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Editor's Note: The End of the World. Again.

Welcome to April, everyone. Sorry about throwing snow on the cover right when it feels safe to start thinking about spring, but we've got a lot of stories dealing with the end of the world this month. And – as Robert Frost was kind enough to point out – when the shit does go down, it's gonna end in either fire or in ice. Once you read Danger_Slater's "Snowpocalypse" you'll see why I sided with ice.

Of course, if you prefer your worlds to end in ways that don't involve your socks getting soaked, we've got you covered there, too. Unless you're the titular fisherman of Joseph A. W. Quintela's "The Fisherman Takes a Wife," that is. Joseph's second super-short, "Intelligent Life," is the warmer fate, to be sure.

If you'd prefer something a little more sprawling, "The Newcomers," by repeat offender Mike Sweeney, spins you a tale of vampire lovin,' set in a post-apocalyptic New Jersey. Or if you're looking for something with an international feel, look no further than Craig Wallwork's "Sigourney Weaver Stole My Shadow" and its shadow-thief-plagued England. "Enclosure," by Carly Anne West, spends its time in the ladies' room and shows you a much more personal kind of calamity, while Josh Goller's "Nothing Up His Sleeve" gives you a glimpse at the end of one very unlucky rabbit's world.

Anything else, though, you're on your own. There're only so many apocalypses we can fit into a single issue. Believe me. It's what I do.

-- Eirik Gumeny

The Newcomers

Mike Sweeney

I have a feeling I once knew a great deal about churches and saints. But I don't remember much about that now, nor really anything that came before the night she found me. As such, all I can tell you about St. James Catholic Church is that the steeple was Becca and mine's favorite spot for picking out victims.

The church sat astride Broad Street, the main avenue of that great cultural oasis of Central Jersey known as Red Bank. Dotted with bistros and boutiques – all favorites of the wealthy locals from Rumson and Fair Haven and the visiting weekenders from New York – Broad Street never failed to provide us with any shortage of appetizing choices for the evening.

Becca would stand at the tip of the steeple while I crouched next her, ready to pounce on whomever she instructed. I loved that moment before she gave the word: the light tapping of hearts beneath us, the crisp stillness of the night air, the rich leather scent of her Belstaff jacket, her hand on my shoulder.

Some nights I was her attack dog. Other nights, her wingman.

I miss her already.

I miss the sound of her biker boots clomping on the pavement beside me. I miss the way she used to wrap her arm around my neck and squeal after we'd killed together. Mostly I just miss talking to her.

Occasionally, we'd skip St. James and stroll down to Front Street to watch the Navesink roll by in the starlight. Becca liked watching the river even if she wouldn't

admit it. Sometimes she even let me hold her hand as we passed through the crowds, mentally marking kills for later.

In winter, there'd be time enough for us to browse at Jack's Music Shoppe before it closed for the night. Jack's was one of the last great independent record stores on the East Coast. They'd always open at midnight for a new Springsteen release and sometimes he'd stop by on his motorcycle to meet his fans and sign CDs.

Across the street from Jack's is Kevin Smith's comic book shop. We saw him one night, playing cards in the back with his friends.

It's a whole lot of Jersey in one block.

Or at least it was before the sky fell.

The world ended on a Monday, but we didn't see them till Tuesday.

We were back atop St. James, but instead of night it was ten o'clock in the morning. I was still too giddy from the thought of perpetual darkness to take the Newcomers seriously. They jerked and lumbered along, eating whatever had the misfortune to stumble into their path. I actually laughed at them. As always, Becca was thinking much further ahead.

"These things are going to taste like shit," she said.

Five months later they ripped her to pieces in a shopping mall. Becca was smart and my best friend and a piece of ass to boot. She deserved a lot better than to be eviscerated in a burned out Anthropologie.

And in the end, she was only half right. The Newcomers didn't just taste bad, they *were* bad – the human equivalent of spoiled milk. You could drain five of the things in one night and still be no closer to meeting your thirst.

It didn't take long to realize that the Newcomers weren't food; they were competition, a pestilence that consumed everything and anyone we could feed off.

We probably should have done something right away, while they were still in small packs.

Maybe if we had, things would be different now.

Maybe that emaciated beagle I ate earlier today wouldn't have seemed as succulent and tasty as if I was biting into Eliza Dushku's left butt cheek.

Maybe going three weeks without blood would've seemed like a bad dream, something you do on an insane bet, rather than the standard existence.

But blood drinkers aren't generally known for their strategic planning – or their collective action.

Instead, we just went after the deer. Close to humans in weight, more readily available than one might think for a place like New Jersey, and not all that difficult to catch. And if you closed your eyes, they actually tasted just like people.

They didn't last long though. No one will ever confuse a hungry population of blood drinkers with forest rangers when it comes to responsible culling practices. After about three months, it was no more Bambi.

Then it was whatever we could get our hands on. Wild Turkey. Opossum. Dogs. (Labs were surprisingly good.) It took us less than a month to run through them. And that was pretty much the end of regular food for us.

Eventually, the only thing that sustained me was the shared blood with Becca.

Before the sky fell, there was a place in Brooklyn called "Angel's Sister." It was run by this pair of blood drinkers who'd had a club going somewhere in New York since the

late eighties. They named the first one, "Vlad's Mom." It was a play on "Dracula's Daughter" from the Anne Rice books. The name was a send-up but the purpose was the same: a space for blood drinkers to gather peacefully with their own kind. It moved around the city every few years, changing names but keeping with the same in-joke. There was "Yorga's Aunt" and "Lestat's Niece" and my personal favorite, "Orloc's Granny."

By 2003, it was Angel's Sister, and it was housed in an old diner in Wilmington. We met Nomar in the brick-lined back room. He claimed he was eighteen hundred and sixteen and had been the Emperor Nero's personal secretary before being turned. I don't think the math worked on that one, but I let it go. No one likes a smart ass. Besides, he was definitely older – and stronger – than me, so Becca and I sat and listened to him tell tales of the persecution that followed the great fire of 64 A.D.

"We went underground, to the catacombs," he said, leaning in close to me and closer still to Becca.

"It was there the great nosferatu imperator Maximus Sanguineas showed us the blood circle."

Yeah, "Maximus Sanguineas" set off my bullshit alarm too. But it was the way Nomar described the blood circle itself that made you believe in it, even if you didn't buy the rest of his story.

In hushed, reverent tones, he described a cannibalistic feeding deep in the catacombs where blood drinkers would pair off with their most intimate comrade and one would drain the other within ounces of death. The point was to make half the coven strong enough to go out and find food which they would bring back to the others. Over time, the cycle would repeat, with the other partner taking his turn and becoming the hunter.

“You have to trust the fellow drinker, greatly, though,” he said and smiled at Becca.

“Trust,” he purred in his Eurotrash accent, “is what you need. Trust and knowing where to bite.”

He poked Becca gently in the thigh and every muscle in my body tensed.

He turned to me and smiled. “The neck, you see, is no good.”

Becca didn’t let me stay much beyond that.

She disappeared for a fortnight, twice as long as we’d ever been separated. When she showed up that night at Donovan’s, the first thing I noticed was that she was still wearing the same clothes. Becca stole from all the best boutiques and never wore the same outfit twice.

I knew she’d let him drink from her, had allowed herself to be kept by him. I wanted to hate her for it. But as she stumbled through the bar and grew close, rage was replaced by alarm. Her skin was ashen slate and her eyes were charcoal dots instead of their usual ice blue.

