family jewels before fleeing. Chalk one up for big brother.

Theo got a car to match the pants: a 1978 Plymouth Voláre, sporting a four-on-the-floor and carpeting the color of dried blood. Ugly car plus anger equaled tickets, which, in

turn, provided the fuel for more anger, with a final sum of many small, varied collisions with other cars, street signs, two trees, an innocent pile of dirt, and one bovine which survived unharmed but cost the Voláre a fender. Gil rode with him, during the short periods between license suspensions, and learned to call the strap over the passenger seat “the Jesus handle.”

On Gil’s fifteenth birthday, Theo packed to leave for college. Gil found a way to be out of the house during Mom’s sure-to-be tearful goodbye. When he returned, a paper grocery sack hunkered dead-center on his bed. After poking it with the butt end of a hockey stick, he looked inside to find his brother’s parting shot. The blue had not faded over the years.

Gil’s own high schoolery pre-occupied him — girls, mostly, without great success but certainly more than his brother, as learning was also accomplished by absorbing what not to do — but by the time spring rolled around, he’d had an idea for Theo’s birthday. The pants, untouched since Gil had first removed them from the bag, went into the double-layered packing crate that he had lovingly built as his final project in wood shop class. Two hundred screws and a half-gallon of glue held the thing together, the screw heads spaced so closely in places that the metal obscured the pine. The final product weighed close to sixty pounds, and it made a significant dent in Theo’s old mattress.

"This is a birthday present?" Theo asked the next time he came home.

"Yes."

"You made this?"

"Yep," Gil said.

"It wouldn't, by any chance, have a pair of corduroy pants inside?"

"Hard to tell, isn't it?"

Theo sighed, and went looking for a power drill and a crowbar to open his gift.

Gil should have expected what came next. On his sixteenth birthday, a roll-off truck dropped a three-foot cube of compacted metal in the driveway. The invoice came with a note written in Theo's beetling script:

I've decided to give you my old car. It's had a few accidents, but I think you can still get some good use out of it. Oh, by the way, the pants are on the backseat.

They shouldn't have made it. The compression of a ton and a half of steel into something the size of a washing machine must warp and tear at its guts, but the pants had flowed with the process and found a tiny space in which to stay whole. Junior year meant metal shop, and Gil earned his A grade in acetylene torch work, peeling a Voláre like an onion.

The pants went back to Theo crammed into a hardened steel pipe, three feet long and an inch in diameter, with the endcaps welded in place.

Seventeen came and went with no pants in sight, as Theo was busy flunking out of college. He'd withdrawn to his dorm room and didn't come out until the campus police evicted him a month into the next semester.

Gil opened a dresser drawer stuffed with the glossy college brochures that arrived daily. Theo's college, or rather, his former college, lay on top. Gil put it straight into the trash.

They arrived in a five-gallon bucket filled with concrete, the pants ensconced in a coffee can in the center, and left buried in the gravel of a fish tank that was home to a pair of piranhas.

Inside a rubber ball in the monkey exhibit at the zoo.

Beneath the surface of the frozen duck pond on Great Aunt Felma's farm.

Great Aunt Felma died shortly before Gil's twenty-first birthday. She'd made it to ninety-seven, outliving all nine of her siblings.

The brothers stood side by side in front of the coffin where Felma lay looking better than she had in decades. The sarcastic tilt of her head lay set in place by rigor mortis and framed by the tender white satin of the pillow, but the wrinkles had

smoothed from her forehead. She looked like a sleeping girl who'd heard her name called.

They were silent, each alone with his thoughts, or waiting for the other to start, or perhaps simply knowing what would be said, if it were said, and skipping over that to the companionable silence afterward.

"If you wanted to be a total bastard, you could bury the pants with her," Gil finally said. "She always liked gallows humor."

"Slide them down into the lower half of the casket," Theo agreed.

"That would be a terrible thing to do."

"It would put an end to this."

Barry Manilow's "Mandy" eased from the hidden speakers and crept among the flowers. Felma had carried a torch for the coiffed singer her entire life, and when given half a chance would spout her long list of plans if she'd ever caught him alone.

"Do you think it was she — "

"Who gave us the pants?" Theo asked.

Gil nodded. His brother tucked his chin into his chest as he always did when considering a problem. Felma had never admitted to placing the gift under the tree those years ago, but she'd always wanted the details of the latest pants delivery.

Theo's fiancée, Bridget, waited in the stifling, veloured reception room. It took him a moment to realize who she reminded Gil of: the flag-waver from junior high, Wendy. They shared a pair of notable characteristics, of course, but the resemblance was stronger than those. Bridget was attempting a career in dance, a prospect that gravity seemed disinclined to support. Gil feared for the safety of her eventual partners.

“I know we’ve just met,” he said, taking her hand between his two, “but I feel like I can say this to someone who is engaged to marry my beloved brother.”

Bridget tilted her head and looked up at him from beneath her lashes, a move that Gil found to be effective, despite the fact that it looked like it had been practiced in front of a mirror. He grinned.

“Yes?” she said.

“You can do better,” Gil said.

When Theo pushed him, a wrapped package slid out from under Theo’s jacket to land at their feet. He snatched it up and headed for the casket, but Gil put him in a headlock before he could disturb Felma one final time.

“Maybe she doesn’t want it to end,” Gil said.

He felt his brother relax under his grip, and let him go.

After the funeral, Gil didn’t hear from Theo for six months. Gil’s birthday passed with no pants in sight. They’d always talked to each other in fits and starts, calling three times in the same day or picking up the phone to dial each other at the same moment, but in between the weeks and months stretched out without worry. Each knew the other existed and would call if he needed anything. Gil had the feeling that he could close his eyes and point in Theo’s direction, no matter the time or distance between them, like a bird finding its way home.

When Theo did call, Bridget’s name came up four times in the first conversation. “We” had leaked in to nestle among the “I,” and a brightness suffused his tone as if his brain had been waxed and polished. On more than one occasion, phrases came out of Theo that sounded like they had originated in someone else, including the words: career, real estate and family. He’d taken a job as an IT director for a cement plant in a town four hours away, abandoning his plans for an internet start-up. Gil focused on

the idea that his brother seemed happy and tried to forget the way Bridget had curled one of her fingers against the sensitive center of his palm when he'd taken her hand in his.

Theo asked Gil to be his best man. The slide toward the wedding accelerated for months. Gil did a lot of polite listening and suffered through a tux fitting, rehearsal dinner, golf outing. The ceremony and reception passed in a daze for Gil: propping up Theo as he wept at the altar, bribing the bartender to fill the flasks he and the other groomsmen had received as gifts, the slither of the married organist's dress hitting the floor of his hotel room.

That autumn came and went without any pants, but the year after that they entered the home improvement phase. The pants arrived sealed inside a double-pane window, then were buried under a freshly sodded lawn. Theo's buddies from college launched a start-up without him, ran it on venture capital for eighteen months, and sold the company for seventy million dollars. Theo forwarded to Gil the message from one buddy who planned to use his share to pay the Russians for a trip to the space station. Gil deleted it before he reached the end. The jobs that had once seemed temporary for them — stepping stones — became permanent, with Gil in his cubicle at an aerospace company, designing the smallest parts of the rockets he had hoped to one day ride, and Theo keeping the cement plant's computers up and running.

Three days after Gil turned twenty-nine, another note arrived.

She has the pants. And the house. And half of everything else.

The return address was an apartment in a cheap complex at the edge of town. Gil called Theo's cell phone. No answer. His second call was to Mom, who picked up on the first ring. Her answers were short and angry: Bridget had had other men, lots of them, since before the wedding.

He gripped the steering wheel hard on the drive to his brother's old house, trying to keep his speed below double the limit. Bridget opened the door wearing only one of Theo's old dress shirts.

"I thought you might come by," she said. She raised one arm overhead and stretched against the doorframe like a cat. The hem of the shirt rode up her smooth thighs. "I assumed you might wait a little longer, though."

Gil took a deep breath, and followed her into the house.

He walked stiffly up the steps of Theo's apartment complex, which smelled vaguely of piss. His crotch was chafed and raw, and he swung his legs in wide, short steps like a gunslinger in a shootout.

No answer met his knock, so he opened the unlocked front door. The shades were drawn, the lights off, but the stains on the thin carpet still stood out in the gloom. The smell seemed worse inside.

“Bro?”

Rustling in the bathroom. Gil knocked on the flimsy door.

“Go away.”

Gil didn’t answer. He looked at the piles of boxes stacked in the tiny living area.

“Are you still there?” Theo asked through the door.

“No,” Gil said. “I left. Open the door.”

“Piss off.”

“We could argue about it,” Gil said. “Yell, bargain, scream, and then I’ll kick it in anyway. Let’s cut out the middle man, and you can keep the security deposit on your lovely new home. I need your help.”

After a moment of silence, Theo answered. “You need my help?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I can barely breathe,” Gil said, “and I can’t feel my feet.”

The door unlocked with a metallic ping and swung open to reveal Theo with matted hair and three-day beard.

“Jesus,” he said.

Gil looked down at his own lower torso, at the violently blue corduroy pants straining around his waist. They had seemed huge twenty years ago, but, like most of his memories of childhood, they’d shrunk. He could feel grains of concrete trapped in the material, the prod of what might be a tiny splinter of glass.

Theo contemplated his brother for a few seconds.

"You didn't fuck her, did you?"

"She wanted me to."

"I know," Theo said. "She told me."

"I tied her to the bed the way she wanted. Nice and tight," Gil said.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Opened the windows. Took out the screens."

Theo looked up, seeming smaller than ever, as if he, too, had diminished over the years.

"It's a bad year for mosquitoes and black flies," Gil continued.

Theo pondered that for a moment. He nodded. "It is worse than normal."

"Maybe I shouldn't have poured all that honey on her."

The weak fluorescent bulb lit the bathroom like a cheap horror movie. It limned the scar on Theo's nose, and cast shadows at the twitching corners of his mouth.

"What's all this?"

Gil gestured at the items lining the edge of the tub and standing on the toilet: packs of razor blades, booze, rope, pill bottles, a plastic bag. A stainless steel revolver lay in the sink.

"Taking a little survey," Theo answered quietly.

Gil hefted the gun, wiping soap scum off the grip before fitting it to his hand and looking over the sights at a five dollar bottle of vodka.