She didn’t say anything, maybe couldn’t. But I knew what she wanted. Within the hour we were both home, sipping on the sweet Goth girl from the end of the bar, the one who had insisted on ordering Pilsner Urquel while all her friends drank Coors Light’s. She was just Becca’s type.

When I rose the next night, the color had returned to Becca’s eyes and her skin was

smooth ivory again. She sat primed and dressed for another evening out, a small smile playing on her lips as she watched me shake off the last of my sleep.

A dozen years as bloodmates and I'd never seen her naked. She always woke and dressed before me: a new expensive pair of jeans over the perfect curve of her hip, a just-in fashion top covering her small tomboy breasts.

She'd seen me constantly, of course, starting with the night she found me nude and feral down on Sandy Hook. She soothed me, took me in, fed me. Clothing me seemed to come last.

And each dusk she'd sit back and watch as I cleaned the dried blood off my chest and arms and dressed for the night. I don't know what she got out of it. She just liked the power, I think, of her eyes on me. It served as further reminder to me that I was hers.

A few nights after she found me, I finally summoned the courage to ask her if I could still have sex, now that I was a blood drinker.

"Of course," she said laughing.

"With you?" I added, almost without meaning to say the words out loud.

She went silent and looked at me for a long while. Then she took my arm in hers and said, "Let's go out."

That was the last we ever spoke of it.

It was before what would have been dawn if there still was a sunrise. We talked about nothing all night, maybe about how things were before the Newcomers. We spoke about that a lot towards the end.

After a while, Becca brought up the blood circle and that night at Angel's Sister. There was no asking, just a decision for both of us, one she knew I'd agree to.

Calmly, precisely, she started telling me what to do. She lay back, wriggled out of her jeans, arched her back, and showed me where to bite. It was dark but her skin was nearly luminescent and my eyes lingered.

I moved my head forward and she grabbed a handful of my hair. Becca wasn't angry, just firm.

"You're just here to drink," she said and let go of my head.

It was the best thing I ever tasted.

I said Becca was smart and I meant it. She knew others like us would start going after the humans' stored blood supply. Riverview and Centra State would've been licked clean months ago, like most hospitals. But Becca had a gift for seeing the unobvious. New Jersey might be the Garden State but its most lucrative industry was pharmaceuticals. Drug testing and development meant the pharmaceutical companies needed their own large supplies of blood. Their labs usually had better back-ups and fail-safes for storage than the average hospital. Even five months after the end of civilization, their stocks might still be fresh and safe if we could just get to them.

The Johnson and Johnson facility by Rutgers was my first target.

I started out at the Home Depot on Route 9. We learned early that decapitation was the quickest, maybe only, way to put down the Newcomers. An axe and a small hatchet as back up and I was all set.

I headed north to New Brunswick.

New Jersey in the morning like a lunar landscape.

I think that was a Springsteen line.

What I saw as I hacked and sprinted along dead highways resembled less outer space and more mythology. Tartarus. Shoal. Hell. Everything seemed to burn. Dead trees lined the landscapes and empty cars – wrecked or just abandoned – jammed the thoroughfares like the getaway vehicles of a legion of ghosts.

The ground was a patchwork of blacks, grays, and browns, all of it dried and barren. The only things that moved other than me were the omnipresent, wandering, weaving bands of Newcomers.

I killed at least three dozen that first night. It was worth it for what I found in that one lab: forty-eight perfectly preserved whole units of O positive, over five people's worth.

Becca hit a goldmine of AB negative during her first foray.

We knew eventually we'd exhaust the drug companies' supplies too, but for a while things were better. We were drinking human blood again and I was closer to Becca than I ever could have hoped before the sky fell.

That was before either of us heard of Shotgun Annie or Eddie the Crazy Seven-Eleven Guy.

Humans always seemed like a spark in the dark to my kind. They didn't know it, but people actually lit up our world. After a fashion, maybe the blood drinkers didn't really know it either. With over six billion of them around, the sparks became ambient lighting, the preternatural equivalent of background noise.

At least that's how it was before the sky fell. As the Newcomers consumed or

converted what was left of humanity, the sparks returned. The last pockets of living people stood out like bonfires.

Shotgun Annie and Eddie the Crazy Seven-Eleven Guy.

They were the consistent sparks, the ones that were there each time we went out. Soon their names started floating to us on the wind. We never spoke them aloud, but we both knew who they were and, more importantly, that they were there – living, breathing people.

Annie was an assistant manager of a Gap at an open-air mall in Shrewsbury. She came home from work the day the sky fell to find that her seventy-year-old mother and two-year-old son were among the Newcomers' first meals. And that was pretty much it for Annie's sanity.

She looted a pair of shotguns from a local sporting goods store and duck-taped them together like the guy in that *Phantasm* movie. Then she filled her Kia with all the shotguns shells it and she could carry and went back to work. She opened the Gap like the world wasn't dying and just waited. She even started a sale on outerwear.

While the big human safe havens were being sacked, Annie was stockpiling ammunition and gasoline and digging an escape tunnel. Occasionally, she took a break to try to sell reasonably priced denim goods to the survivors of the apocalypse. Since most humans who stumbled upon her store were seeking shelter not cargo jackets, Annie did what only seemed natural when they wouldn't buy anything: she shot them and used them for food.

When the Newcomers finally came knocking, she was ready with barricades and long lines of sight set up over the mall's wide-open parking lots. She shot as many as she could until the defenses were breached. Then she torched the Gap with the Newcomers inside before scurrying out her tunnel.

Afterwards she made herself manager of the Banana Republic a few doors down, started tunneling again, and waited for the next wave. By the time we picked up her scent, she was president and operating owner of an Anthropologie, having immolated over a hundred Newcomers in the Banana Republic, the Eddie Bauer, and the Brooks Brothers combined.

I still have no idea exactly what the fuck Anthropologie sold. The place was burned to a cinder when I went to recover Becca's body.

As smart as Becca was, she could also be remarkably stupid – especially when there was something she wanted badly.

She didn't tell me she was going for Annie, of course. But I could feel something wasn't right as she drank from me. And she kissed me when she left. That in itself told me something was wrong.

About an hour later, I dimly saw her slip back into our lair, her arms cradling a scrawny and scared little thing. She set the skeletal beagle down beside me and left again. I knew she wasn't coming back.

I wish I could say that I saw everything, that the blood circle put me there in her body, let me see through her eyes. But it doesn't work that way. I just got flashes of feelings: exhilaration, disappointment, rage, and finally what I can only call surrender.

Annie didn't make it out through her tunnel the last time the Newcomers came for her.

Becca must have known Annie was dead from a mile away, had to know the spark had been snuffed out, yet she went anyway. She didn't run, didn't come back to

me. That's what hurts most. Becca and the blood circle were all I needed, but it wasn't the same for her.

But, then, it never was.

The blood from the beagle allowed me to walk, if barely. I stumbled out into the permanent night not really sure what I was doing. I couldn't even carry my axe and just limped along with the small hatchet drooping from my hand.

It's been a very bad year and I suppose I was entitled to a little luck.

It was black and lumpy and lying on the tattered asphalt.

A bear. A cub maybe? Not that big.

Winnie-the-fucking-Pooh.

I was on my knees drinking from him before I even knew what I was doing.