"Nice collection. I know how hard it is to stop once you get started. Why'd you go with the six inch barrel?" he asked, his voice cracking. "You feeling like a cowboy, too?"

The weapon suddenly felt too heavy to hold, too solid and real and possible, and his hand trembled as he set it down again.

Theo didn't say anything. He kept his eyes on the floor.

Gil picked up a prescription and read the label.

"A. Gerry, DVM?"

That got a response. Theo cleared his throat.

"It's all we had in the house when I left," he said.

Gil waited for him to finish.

"They're, um, they're for the cat. Antibiotics."

Gil placed the bottle gently back on the counter.

"Well, at least you'll clear up that nasty urinary tract infection before you go."

He pawed through the mess until he found a pack of razor blades and tore the top off the package. He fished one out and handed it to his brother.

"Here."

"I don't want to."

"Not that, asshole," Gil said. "Get me out of these pants. The zipper is fused shut, and I think that if I don't restore the circulation soon, my toes will begin to drop off."

Theo leaned forward and reached out toward the blue pants with the razor blade. When he got within a few inches, an arc of intense white-blue light leapt from the pants to the steel, freezing the scene in an electrical snapshot.

"Jesus Christ!"

Theo dropped the razor and shook his hand. The spark had burned a pinhole in his thumb. Gil snickered.

"You knew that was going to happen?" Theo asked.

"I thought it might. Come on, cut me out. These things are making me sterile."

"What if they shock me again?" Theo asked.

“I think that was the last bit of juice they had,” Gil said. “Besides . . . aren’t I worth it?”

He watched as Theo picked up the blade and set to work. The pants were skintight, and he had to carefully slice through the tough material without cutting into the flesh beneath. He traced a line from hip to floor, the corduroy falling away to either side, then did the other leg without so much as scratching Gil. Well, maybe there were a few nicks along the way, but they didn’t hurt.

“Nice boxers,” Theo said.

“Thanks. You still wearing those cheap hotel briefs?”

“Cheap hotel?”

“No ballroom.”

That did it. Theo grinned. They both looked at the shapeless mass of fabric at their feet, all that remained of the once-proud pants.

“Now what do we do?” he asked.

Gil took the razor from him and dropped it in the trash.

“We’ll figure something out,” he said. “First, let’s get out of this shithole. You can stay with me. We’ll pick up your stuff later.”

The boys headed for the door.

Less than a year later, Gil came home late from work to find another suspicious envelope in his mail. Theo had moved out months before, but they still talked every week. The birthday card inside had a cartoon rocket ship on the front, and read, “Now

you are SIX.” Theo had added the “*times 5*” in his own scrawl. His handwriting had gotten worse in his middle age.

My college buddy owed me a favor.

7:25 p.m. – 10 degrees above SSW

Gil checked the time. He held the card in his hand as he walked into the backyard. The glow of the city fell behind him, and the sky had begun to darken to the south. He stood motionless, watching. Right on time it appeared, tracking overhead. The space station hung in low earth orbit, circling the globe every ninety-six minutes in long arcs as if weaving a blanket from threads of night. Somewhere onboard a scrap of blue corduroy streaked through space.

JIM WALKE is a writer, actor and cubicle monkey in the mountains of Virginia, with a freshly-minted MFA that fully qualifies him to sit in his basement and stare at the wall until things start to happen. In his spare moments he wanders the Appalachian Trail, and spends time lying in his hammock and lying. His work has previously appeared in *The Ampersand Review*, *Confluence* and online in *Toasted Cheese*.

To Do List

Morowa Yejidé

I've got to drive up to Ypsilanti this weekend, and it's got to be this Saturday because the Fourth of July weekend is when they run the specials on the grave plots. I want to get a good one. I want one with a tree, a maple. No, an oak. Rodman has the nerve to tell me this morning, after thirty-three years of marriage, that he doesn't *approve* of me going—which is 100% insane because I don't need his approval to pick out my own burial plot. He'll be standing there, arguing with the funeral home director about what's best for his wife, cramming his feelings into long, condescending discussions with the notary public and the attorney. I know him. He'll be stretching his fury and fears into taut, pronounce-each-syllable words to the insurance representative and the social security benefits clerk. And he'll do it all without looking me in the eye.

I don't want to see all of that.

I'll rent a car myself, and I'll drive up to Michigan tomorrow morning and I'll buy my spot at the Ypsilanti Groves of Peace. Done. Then I'm going to dump these damned horse choking pills in the toilet because for one thing, they're placebos anyway. They didn't work six months ago, they don't work now, and they won't work tomorrow. So I'm going to flush them and tell that ridiculous nurse that she can stop tattling on me to the oncologist about his nuclear-research-waste-away medications. If I've got to throw up, let it be from an Atlantic City frankfurter drowning in mustard and sauerkraut, or too much Ben & Jerry's, or motion sickness on the boat Rodman and I used to sail on late Sunday afternoons.

We used to float together on the lake when the water was crystal in the dimming light, when the sun was melting like a great candle.