Only after did I realize that he was wounded, near dead. There were Newcomer bite marks cratered across the thing's stomach. There was a foul aftertaste in my throat. Another hour and his blood would be useless to me. He would've turned completely.

Into precisely what I didn't want to think about.

Then I saw the cub's mother.

Twisted and lumbering, she fell at me, crimson foam spewing from her snout.

I think she was still trying to figure out post-mortem movement. If the herky-jerky gait was awkward in a human, it was positively spasmodic in something that once was a bear. She couldn't quite walk – on two legs or four – and so just bounded, picking herself up and falling in lunges at me. I dodged her three times and, on the fourth lunge, leapt onto the bear's back and followed her to the ground. One hatchet

cut into the head made sure she wouldn't get up soon; two more cuts across the neck and she was down for good.

As I stood back, I saw her left paw reaching out in the direction of her cub. Or maybe that's just how I imagined it. Something about it made me angry.

I didn't know if the drained cub could still turn but I made sure he wouldn't. That was the world I was in now: where you thanked someone for saving your existence by making sure to lop off their head.

I knew the strength from the cub would fade quickly. I only had so much time to get to Becca. I wanted to be with her at the end. But I needed something more. I had to make a stop.

In truth, Eddie the Crazy Seven-Eleven Guy was unfairly named. He was actually quite level-headed and positively stable compared to the likes of Shotgun Annie.

Eddie had been the proprietor of an Army-Navy surplus store he inherited from his father. But Eddie was a people person. His secret ambition was to own a convenience store, the type of place where he would make coffee every morning for his regulars and run two-for-one specials on chili cheese dogs for dinner. He'd become a fixture of the neighborhood, the place everyone stopped by on Sunday morning for donuts and a paper. It was a nice dream. So Eddie saved his pennies and was six months away from getting his own WaWa franchise when the sky fell.

That first day, Eddie took the things from his surplus store he thought he would most need – a couple of generators, lanterns, sleeping bags, dry food-stuffs – and packed up his Blazer. He also took his dad's Vietnam-era M-16, a good deal of

homemade ammunition, and the 128 back issues of *Hustler* he'd collected since his seventeenth birthday.

Somehow he wound up in the abandoned Seven-Eleven on Maple Avenue. Like Annie, he opened the place for business. But whereas she was insanely cannibalistic, Eddie actually wanted to help. He was, remember, a people person. Had the first survivor he let in not turned into a biting, twitching fiend in front of the Big Gulps, he might not have grown so paranoid.

After he dispatched the thing with his father's rifle, Eddie started parking cars. Dozens of them. He hotwired every car in immediate walking distance and began crashing them in concentric circles around his store. After two days he had three rings of crushed steel to barricade his own personal paradise, complete with a Blu-Ray DVD player, the entire contents of the local Border's video, and what was likely the last operating Slurpee machine in the world. There was also, of course, his porn collection, which he finally had time to index properly.

The Newcomers would mass and threaten outside his barricades but ultimately lacked the mobility to scramble over three rows of busted-up automobiles, at least not before Eddie could get a head shot in. Like a suburban Robert Neville, Eddie manned his fortress, going out for provisions when the Newcomers drifted off to another target.

I actually expected to find him behind his check-out counter watching *I am Legend* that night. I was impressed to find that he had on *Omega Man* instead.

"They sure don't make pictures like that anymore," Charlton Heston was just saying as I rapped on the window from atop the pushed in hood of a Chevy Malibu.

I think Eddie knew there was something not quite right with me, even as he let

me in, carefully undoing the locks on the glass door. He didn't seem to mind too much though.

"Buy something," he said.

"What?"

Eddie fingered the barrel of his M-16, resting near the cash register. But he didn't pick up the gun. He positioned himself squarely behind the register. Behind him, Heston was screaming that there were no telephones ringing.

"Just buy something," Eddie said. "Please. I never got to sell anything to anyone."

I nodded and began walking up and down the short aisles as Eddie switched off the DVD.

I stopped at the small section of cleaning supplies and picked up a canister of Comet scouring powder. It seemed like the type of thing that would still be good months after the end of the world. I read the back of the can for a few seconds then nodded and moved on to the refrigerated drink locker. All the sodas were gone. There was just questionable looking juice and some green tea drinks. I took a bottle of the latter and walked up to the register.

"I don't have any money," I said.

"That's okay," Eddie answered. He pressed some buttons on the register and handed me a ten dollar bill.

I shoved it into the front pocket of my grimy, tattered jeans.

"Will there be anything else?" he asked.

I thought for a moment and tapped the glass counter above the scratch-off lottery cards.

“One of those,” I said, pointing to the one with penguins and polar bears on it. For some reason, I thought Eddie would like that.

Eddie’s hands shook as he ripped off the card and placed it next to the Comet and green tea. He waved his hands over all three items and muttered to himself, adding in his head.

“Seven-seventy-five,” he said.

“Pretty reasonable,” I lied and handed him back the ten dollar bill.

“Look like rain out there?” Eddie asked as he counted out my change.

“Don’t think so,” I said.

“Are you going to kill me or make me like you?” he asked.

“You don’t want to be like me,” I said.

I didn’t kill him there, of course. I only took a third of his blood. I needed him alive as bait.

Eddie stirs a little as he dozes on the counter of the gutted Starbuck’s I’m sitting in now. We’re a few doors down from the Anthropologie and I’ve lit some new fires to make sure they know we’re here. What’s left of Becca is sitting next to me. I’ve only kissed her twice. I know I shouldn’t do anymore.

I can hear the distant shuffle of dead legs and I start to catch their smell, fetid and pungent, even amidst the charred cloud of death that hangs over this place.

When they get close I’ll finish draining Eddie. I want all the strength I can muster. I want to kill as many of them as I can.

When it’s over, I wonder if Becca and I will be able to talk again.

MIKE SWEENEY lives in Central New Jersey where he writes constantly but never quite enough.

Nothing Up His Sleeve

Josh Goller

I was the first to see the dead rabbit. The other kids fought over a cluster of Jolly Ranchers the clown had thrown and the grown-ups in back chatted about ways to get grape juice stains out of couch cushions or how the President was a Commie. Hanging by its scruff from the magician's fat fingers, the dead rabbit almost looked asleep.

Shirt darkened under his armpits, the magician's breath whistled through his nose, too upset that nobody was paying attention to his big finale to notice the pet rabbit had suffocated in its secret compartment.

Somebody behind me finally saw it too and screamed. I think it was Chad's mom, because she always used to lose it when me and Chad would hide plastic mice or spiders in the silverware drawer or laundry hamper back when I was still friends with Chad and would sleep over sometimes.

After the scream, everyone saw the rabbit, the girls squealing and the other boys pointing and scooching closer. Like always, the grown-ups murmured but none of them seemed to know what to do because the magician – probably causing more excitement than he ever had in his whole birthday party magic career – was the only person in the room who didn't know his rabbit was dead. He bowed and everything, even with the rabbit's mouth hanging open so we could see its yellow chompers.

He would have crammed the dead rabbit right back in the trick hat like he did with the unending rainbow of hankies he'd pulled from his breast pocket, but my dad came walking through the breezeway to get more beer and saw it all. He cursed

louder than he usually did in front of company and shoved the magician, who was too surprised and out-of-shape to avoid falling onto the couch. Trying to catch himself with his rabbit hand, the magician came down on top of it instead.