I've got to get stamps and send my sister Karen a card. I'll write a little note of apology on it too. Because I'm sure I hurt her feelings when she said that I should stop smoking, now that I've been diagnosed, and I said: "What the fuck does it matter now?" That was a low blow, because for one thing Karen likes to hunt and gather all those natural things like mammals used to do in Jurassic times, except she goes to the organic store instead of the Amazon Rain Forest. She's big on the tofu and nuts and berries, and who am I to judge? That's just her bag, and she's never said an unkind thing to me. Not since we were girls, when I wanted to go out with her and her friends, and she would tell me no. And I blew up at her for commenting about the Virginia Slims and offering me a chewable Vitamin C. I lost my cool. But it wasn't as if I didn't know what was happening to me.

I just knew too much.

I'll write a note on Karen's card and think only of when she was sixteen and I was fourteen, and she had miscarried in the bathroom. I had offered my shoulder for her to cry on, and she had said: Let's run away. I'll think only of us riding in the blueness of twilight on the open road, in the station wagon she had stolen from our parents. I had twelve dollars in my pocket and she had a driver's permit in her purse. We had been free of everything in existence for thirty-five minutes on the New Jersey Turnpike before the police caught up with us. But I'll think only of the two of us tracing those white lines, with the smoke stacks signaling our exodus, and the grey air burning our eyes and our souls. I'll think of the fate we thought we controlled for thirty-five minutes when I lick the envelope, when I pin it under the windshield of Karen's car without ringing the doorbell.

I'll leave an informed message on the graduate student's answering machine, Rodman's mistress. She'll want to know that after two years of being aware of her existence, I never once feared her taking my place; that years from now, after she's finished graduate school and started her own family and sat alone with her thoughts by the window, she'll understand that there are many ways to win and there are many ways to lose. She'll erase my message after listening to it, but she'll file it in the archives of her mind. She'll reference it when the time comes and know that even if Rodman had never happened, I was right.

I've got to stop at the post office to send my novel to the United States Copyright Office, with a check for the filing fee. I don't even care anymore that "One Day" was never published because for one thing, I know that there will come a day when all that constitutional white marble will be chipped away. All that monument stone will just be chalky silt, and somebody will go down in that mile-deep basement and open up my yellow-paged unbound book. They'll open up the singular edition of "One Day," and it'll be just as good a read then as it is now. All about the woman, the heroine, that chose career first, that chose a man first, that chose to have pets instead of children. I'm not going to make a copy of it. I'll mail the original.

It'll be the only real proof that I was here.

I've got to get that dress I saw at Neiman Marcus: the red one with the A-line. I am not going to be put down in one of those ugly-ass granny dresses with the lace trim and the darts in the front; the kind of dress that you look at and right away you think of tired, muddy women in the Mississippi Delta. They buried Mama in one of those wrecks and I was never able to shake the sight of it. Mama in that sickening paisley sack, surrounded by bouquets of flowers that should have been given to her when she was living. Not me. That's why I've got to pick up some long stems today. And I'm

not going to the little florist by the house that I've been going to for ten years, just because I've known Margaret for ten years. I'm going to the market out in the country. They've got the biggest, prettiest flowers out there. All the way past the traffic and the downtown shops and the golf courses and the freeway, to the road that has only two lanes, where the world is small and quiet.

Where I can forget about all of the things I've been meaning to do.

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Normal After All

Chris Yodice

The girls always thought that there was a head in the box, but they couldn't imagine whose.

They remembered their father making "arrangements" for a great-uncle who had died, but that was less than a year ago, and the box was older than that. Besides, those arrangements, they had been told upon inquiry, were for the whole body.

Family photo albums were strewn with the faces of men and women they had met once or twice and had never seen again. And there were some they had never met at all. Though their parents consistently described these people as old friends, or even family, when questioned on their current whereabouts, they were often vague.

"I'm not sure," their father would say with a slight shake of his head.

"Oh," their mother would say, "They're around." Sometimes she would laugh.

These responses only emphasized the unaccounted-for status of any number of heads from their parents' past.

The box sat on the top shelf in their parents' closet, out of reach of the girls' little fingers, even if they were to pile their mother's paisley storage boxes one on top of the other and climb up. Which they had tried twice.

So they contented themselves, when their parents were otherwise occupied, with opening the door to the small walk-in closet and stepping inside. They would stare up, their necks bent as far back as they would go. The box itself was silver and based on its sharp reflection of the closet's single light bulb, was likely metal. It had well-

defined edges and a discrete top that fit snugly on the base. It was probably twelve inches square. Sara, the older girl, had learned about the volume of cubes in school the year before.

The box looked somewhat out of place among the more common and pleasant objects in their parent's closet. To its right was a see-through plastic storage container with several drawers in which their mother kept gift-wrap items – folds of paper, assorted cards, and brightly colored ribbons. One of the sections contained craft accessories. To its left was a pile of sweaters and sweatshirts, fluffy and familiar, favorites of their parents when the air turned crisp.

It would have sat there essentially unnoticed, that silver box, were it not for the peculiar comment that Samantha, the younger girl, claimed to have overheard the only time that she saw it off the shelf. She had walked by their parents' bedroom and, standing in the hallway, had seen their mother and father sitting on the bed with the box between them. The top was removed and lay on the white and lavender flowered comforter. Peering inside, their father wore an expression of wrinkled disagreement while their mother looked quite pleased.

"We should wrap it better," their father had said. "Or else the nose will fall off."