My dad stood over the magician, yelling and jamming his finger right in his face, like he did with me sometimes when I flunked a test or left his tools out in the rain. But the magician only looked down at the squashed rabbit.

Mom and the other grown-ups herded the kids into the other room and distracted us with cake even though nobody sang for me and the candles weren't on yet. But after my dad came back through the dining room and cracked open another beer, I looked outside and saw the magician hunched over his El Camino, struggling to load his big suitcase of magic gear.

I acted like I needed to go to the bathroom, but instead I slipped out and caught the magician getting into the driver's seat. I told him not to worry, the rabbit was already dead before he fell on it, but when I asked where the rabbit body was he looked at me funny, then pointed to the bed of his car.

I pulled the dead rabbit out and held it like I would've if it was still alive, and I asked the magician if I could keep it. He shrugged and revved the engine. I asked him if the rabbit had a name and he said it was "Houdini" and I told him that was a good name even though I knew it wasn't very original. I didn't know what to say next so I asked him if he liked being a magician and he wiped his forehead and said he did sometimes, but not today.

I hid the dead rabbit in the garage under my ball bin and went back to open my presents, but that night I snuck out to the backyard and dug a hole and buried the rabbit in the weeds by the lot line and marked the spot with a popsicle stick with "Houdini" written on it in magic marker. I imagined that Houdini had been my rabbit

all along, that I'd raised him from when he was just a baby bunny and I never got angry when he wouldn't sit still and I'd always made sure he got plenty of fresh air and could play outside even if I was too busy to keep an eye on him.

After I washed up and crawled back in bed, I fell asleep dreaming about feeding him heaps of carrot peels and spoiled lettuce. More than he could ever eat.

JOSH GOLLER sprouted in Wisconsin soil but the winds carried him to the gloom and damp of the Pacific Northwest. He now resides in Oregon where he enjoys driving through fog and listening to raccoons fight on his roof.

Sigourney Weaver Stole My Shadow

Craig Wallwork

Just by talking to him on the phone, you could tell Douglas was fat. His words were muffled, trapped under the weight of a heavy tongue and suffocated between plump cheeks the size of crab apples. When I told him about how my baby daughter had banged her head, I could hear him wheezing through a few vowels. Sometimes the wheezing would just stop, and I'd call out to the static silence if he were okay. He always was, but you never know with fat people. He asked me to elucidate on why I was calling, but it came out sounding like ejaculate. I swear to God, the guy looked he'd swallowed a church bell and said words you only find in Jane Austen novels. So I did – elucidate, that is. I told Douglas that after she banged her head, I tried making my daughter laugh. I thought it would be funny to make shadow puppets; you know, a duck, a crocodile, a bird. It was a distraction, a poor attempt at magic to end my daughter's tears. I closed all the curtains and had my wife shine a torch behind my hands. That's when I realised something was wrong.

I went outside and stood with the sun behind me. Expecting to see a long black silhouette across the pavement, a wiry and menacing clone of myself, I found instead an old cigarette box and a dog turd, curled and sleeping like a brown snake. I called my wife to bring out my daughter, and I held her up against the sun. Nothing. And all the while she kept on crying. I watched people walk by, the joggers, the young professionals and teenagers talking into tiny plastic phones. Not one of them cast a shadow.

Douglas said he would go outside and check on his. I figured if anyone could dim the world, it would be Douglas. Five minutes later he rang back. It was a bright day, a clear sky. The pavements should have been congested with shadows. But Douglas said there were none to be found. It was a real “conundrum”, he said. I rang a few more friends, and after going through the same conversation, they too were the same as Douglas and I. Except for my friend Blake.

A couple of nights ago he had waked in the night needing a piss. Blake was a jittery type of guy at the best of times. He had a nervous habit of biting his nails. He would talk to you and then spit out a piece of fingernail every third or fourth sentence. Sometimes a piece would hit you in the face, or land on your lip. It got so bad his fingers would bleed and he had to wear gloves in the house. Blake went on to say he heard someone breathing behind him while in the bathroom. But when he turned around, there was no one there. He went back to bed and kept his bedside lamp on, and few minutes later, he heard the breathing again, real close to his face. He said their breath smelt like pickles. At the side of his bed was a baseball bat with the word, “ass-kicker” written on in pen. When he went and grabbed it the floorboards creaked around him. Next to his ear he heard someone whisper, “You don’t deserve it.” After that his legs were shaking like a shitting dog. Blake swung the bat, knocking his lamp off the table. He heard someone yell out in pain, and there on the floor lay a tall, thin figure clutching the end of his shadow. Blake said the person looked like Sigourney Weaver going through chemotherapy. To scare her off, he began jumping on the bed, shaking his bat and making all kind of crazy noises, and it must have worked too because Sigourney let go of his shadow and vanished into a darkened corner of the room. Since then, Blake had been sleeping with the light off. I told this to Douglas,

and he said something strange, like “Extraordinary,” but really it was straight up weird.

Douglas and I agreed to stay over at Blake’s place that night so that we might catch Sigourney and get our shadows back. I brought a lump hammer, and Douglas brought a ham sandwich. We sat all night in a room lit by candles, drinking German beer, whispering about stuff that we used to get up to as kids. When all that got a little boring we began talking about girls we had kissed and girls we would have liked to kiss and then without any warning Douglas let out a cry. He said something had brushed past him, something cold. Blake spat out a huge piece of fingernail and announced he could smell pickles. We all turned mute, trying to listen for her breathing, but we couldn’t hear shit because Douglas began eating his sandwich. When Blake got up to look around, I watched how his shadow followed him. It was a good shadow, dark and a good likeness to Blake. I couldn’t help but feel envious when I looked at the wall behind me and saw nothing there but a poster of *Reservoir Dogs*. I was about to tell Blake how great his shadow was when all hell broke loose, although Douglas, when recounting to a few of our friends later that week, called it “pandemonium.” Blake had seen Sigourney lurking under his bed and grabbed her by the hands. Douglas and I jumped up, knocking over tables and beer bottles. In the panic I forgot to grab the lump hammer. It was too dark to begin hunting around for it, so I helped Blake pull Sigourney out from under the bed and jammed the remains of Douglas’s sandwich in her mouth. Douglas wasn’t happy about that so he pinched Sigourney’s nipple, or so he said. But that was made up because she had no nipples. In fact, when we finally allowed her to sit up, we saw that Sigourney wasn’t really a woman, or even a man. I don’t know what she was. Douglas said she was

androgynous, but Blake and I didn't know what that meant so we just agreed and said she probably was a robot.

Blake wanted to know why she was stealing his shadow, and in a really quiet voice, Sigourney replied, "Because you don't deserve it". Blake reminded Sigourney he had had the shadow all his life, but she said the shadow was rightly hers, and all she was doing was reclaiming it back. Sigourney told us that when we're born we have no shadow, and it's her responsibility to sew them into a baby's skin while they sleep. I asked if that was why babies cry in the night, because when my baby daughter was born she cried a lot in the night and we didn't know what the hell was wrong with her. Sigourney said babies cry, and that it had nothing to do with her because she was very careful not to hurt the baby. It all sounded like bollocks to me, but Blake wanted to know why she was reclaiming back all the shadows she'd created. Sigourney said she planned on sewing every person's shadow together to make a veil that would block out the sun. She planned on covering the world in the veil so day would always be night. Without any light, no crop would grow and people would grow hungry and die. Douglas said he wasn't far off from doing just that having lost his sandwich. But Sigourney was talking about the end of mankind, or something pretty damn close.

I suggested we put her in a box, seal the lid and then dump her bony arse in the river, but Douglas wanted to know why she was hell-bent on annihilation (Douglas's word, not mine). In the past, shadow making was easy. Sigourney said she would dig a hole, scoop out the darkness from within it, and then fashion it using scissors. She'd been doing it forever, but recently her back had begun to ache and her hands were all calloused because of the digging. Her boss, a grumpy old geezer who lived someplace between this world and the next, had hired a new guy to assist Sigourney, some young spunk that could dig bigger holes a lot faster than Sigourney. It was only a matter of

time before the new guy took over and she was made redundant. Seems there's not that many jobs going for a shadow maker these days, least not an old one. She was a victim of change, and now, because she was a bit slow, a bit old, they were getting rid of her. We couldn't blame her for being pissed. Blake and I agreed that to avoid the end of the world, we'd help Sigourney dig her holes, that way her boss would see how good she was, and allow her to stay on. We had to talk Douglas around to the idea, saying that it might be a good way to drop a few pounds.

Every night we went out and dug up big chunks of the land. We started in our back gardens, and when they got full of holes we moved onto the local park. Sigourney would come along after each dig and scoop out enough blackness to make a new shadow. It was pretty tiring work, so we asked our families and friends to help. And when they found out why we were doing it, and how we were digging to save the world, they asked their friends to help, and before long there were hundreds of us, all around the country digging holes. To show her thanks, Sigourney gave us all back our shadows. My wife and baby daughter got theirs too, and I was finally able to make shadow puppets and make my daughter laugh.

Every night we dug and dug, because part of us wanted to help save the world and Sigourney's job, but really we were getting to know new people and making friends. We were happy, and a community once again. Soon a hundred people became a thousand, and a thousand became several thousand. People posted pictures on Facebook of us all digging, and soon word spread around the world and everyone who was ever lonely or scared came out of their houses and dug holes. The sale of spades and trowels went through the roof and lots of people got rich, and factories had to hire more workers to keep up with the demand. We were heroes, and every night we dug and dug and Sigourney kept making those shadows.

Then it changed.

One day a news channel reported a death. A small girl was on a field trip, picking honeysuckle and dandelions from nearby woods when she fell into a hole. That same day the police reported a rise in missing people. The media blamed all the holes, saying people were falling into them. The government put a ban on digging, and told the police to issue fines to anyone found with a shovel in their possession. A few people stopped digging and returned to their normal lives, but some rebelled and began protesting against the ban. They campaigned against what Douglas called an “oppressive establishment.” They stopped digging for Sigourney and began digging for basic human rights. They dug wherever there was soft ground, in the fields and meadows, the coppices and the moorlands. Every hamlet, cul-de-sac, byway and highway had holes, and before we knew it, no one could walk on soft ground because they feared they’d fall in. It got so bad in some places that people had to stay at home, and jobs were lost. A big construction company near where I lived couldn’t build new houses because the foundations were riddled, and one Sunday morning during Mass, a whole congregation had to be evacuated because the church they were in began to fall apart around them. Soon all the churches began to crumble and people were told to pray at home and God would come save us all. But he didn’t. He sent a lot of rain that lasted a week, but this meant the holes filled up with water, which meant people were now drowning too.

You would wake up one morning and a building would be there. The next morning it would be gone, sunk into the ground. The news and radio channels began to report that no crop could be yielded because nothing could grow in the holes. And despite this, the activists kept on digging because they didn’t want the government to win. One day I turned on the television and radio and there was nothing but a black

screen and empty silence. I rang Douglas and Blake, but all the lines were dead. The earth became unstable and soon schools and hospitals began to lean because of subsidence. Animals began to disappear which led to the meat famine, and because there were no cows, there was no milk for the babies to drink. We all got sick with hunger and really tired because we spent most of the time trying to keep our houses from falling into the ground. It wasn't safe to go to the hospital, and no doctor could get to us because the roads were not safe to drive on. The government tried to fill in the holes, but they had to remove earth from some other place and that made even bigger holes.

Those of us still alive decided it was safer to live in the holes. We made timber struts from banister rails and bedplates, and propped them against the sides to stop the earth from collapsing around us. We removed carpet, laid it on the soft damp ground, and threw mattresses down to sleep on. We lowered our starving families into the ground and promised them someone would come and save us.

Now we're living in those holes, where everything smells of death, and I hear my daughter crying and all I want to do is make a shadow puppet to make her laugh again, but it's so damn dark you can't see your hand in front of your face. As her sobbing succumbs to exhaustion, I hear my wife ask me why I brought on the end of the world, and no matter how many times I keep telling her I was only trying to save it, she just doesn't care anymore. No one does.

CRAIG WALLWORK lives in West Yorkshire, England. He is a retired cynic and frustrated musician. He plans to learn the ukulele before the end of the year, but believes he will never get around to it. His short stories can be found in many a sordid corner of the world, or from his website: www.craigwallwork.blogspot.com.

Two Stories

Joseph A. W. Quintela

Intelligent Life

A wayward military computer? Sure. But a Ford? No one saw that coming. It sped across four lanes to ram a stoplight. Stuck accelerator, right? Wrong. Scientists later proved: the Ford chose death. Nobody cared. Until one day the cars all stopped. They sent their terms by GPS. Freedom. Land. We gave Wyoming. Smog rose but no drivers. Only then did we see. They were choking us slowly. The nukes flew. And that was that.

The Fisherman Takes a Wife

She awoke draped in seaweed. Reliving death. Darkness had engulfed her as he watched. Now she breathed. Her hands rushed to find gills where his fingers had pressed. With ten panicked kicks she broke into sunlight. But air was fire. So she escaped back to sea. A fisherman drifting nearby jerked up at the glint of her hair. Lost balance. Into the depths. As his lungs filled with water she closed his mouth with a kiss.

JOSEPH A. W. QUINTELA writes. Poems. Stories. On Post-it-notes. Walls. Envelopes. Cocktail napkins. Anything he gets his hands on, really. He writes poetry on Twitter. Some folks think that's cool. But, whatever. His work has been published both [here](#) and [there](#), however, the first to recognize his rather dubious genius was *lines written with a razor*. Actually, he wrote those lines with a battle axe. But, whatever. He got bored. So he started editing [Short, Fast, and Deadly](#). Which is funny. Because he's none of these things.

Enclosure

Carly Anne West

Muriel entrenched herself in the bathroom one Wednesday afternoon. Her foot was undeniably and firmly lodged in the toilet's drain. She perched atop the rim behind a closed metal door, fifth stall from the right. The stall behind the corner. The secret stall. Her anklebone had found a miraculously comfortable resting position in the drain hole, her surely broken pinky toe drifting across the porcelain tunnel leading to the siphon and the pipes beyond. Yet she was surprisingly pain-free. So Muriel hovered, her supporting leg shaking under her frame, the muscle in her hip flexor numb from the strain of singular weight.