This, at least, is what Samantha reported to her sister. Sara initially disagreed.

"I was right behind you, Squish-Face," she had informed her sister in a superior tone, proud of the term of endearment she recently coined. "He didn't say 'nose.'" But her certainty wilted when she found herself unable to state with real confidence what the word had actually been. "Rose?" she suggested. "Bows?"

As the days passed and Samantha kept on, tenacious in her six-year-old's insistence that she knew exactly what she had heard, Sara eventually became convinced that what was in the box was indeed a head.

The girls did not mention the comment to their parents and certainly never asked about the box directly. But they often talked among themselves.

One mid-spring evening, when the daylight lasted until just after dinner, they stood outside their parents' bedroom door looking in. They spoke in whispers as the long shadows of the backyard trees reached across the room toward where they were standing.

"Why are they keeping a head in the box?" Samantha asked.

"Where else would they keep it?" Sara said. She considered her answer logical. Had she been familiar with the word, Samantha might have called it sarcastic.

"Do other people keep heads in boxes?"

Sara did not know the answer. As she decided whether or not to admit this and found herself leaning toward an authoritative *maybe*, she was startled by a voice from behind them.

"What's going on here?" their mother asked. She was rubbing her hands together and Sara smelled the vanilla lotion that they kept by the kitchen sink. She liked that smell.

The girls were silent. Sara looked at Samantha, saw her mouth open, and watched her tongue slip over her bottom teeth and behind her lip; it flared at the sides. She was about to talk, Sara realized.

"That's okay," their mother said first. She smiled and stilled her hands. "Sisters can have their secrets."

"We can?" Samantha asked.

"Sure," their mother said. "In fact, everyone has secrets."

"Really?" Samantha asked. "Everyone?"

"Your friends, my friends. Even your father and I." She winked. *"It's perfectly normal."*

Samantha considered this for a moment. She stole a quick glance toward the closet door and her tongue flashed.

"Are we normal?" she asked. *"Our family?"*

Her mother laughed, bent over, and kissed the top of the younger girl's head.

"Normal depends on how you look at things, sweetheart," she said. *"But we're as normal as anyone else, I can tell you that."*

She bent again and kissed Sara. She took both girls by the hand and led them into the kitchen. Their father was stepping away from the dish rack, setting a towel down on the stove handle. He looked outside.

"It seems to be just warm enough for ice cream," he said. *"Anyone interested?"*

Samantha responded immediately, jumping up and down. Sara was more subtle. But, yes, she was interested. She considered the conversations of the last few minutes. Ice cream on a spring night was normal. A head in a box in the bedroom? She wasn't sure. What she knew was that she loved her family; Samantha did too. And they were happy. For the moment they put aside all of their questions and enjoyed the evening.

But they were still curious.

The day that the girls finally reached the top shelf was bright and warm. By mid-afternoon, their parents were entertaining friends in the backyard. Sara and Samantha were in the kitchen hovering around the cheese that had been left when the grown-ups took their wine glasses out to the patio. *"Let's take advantage of the day,"* their mother had suggested.

Sara watched them through the glass door, wondering if they all really did have secrets, when she noticed a stepstool resting against the wall. She had seen her mother use it last night, re-hanging her newly laundered valances above the kitchen windows. It seemed the day would offer an opportunity for them all.

The two girls pulled the stepstool as quietly as they could down the hall and into their parents' bedroom closet. Sara opened it, climbed to the top, and picked up the box. It was heavy and cool. Samantha stood a step below her, one hand grasping the bottom of her sister's yellow sundress. She let go quickly upon seeing Sara turn, swinging the box toward her. Unprepared for the weight, the younger girl almost dropped it with a huff.

Placing the box on their parent's bed, the two girls stared at it for a moment. They had never seen it this close. There was no lock and the top looked as if it would come off easily enough. Sara wondered aloud if they would recognize the head. Samantha, looking much like her father, wrinkled her nose. The sound of the adults laughing came in through the back window.

"Ready?" Sara asked.

Samantha nodded. She looked very serious. The girls each placed their hands on opposite sides of the top of the box and counted to three, the younger's count coming half a beat behind the older's. As suspected, the top came right off.

They both laughed when they looked inside, relieved not to find a face, familiar or otherwise, looking up at them. Their parents may have secrets, but, here, the question of normalcy was finally settled. It was not a head in the box after all.

The activity in the backyard lulled. It picked up again soon enough but the momentary stillness startled Sara. The inner calm that came with her sated curiosity

would be quickly dispelled if she and her sister were caught. Their mother may allow secrets, but she was not fond of snooping.

“Okay,” she said to Samantha, “let’s put it back.”

They slipped the cover into place and Sara hurried back up the stepstool. Her footing secure, she reached forward and returned the box to its shelf. After a quick peek through the bedroom window confirmed that the adults were wholly occupied with their own activities in the light of the open yard, the girls replaced the stepstool where they had found it. A gentle breeze rippled the curtain at its side.

Samantha was ready to walk outside, her mouth filled with cheese, when Sara thought back to what could have made them think there was a head in the box to begin with. Her sister. Her sister and her sister’s imagination.

Sara stepped into the bright sunshine beaming through the backdoor screen and caught Samantha by the shoulder.