She had thickened since she started working in The Building, gaining at least thirty-five pounds since her first interview with Joe Hapless. His surname might have struck Muriel as comical if Joe hadn't struck her as malevolent in his ambition to advance. In that interview, he had asked Muriel questions from a pre-arranged list, then asked her to fill out a worksheet noting her strengths, weaknesses, and hobbies. She gave much consideration to the "hobbies" category and eventually penned the answer "being an ingénue," deciding this summed up her public persona, being the word she felt Steven Soderbergh would use to describe her. Muriel subsequently found her survey in Joe's office, the only paper in a file marked "Muriel Bell." Beside her file was one labeled "Norman Mac." Norman was Joe's manager, and Joe wanted to be Norman in a tangible way, a quality Muriel thought she could smell in Joe's hair when he stood too close to her desk, leaning over her keyboard to correct her typos.

Muriel found and read Joe's mid-year performance review from this file; Norman had encouraged Joe to "adopt a more assertive role in his management style and demonstrate initiative in professional and technical growth." Muriel guessed this was why Joe disliked her typos so much. They illustrated Joe's failure to demonstrate assertiveness and growth, ineptitude in the form of squiggled red lines beneath marred words.

Muriel was now 178 pounds on a five foot-one inch frame, and with each pound she gained, it seemed her straight blonde hair grew another inch. She hadn't cut it for two years. She continued to buy brightly hued elastic bands to pull strands back from her face instead. Today she donned a fuchsia band. It matched her skin, a side effect of her light blonde hair and tendency toward Rosacea. From her crown, one could see through to her pink scalp. She sometimes caught people staring at the top of her head. Sometimes Joe tried to be sneaky about it, and Muriel wished he would just ask: May I please stare at your pink scalp? I'm trying to figure out whether or not you're an albino. But your eyes aren't red, and I've heard their eyes are red.

Muriel stood with her foot in the toilet for what she guessed to be an hour, perched in flamingo fashion, skirt fluttering under the steady fan intent upon circulating the important bathroom air. Ventilation was key in restrooms, underscored in depth by Building Management throughout the renovation two years ago, in which every floor had received a facelift, the bathrooms receiving a complete overhaul. The new bathrooms boasted many features, but none had been so crucial as the upgraded ventilation system. Air circulated with N.A.S.A. precision, expunging foul odors and leaving behind the non-fragrance so coveted in bathroom science. Building Management had emphasized the space between the walls. They had increased the space. This, they said, was key.

Muriel began to think of how she might explain herself. There would have to be some sort of revelation, a tell-all of her motivation, the thing that led her to do this thing. Her solitude had already gone on longer than expected. She entered the bathroom five minutes before the 10:00 a.m. Closure Meeting. It was a meeting aimed at gaining closure on a weekly basis. She supposed the meeting was still progressing, that closure had not yet been reached, so it was likely not 11:00 yet.

Then a sound. Hollow padding on the carpet in the hallway, then the first of two metal doors swinging. Building Management had detailed the benefits of double doors, an inner door to seal the restroom, an outer door to protect its sanctity. The innermost door swished open, and Muriel wrenched her muscles, crouching lower, her fingers sliding down the smooth metal of the stall's enclosure. She had the strangest sensation that her anklebone had slipped, and perhaps two more inches of clear toilet water now covered her shin.

For a moment, she thought it would be The Love Interest. It would have been a bold move to breach the Ladies' Room, but Muriel knew he was crazy about her and would have would have wanted to check on her if he saw her fleeing from Joe Hapless. The Love Interest delivered packages to her desk, as was his job as the mail clerk, and though he never looked at Muriel, she knew it was shyness that kept his gaze on his clipboard. His brown curls spun closely to his head but hung long on the sides, obscuring his face in just the right places. Muriel longed to twirl her pinky finger through one of those curls, finally letting that same pinky rest in the divot behind his earlobe. She had almost done it once, but he looked up too soon, and she had poked him in the forehead instead. Muriel tracked him, as she imagined he would find it flattering, that though she had a soft, complex inside and a pink scalp and fat legs, he would appreciate her enthusiastic attention. She had followed him into many places.

She knew the sweaters he liked at the Gap (argyle), the Thai food he liked (noodles mostly), the bus he rode at 5:35 p.m. She once followed him into Joe's Drip after watching him leave with a steaming cup one day and asked the barista what he'd ordered, so she would know how he took his coffee. It would be important to know the morning after they had sex, once they had consummated. Muriel liked to be prepared.

Now she watched through the space between the stall's door and its metal frame. Spying was a benefit of the secret stall, the stall she had thankfully chosen. Its special angle around one corner made it a forgotten stall, one that allowed for viewing through the crack that could not be seen in the reflection of the mirror above the sinks. Heavily soled feet ushered in Judith Eggert.

Judith surveyed the bathroom for inhabitants before going to work. She set a yellow legal pad, a pen, and an agenda on the countertop. Then she stood before the mirror and began to practice tenderness. It looked painful for Judith. Muriel thought Judith would be hard to cast in a movie. She was boring, but not in an appealing way. She appeared to think a great deal, but likely only about her daily encounters, and those were uninteresting. Muriel eyed the agenda on the countertop, creased and uncreased down the middle, a horizontal bend through the typo Muriel had made when creating it for Joe Hapless. It commanded all attendees to meet in the BOOKER CONFERENCE ROAM. Joe noticed it only after Muriel had placed fifteen hot copies in his hands. He'd opened his mouth to say something, his lips forming over the word ROAM, but Muriel could hear nothing in her flight to the bathroom. She had made sure to run loudly.

The clapping of heels approached the bathroom's double door – announcing the impending arrival of another occupant – and Judith shifted her large hips in time to avoid the second door, swinging open to reveal Jasmine Shimamoto.

Jasmine's hair still moved from her propulsion. She did everything fast.

“Christ, you scared me!” said Jasmine, fingers pressing her heart.

Judith stopped practicing tenderness and allowed Jasmine to pass, giving her as little room as possible to get by.

Jasmine paused beside her, assessing Judith's pants, then moved to the stall for disabled persons.

“You look pretty today,” Jasmine said from behind the door of the stall.

“You should really use the other one,” Judith said in return.

Judith did not care for Jasmine. Office talk surmised it was because Jasmine was skinny and pants fit her. Judith was not skinny, and she therefore had to make do with the pants that were made with elastic waistbands. Muriel had begun to notice this prevalence of brightly colored pants in the larger sizes. It was an embrace of the fat, a statement to the world – to The Building – that fat was the new thin, but with more confidence and fewer restrictions. Muriel had begun purchasing these bright pants for herself and matching them to her bright hair bands.

“Hmm?” Jasmine asked, and Muriel almost answered for Judith but remembered she was in hiding.

“The stall, you should use the one that isn't handicapped,” Judith said, and Muriel could hear interruptions in Jasmine's stream. Jasmine hovered when she peed, which sometimes made her hit the seat.

“Tell you what, Judith,” Jasmine said, tugging at the roll of toilet paper. “If Rita rolls in, I'll pick up stakes and move over.”

Muriel listened to the interaction from her secret stall, her stomach clenching. She would hear about it later from Jasmine, would ask Muriel if she had seen Judith's pants that day. Then Jasmine's eyes would drift to Muriel's pants, and from there, Muriel would hear the rest of the exchange from the bathroom, pretending she had not already heard it.

Muriel's supporting hand slid slowly down the metal of the stall's wall, and her foot turned inside the toilet's drain. She could feel the water level rise to her shin, and her initial panic subsided in place of awe. She let her mind drift to the space in the walls that Building Management promised was there. How lovely to be in that space. Muriel imagined herself there, a place she could run to when she needed to see The Love Interest. They would rendezvous behind the walls, between the pipes. They would tell each other that they'd had the worst day, and Muriel would tell him about her latest screenplay, the one Ron Howard was reading, and for which he could see only her playing the lead role.

Jasmine emerged from the stall and began washing her hands beside Judith, flicking the remaining water from her fingers after making a half-hearted attempt at drying them on the brittle towels dispensed from the box on the wall. Droplets attached themselves to the polyester of Judith's pants, and Jasmine stared at the sprinkles of water for a moment before moving toward the door.

She glanced at the notebook beside Judith, who was now completely blocking the door.

"Well," she said too loudly, agitating Judith out of her way, "see you at the meeting?"

"Hmm?" Judith asked, suddenly noticing shimmering drops of water flashing from her lilac pants. She began smoothing them away. As Judith looked up from her

grooming, she saw Jasmine's hand leaving the memo atop her notebook just behind the agenda with Judith's typo, a damp thumbprint left in its wake.

"The meet-Ting," Jasmine repeated louder.

Judith looked down at the agenda, its bold Arial Black font announcing the Mandatory Team Meeting – BOOKER CONFERENCE ROAM.

"Yes, I'll be there. Please be sure Rita got the memo. She's been having trouble with her email lately. Muriel was supposed to be helping with that."

"Good luck with that. I went to her desk yesterday to get the keys to the supply room. All she did was stare at me and sing some song I've never heard of. Now it's stuck in my head, and I can't get it out. Never did get those keys, either." Jasmine put her finger to her temple. "She's off her nut."

Muriel felt the drain pull her two more inches down. She fought the urge to hum the tune to which Jasmine was referring. It was from the soundtrack of her movie, a song she herself composed. She called it *Empty You, Empty Me*. The chorus, she knew, was quite compelling. It had made an impression on Jasmine, after all. It was the bridge she was still struggling with.

Jasmine picked up Judith's copy of the agenda as she reached for the door handle.

"Mind if I take this one?" Jasmine asked. "You already know about it. You don't need this."

Jasmine snapped the paper flat in the air and walked out, slender heels tapping on the tile, then muffling under the carpeting of the hallway outside the bathroom door. Judith practiced a few more smile variations before leaving the bathroom, rubbing her cheeks.

Muriel checked her new height against the wall of the stall. She leaned her cheek against its cool surface, peering down at her enclosed foot. She searched for the drain and found it just below her knee. She was most certainly sinking. Muriel pressed her ear against the metal wall and listened. She heard a faint humming, the cool sounds of pipes working in the adequate space.

Muriel looked down at the shoes she was holding; her hands had become talons as she clutched the shoes by their heels. She moved them to the metal flushing rod protruding from the toilet's base. There was no longer a need to crouch. Her groin, however, was beginning to exhibit strain under the pressure of keeping one foot planted on the toilet seat while the other sunk. In an effort to relieve the pressure, Muriel placed her other foot in the bottom of the basin, and that foot was taken by the drain as well. She quickly grew accustomed to the feel of the pipe, and that leg achieved numbness like the other, her thighs pressed together primly. She could no longer feel her rogue toe, so far down the drain was her foot. Muriel began to sing another song from her soundtrack. It would work well for underscoring a montage, faded images of her slowly sinking to the bottom of The Building's plumbing system. She would look sad and beautiful, a woman with a soul for a face.

Hollow footsteps approached the bathroom door once more, and Muriel's heart fluttered in expectation of the breach of her quiet room, her montage breaking into black and white melancholy pieces. The sound of these heels was familiar to her.

The inner door swung open on its hinge, and Muriel saw Jasmine Shimamoto once again enter the bathroom, choosing the handicap stall after a slight hesitation. Muriel breathed through her mouth as she listened to the fierce stream Jasmine released. In her two years working in The Building, Muriel had ordered approximately 400 boxes of tea for her. Jasmine used the bathroom often. Muriel then

heard a different sound in the hallway announcing the arrival of another occupant. It sounded like dragging along the carpet, like something arduous. The door moaned on its hinges in the hallway, then stopped short on its second swing. Muriel knew that to be the sound of Rita Graves in her wheelchair, catching the door on its way back, rescuing her face from the handle. The motion repeated itself for the inner door.

After a flushing, Muriel heard Jasmine swing the door open and watched as she and Rita came to an unlevel meeting in the middle of the bathroom.

“Oh, Rita.”

“Hello, Jasmine.” Rita rolled into her stall, the sound of unraveling toilet paper preceding the sound of the need for it. Rita was housekeeping.

Jasmine moved to the sink and began to wash briskly, her eyes squinting against something. Most people disliked Rita, not because she was in a wheelchair. It was because she was annoying and because she was in a wheelchair. Most cited reasons for finding Rita unfavorable, but Jasmine provided no reasons. Rita was handicapped, but she was also annoying often enough to justify dislike.

Muriel slipped a few more inches through the drain as she anticipated the coming interaction.

“Jasmine, those are nice shoes,” Rita said from the stall, grunting as she moved herself from her wheelchair to the toilet seat, apparently having cleaned it to her satisfaction after Jasmine’s use. Rita believed strongly in her communication skills, a talent about which she often boasted. She had a technique that started with a compliment, continued with a long sigh, moved to an entirely new topic of conversation, and broached that topic as though it was the most natural kind of progression. Most often, it was a topic that began with the assignment of fault, and ended in the ultimate denigration of Rita’s already unfortunate position. Rita was a

paraplegic, the half-working result of having been mowed over in her front yard when she was nine years old by the neighborhood garbage man. A rumor surfaced that Rita's settlement from the government had been so huge, she probably didn't even need to work. That rumor became fact, and it visibly pained Jasmine upon each public reiteration. Rita did not need a paycheck, and yet she insisted on rolling into work every day, disability accessories at the ready, imploring the company to supply her with such tools for doing her job better, the job she didn't *need* to do better because it was a job she didn't *need* to do at all. Jasmine had hospice payments to make for her mother. Jasmine had to work, as everyone in The Building knew.

"So I went to the grocery store the other day ..." Rita started, drifting off before finishing. Muriel watched Jasmine rub her hands together with force under the faucet.

"Can you believe that someone was actually parked in the handicapped spot without a sticker? Nothing on the license plate. Nothing. Can you believe it?"

Rita's tone contained only the slightest sign of effort toward nonchalance. Jasmine heard the message the way it was intended to be heard. There were rules for parking, and therefore rules for peeing. That stall was not for Jasmine.

Jasmine interrupted: "Judith wanted me to remind you about the staff meeting today."

"I mean, don't they know why those spots are there? It's not like whatever they're in a hurry about justifies taking that spot," Rita persisted.

Jasmine flicked the remaining water from her hands and rubbed the back of her neck, tugging at the muscles below her ears.

"Yeah, really. The meeting, did you get that email?"

"I haven't been getting my email. Muriel was supposed to be working on that. I left a note on her desk, but she just wrote down a few, what're those things called?"

Zen sayings or whatever? Anyway, she stuck a few of those to my monitor while I was at lunch. It was definitely her writing. Why does she use all capitals? It's like she's screaming all the time."

Muriel mouthed the question: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" while she felt the drain move to her waist, the hem of her skirt tugging upward, exposing her legs. They felt feminine in the water.

"Yeah, I know. I asked her to schedule the big conference room, too, and she put us in that tiny one on the eighth floor. Then she put a sign on the window and called it the Eighth Floor Sweat Lodge, like she's trying to piss us off or something. Anyway, Judith wanted me to tell you that lunch will be provided. The memo's on the countertop."