“I told you Daddy didn’t say ‘nose,’” she said. She never should have doubted herself; she wouldn’t next time.

Samantha turned, her face blank. Then her features opened wide with realization, the connection made between the cryptic comment and what they had actually found in the box, which was as far from a head as could be. She giggled, the sprightly sound blending with the laughter from outside.

“Ohh,” she said, drawing out the word with knowing satisfaction. “He said ‘toes.’”

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Out of Steam Punk and Zombies Comes Bruce Lee

Jenny Ortiz

Use only that which works and take it from any place you can find it – Bruce Lee

Strewn on the couch are second hand clothes and old kung fu movies. East likes Bruce Lee the best; she knows everyone says it, but Bruce Lee was a badass motherfucker; his son, too. They were real cool. With an untoasted Pop-tart, East sits on top of the clothes and watches *Enter the Dragon*, alone.

Later on, when the movie is finished, East goes into the kitchen for some cereal. She opens the fridge only to find the milk carton empty. Throwing on her leather jacket, she waves to her fish and heads to the supermarket. This is the only thing she hates about the real world. The things she needs don't appear in front of her, she has to go out and get them.

As East walks down the block, she once again concludes that as much as she misses certain things that made her life easy, she would not be some kind of sleeper cell; that's what she'd promised herself when she left the world created by the Authors and entered the real world. She forgot about the steam punk nation she'd been born into and settled in New York. She'd been a nomad there and had nothing and no one to miss. Sometimes East thought about Roan, the way they'd travelled through forests and swamps on their way to... where?

She couldn't remember what ending the Authors had planned. A face off with her brother, Ian. No, she shakes her head as she walks down the block to the corner,

where the red awning of the supermarket is drooping low and is threatening to fall on the crates of dry apples and thick skinned oranges. She isn't going to spend her youth waiting for the Authors to pick up where they left off. Let Ian control that world, overthrow the king or the corporation; she isn't even sure who is in power anymore. Her leader now is the President of the United States. Though she isn't sure what democracy means, East believes it's better than an army of zombies that keeps the population in check.

The only thing East really misses about her old life is the show Dinopups. She is wearing a shirt, with a Dinopups character on it. It reminds her of the card game that went with the show and how she'd played with Ian. She never lost. She doesn't have the cards or the show or, for that matter, anyone to play with anymore.

East doesn't like to think about the past. Her story had once been written with enthusiasm, only to be left midway through. She and the other characters were in a perpetual wait, repeating the same actions, walking in circles, pretending to be lost. Having clawed her way out of the swamp, East had pulled herself out from between the green ink and white lined paper. Pushed the words off her skin and took a job at a Laundromat. East avoided other characters, the ones who escaped and certainly the ones still in stories. In every book, she could hear them calling for her to come back.

But as she makes her way to the open fridge in the back of the supermarket, East thinks about all of the people she left behind. She knows the only reason she's thinking about the story and the past is because of The Grappler, Jude here. He'd moved from her story to another collapsed story, only to be abandoned. He'd always been a good character—she liked his smile and the way his boots were always covered with desert sand. But the Authors took him out of her story because she was supposed to only have interest in Roan. But Roan isn't around anymore and the other day, Jude

and East went out on their third official date. He's coming over later tonight for a movie, some snacks, and wine. Along with the milk, East buys a pack of condoms.

He's late. Two whole Bruce Lee movies late. East watches the popcorn bag turn in the microwave, while the credits run on the television. After taking a large swallow of chocolate milk, East moves toward her fish tank. The red and orange fish glide around unaware of her presence. They make large circles in the tank, ignoring the plastic submarine and the clay mermaids sitting on the rocks. She imagines that being a character is very much like being a fish. She was given food, and a daily schedule. Her friends and her family were already waiting for her. For a moment, she wishes she still had the security of knowing Roan loved her. She wonders, if it had been written that they'd love each other right away, why she left him behind.

The fish don't jump like East does to the sound of knocking on her door. The popping sound follows her as she opens the door. Wet and panting Jude stands in front of her with a big smile. He's wearing his tattered black coat and dusty boots.

"They're writing the ending of our story."

"What are you talking about?"

"I woke up this morning and was in the forest, looking for you and Roan."

"Looking?"

"I work for the cooperation, duh. I've been trailing the two of you. Of course I'm only working for them to get revenge for my wife's death... but that doesn't matter, what matters is that I was trailing you in the story."

"You just woke up in the story? How's that possible?"

“We are characters.”

“I haven’t been pulled back into the story.”

“Not yet, but I think you’ll be written in sometime tomorrow.”

“But I work tomorrow. And I’m pulling a double shift because the rent is due at the end of the week.”

“What’s that matter? We’re going back home.”

She looks around at the things she’s bought and rearranged so carefully. The couch from IKEA she’d assembled on her own, photos of the day she adopted her fish, the magazine subscriptions, the television, Bruce Lee.

“I think I need a drink,” she says.

They sit together in a booth at the Left of Center, a bar that caters specifically to characters. East pulls her sleeves over her hands as the waitress, a woman styled like a 1950s pin-up, brings them their beers. The bar is crowded. Mondays are always crowded. Authors reread their weekend dribble and cut whole passages, full of characters. Little than half of those characters filter into the real world, looking for something to do. East hates being around them, but Jude takes her anyway. A stock character tries to buy East a drink, which amuses Jude. She slumps into the booth and stares straight ahead, pretending to be brain dead. After a few minutes, the stock character shrugs at Jude, and finds himself a flat character to dance with. Full characters only come to the bar because it’s the best discarded description of one. Cheap drink and good music could cover up the crowds. Ladyhawke’s Professional Suicide is playing and Jude asks her if she wants to dance; she’s about to say yes, but a

gang of stereotypes walk in and take over the dance floor. The music becomes frantic and the air dense.

It's at these times when she remembers her past with sadness: the smell of the trees and the soft, mud like texture of the ground under her bare feet. Towards the end of her time in that world, she stopped using shoes. Gave up the worn down ankle boots for a thin layer of dirt on her skin. Had Roan disapproved? She couldn't remember.

"Can we go?" she says, looking at Jude.

"We just got here."

"I hate this fucking place."

"You wanted to get a drink."

"Why couldn't we go to a normal bar?"

"Because this is where our people are."

"They're not my people."

"And humans are? You can't do anything with them."

"I'm leaving."

"And going where? You going to go see another Bruce Lee movie? That's really assimilating to the real world."

She ignores him and zippers up her jacket against the wind. Jude's right. She's lonely here. No, not lonely, haunted by nothing. East realizes now that nothing has a weight. It isn't heavy, but uncomfortable, making itself known. Whenever a Bruce Lee film ends and the credits are flashing on the screen, East feels the nothing. She doesn't feel it when she's with Jude, but she hates his reasoning as to why: they'll only be fulfilled if they're reconnected to the story. She crosses the street, narrowly avoiding a

speeding car. She doubts the driver sees her; she's like a sliver of black paper floating in the dark.

A guy in a biker jacket opens the door to another bar, a bar with real people inside. She mumbles thanks and slips in, avoiding the guy in the front checking ID. Though no one is smoking, there is the smell of cigarettes on everyone's clothes and the sound of the cash register is shrill and overpowers the sound of people talking. East slips through the crowd and takes a seat at the end of the bar, orders a beer, and begins to watch the people. She likes how the girls' sleek metallic colored skirts crawl up their thighs as they dance in place. The music is bad, but no one seems to notice.

When she notices him, he is standing with a girl in crème colored pants too tight for her thighs, but she's still attractive. He's standing next to her talking, his face close to hers, and he is bent slightly to meet her. When he stands up straight, he's tall, thin, and with his white buttoned down looks more like a sheet of paper than East does.

A heat settles in East's thighs and right below her breasts as she watches the girl shrug and move away from the paper-like man. He sighs and puts his beer bottle on a table nearby and leaves. East follows him all the way down to the subway. She luckily has a MetroCard and quickly follows him towards the platform where he waits for the A. It's already one in the morning, and from the looks of another man on the platform, they just missed one. They'll have to wait another thirty minutes. Putting on her headphones, East chooses an instrumental to play while watching the paper man.

East likes taking the train; she likes watching the people. They slowly become her characters, each one with a story she won't abandon. Sometimes, she'll feel the urge to write one down on paper, but she never does.

He doesn't notice her until they're on the train and she's standing next to him, her eyes on an ad by his head. She smiles at him.

"You were at the bar with your girlfriend."

"No, she's a friend."

"But you want her to be your girlfriend?"

"I—I don't know... Do I know you?"

"No." She pauses. "I'm East."

"Nice to meet you," he says, not looking at her. She is still smiling.

He has travel magazines on his coffee table. East picks one up and begins reading about the fantastic beaches of Malaysia. She knew a boy from Malaysia, tall and athletic. He didn't talk much, but told funny jokes. She can't remember any of them now. He only worked at the Laundromat for a few weeks before he started school. Once he started, he never came back. They had washers and dryers on campus. Now the only people working aside from herself were the manager, Kim, and Paul; none of them liked to talk much.

"I get them for free from the adjunct faculty lounge. *The Popular Mechanics*, too."

"Are you a teacher?"

"Not yet. I'm a graduate student. I get a stipend for helping a few of the professors with their classes."

"That sounds interesting."

"Yeah, it is. What do you do?"

"I work in fashion. I'm responsible for organizing and separating different colors and textures of the clothes to be used on the models. "

"Sounds pretty important."

“It is. One slip up and a whole week’s worth of fashion statements are destroyed.”

“Are you thirsty?”

“No.”

He’s already in the kitchen and doesn’t hear her. The furniture in his apartment is sparse, except for the old couch and the stack of books neatly against the off white wall where the television should be. On the bottom of the stack is a biography on Bruce Lee. Carefully, East pulls the book from the bottom without toppling the other books on the modern world and literary theory. She flips through the pages until she finds the photos and examines each one.

“Are you into him?” he asks.

“Yeah. I have all his movies. I’ve read this. Did you know he pitched the show Kung Fu? In the end, they didn’t cast him. But he said the moves in the show were more ballet than—”

“I don’t know much about him. My friend was studying alternative philosophy and left this behind,” he says curtly, avoiding her eyes.

He hands her a beer and they move to the couch. They look at the bare wall silently. Their arms are touching and she can feel the tension in his body. There’s nothing to keep her eyes focused on and the beer in her hand is warm. She sets it down by her feet and puts her head on his shoulder. Looking at his forearm, East examines the black hairs sticking up and the veins bulging slightly. He’s breathing evenly, which surprises her. She wants to ask him about the girl with the crème colored pants, but doesn’t. Where the walls meet, there is an opening to her story. She knows he can’t see it; the branches of the trees are sticking out and leaves are slowly

crawling on the wall. The shadow of a man passes through the trees. She shudders; he puts his arm around her.

“Do you have a bedroom?”

“Yeah,” he says.

She follows him and before they even get inside, she begins to remove her clothes. The floor under her feet is muddy and in the distance she can hear Roan’s voice. He’s looking for her. East closes her eyes and lets the stranger kiss her. Sex with him is like a warm finger flipping through the pages of a book. She ignores him as he whispers the name Abigail and focuses on her movements. When they’re finished, she gets dressed and leaves without saying goodbye. She takes with her the newest copy of *Popular Mechanics* for the ride home. She isn’t particularly interested in Abigail’s Bruce Lee.

On the train ride home, she reads the articles as a way to avoid making eye contact with the zombies sitting around her. Even holding her breath, East can’t escape the smell of iron and feces coming off their dirty, broken bodies. They aren’t very bright, so she can get off at her stop without worrying about them following her. As she makes her way out, a man and his girlfriend walk in. East doesn’t pause to check on them; instead she makes her way home.

On her way up the stairs to her apartment she finds Jude leaning against her door. She smiles at him.

“Where did you go?”

“I went home with someone.”

“Because of the story? You have no choice. You’re going to wake up one morning and find yourself back there. What are you going to do, crawl back to the real world every night?”

“If I tell you I’m good, you will think I am boasting. But if I tell you I’m no good, you know I’m lying,” she mumbles slowly as she opens the door.

“What?”

Jude is standing in the doorway.

“It’s only the best line Bruce Lee ever said.” She pauses, her body is slumped slightly. “I think that it reflects this situation quite well. I’m going to do whatever I need to so that I can stay here. If I have to cut off zombie heads in the subway or get pregnant—”

“Is that why you slept with that guy? To get pregnant?”

“How did you know I slept with him?”

“You slept with him? I was just taking a guess. East... It’s not normal for us to be with them like that.”

“If I tell you I’m good—”

“Stop saying that.”

“Okay, how about this one: Love is like a friendship caught on fire. In the beginning a flame, very pretty, often hot and fierce, but still only light and flickering—”

“East, stop,” he says as he pulls her towards him.

“As love grows older, our hearts mature and our love becomes as coals, deep-burning and unquenchable,” she says smiling. “Pretty, huh?”

“East.”

“If you always put limits on everything you do, physical or anything else, it’ll spread into your work and into your life. There are no limits. There are only plateaus, and you must not stay there, you must go beyond them... He said that too.”

East pushes away from Jude.

“Why are you saying all this?”

“Why am I? How am I capable of memorizing every one of Bruce Lee’s famous quotes? Why can I work in a Laundromat or have a one night stand with a stranger? Why would the Authors build all of this in my character if I was supposed to do what they want me to do in a faraway place that doesn’t mean anything to me?”

“You’re the main character.”

“Do I have to be? Why can’t they make another character? We’ve evolved. We’re no longer the characters we were.”

“That’s not true.”

“You haven’t killed anyone while we’ve been here. You haven’t talked about revenge or even thought about your dead wife. No, every night you come over and we eat Chinese food and listen to music. You’re more out of character than I am.” She pauses. “Bruce Lee says—”

“Please tell me. Tell me what Bruce Lee says. He’s dead, East. And you know what he did when he was alive? He made movies. He became a character. He wanted to be one of us. So shut up and come back to the story.” His shoulders are slumped. “We can be immortal.”

“The key to immortality is first living a life worth remembering,” she recites another quote; this time she says it as she walks towards the kitchen table. She sits down and looks at him. “As you think, so shall you become... that’s what he says... said. I think it’s appropriate for us...don’t you think?”

“You’re selfish. What about Roan? You’re going to leave him alone?”

“If the Authors let you remember me, remember the time we visited the Empire State building.”

“Night, East.”

“Night Ju—Grappler.”

After watching him leave, East turns off the lights and turns on the television, but doesn’t focus on it. Instead she drinks some milk from the carton, and sits on the couch, waiting to fall asleep. She thinks about the things she needs to do for work and wonders when she should buy a pregnancy test. She avoids the sounds of the jungle coming from her bathroom, closing her ears off to Roan’s crackling fire or to Jude’s boots crunching the plants on the ground, as he prepares to kill.

JENNY ORTIZ is a 23 year old writer living and teaching in New York. When she was a little girl, Jenny wanted to be a gun-slinging drifter, much like a Clint Eastwood character. She ended up (happily) graduating from Adelphi University with an MFA in Creative Writing and is currently working at St. John's University and LaGuardia Community College. When she is not teaching or writing, Jenny can be found hanging out in IHOP with her friends, discussing music, video games, or Avatar: Last Airbender. When at home, she enjoys reading Haruki Murakami or listening to podcasts from the New Yorker. Follow her on Twitter: twitter.com/jnylynn.