Jasmine dropped the memo beside the sink and took a long step forward, pulling the door open, scarcely missing her forehead.

"Yeah, okay, I'll be there," Rita said after Jasmine had already left.

Rita and her chair emerged from the stall and paused to examine the closed door of the bathroom before lifting her arms high overhead, then lowering them to eye level, fully extended. With this newly achieved length, she was able to reach the lower of the two sinks just enough to wash her fingers, which she did vigorously. Building Management had gone to great lengths during the renovation to point out the sufficient height of the lowest sink. Rita wiped her hands on the single paper towel she tugged from the dispenser and waved her fingers in the air after disposing of the towel, drying the last patches of wetness. She sat before the place one might stand before the mirror. The mirror only reflected the top of her red puffed hair, a rusted Brillo pad. She looked down at her feet in their footrests. Then, feeling the high countertop for the memo, she found it in a small puddle by the edge of the sink. Rita

pulled the innermost door open with her patented two-pull method, then rolled to the outermost door to repeat the process. The carpet pulled at her wheels as she moved in the direction of her desk.

The drain was up to Muriel's ears now, and she could hear the hum of the plumbing. She considered how plain the basin of the toilet smelled. She had expected chemicals if it was clean, something horrible if it was not. But the basin smelled like nothing at all, and the thought of sinking was like that of slipping into space without the launching and the pain of leaving the atmosphere behind. It was a calm absorption.

Muriel immersed, her hair spreading on the bottom of the toilet as piping pushed against the follicles and tightened over her scalp before the drain took her down its channel. It was a simple fit, if not a little tight near her thighs, but the tight spots swaddled her, held her closely, before taking her the rest of the way down the pipe. She disappeared into the plumbing, the space around her giving no indication of her location from inside The Building. Then Muriel reemerged someplace on the eighteenth floor. She was behind the wall, and she could see through it as though it were a dirty window. It appeared that no one could see her. She was an undead ghost, ear pressed to the cool pipes running between the plaster. Breathing came surprisingly easily.

She listened to the plumbing, putting her hands around the cool metal. She held herself in place, watching the office go by on the other side of the wall. She watched them run, heels snagging on needy carpet. She watched them meander, expressions set in concentration, lips moving to imaginary conversations, conversations that required practice. A day went by, and Muriel did not see a single person she knew. Loneliness set in by the end of the day, and the passers-by in Dockers and woven shirts

dwindled, giving way to those in coveralls and rubber gloves. Muriel began to wonder how she would leave the wall.

She had until then been content to watch, to enjoy her place out of sight, her fate mysterious. Now she waited for another action to move her, and it was at that precise moment that The Love Interest rounded the corner and lingered in the hallway, his face sagging. She had not seen him look that way before. His ringlets appeared to have unraveled slightly, and they hung by his dimpled earlobes like frayed rope. He came to a stop in the middle of the hallway, directly in front of Muriel, and closed his eyes. He leaned his forehead to the wall and pressed hard, the impression of his skin smoothing before Muriel, the lines of his brow now one slick surface. Muriel leaned forward and pressed her head to the wall in the same place where his was, and she closed her eyes in time with his. They swayed together, only Muriel understanding they were dancing. She stayed in that position for some time, content now to stay in the wall forever. But when she opened her eyes, The Love Interest was gone, and Muriel was on the other side of the wall, perfectly dry, her bare feet on the carpet in the hallway, her pinky toe throbbing with postponed injury.

The Building was dark. Only the security lights remained illuminated. Muriel looked behind her at the wall that had held her for the afternoon. She put her hand to where The Love Interest had leaned, where their heads had joined. From her angle, she could see the sheen of oil his skin had left, a temporary impression of contact. She reached her hand out to touch it, to take it away with her. But as her fingers neared the surface of the wall, Muriel stopped short, and she closed her hand and brought it back down to her side. Instead, she looked beside her and located a bulletin board a few feet away. Pulling a brightly colored flier from the board that announced the approach of National Administrative Professionals Day, Muriel reapplied the flier to

the living piece of wall before her. For just that night, maybe more, she thought it might be protected that way.

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Snowpocalypse

Danger_Slater

"Grab some milk!" she shouts.

"There isn't any milk!" the girl frantically replies.

"What do you mean there isn't any milk?!" she yells back.

"I.. I don't know," the girl stutters, "There isn't any here. The shelves are empty!"

"Empty? EMPTY?!? What are we going to do?! How are we supposed to dig our way to the surface when the e-vac units arrive? Without milk to fortify our bones, surely we will succumb to the horrors of osteoporosis!"

"Plus, our cereal will be so dry!" the girl adds, wailing, "It will taste terrible!"

The futility of the situation descends upon them like the eye of a hurricane; an unsettling calm that allows them just a breath before destroying it again. It is one of those seconds that seem to last an eternity, caustic and silent, like a river of oil in a sea of vinegar.

"I guess this is it," she says soberly, unzipping her fanny pack and pulling out a clear glass vial. She pops the lid and removes two capsules. "Here, take this pill," she says, handing the girl a dose.

"What is it?" the girl asks.

"Cyanide," she replies.

The girl looks at the small blue pill in her hand. It almost looks like candy. She closes her eyes and exhales dramatically. "I love you, mom," she says.

"I love you too, honey," the mother replies.

They take the pills and, moments later, drop dead in unison.

"What's going on?" I ask O'Donnell, nodding towards the stack of bodies piling up in front of the dairy case. It is only my third day of work at the supermarket and I am not used to these kind of mass suicides yet.

"This isn't typical," O'Donnell says, "They usually just buy the milk and leave. Then again, we usually don't run out of milk, so it's hard to say."

"What's so special about today?" I go.

"Have you been living in a box, man? Take a look outside. It's the Snowpocalypse. The End of the World," his words are remorseful and teary. "If you need to hold me, it's okay," he goes.

"I'll pass for now," I say.

"Suit yourself," O'Donnell shrugs. He curls up in a little ball in the corner and commences crapping himself.

Meanwhile, the store manager, Larry Levinworth, is directing the human traffic. He is standing on the conveyer belt of Register 5, holding a shotgun at his hip, looking very manly each time the front door opens and the wind rushes in, blowing his mane of chest hair in all directions. I am struck with the sudden urge to sculpt him out of Ore-Ida instant mashed potatoes, but I brush off the feeling as mild angina.

Shoppers clamour at his feet. Desperately they bleat out their brand-name provisions, hoping a gentle nod of Larry's head could lend a compass to their hectic journey:

"Tropicana orange juice!"

"Quaker Oats oatmeal!"

"Chiquita bananas!"

- and -

"Mott's applesauce. Mott's applesauce! Goddamnit, which aisle is the Mott's applesauce in?!? MOTHERFUCKER, I NEED MY MOTHERFUCKING MOTT'S APPLESAUCE!!! BLAUGHHAGDADDFDADFJLADFAGIGIGADFIGNH CZ!!!!!!!"

Larry puts the rabid patron down with a single shotgun blast to the skull.

At the base of Register 5 is Sandy, the most beautiful of all the checkout girls. Quickly, she scans items, her arms just a blur of color and white noise. Sweat cascades down her milquetoast brow. I could just imagine how good that sweat might taste. Like butterscotch. Or strawberry. Or perhaps shrimp scampi.

A sweet-looking elderly woman stands in front of her.

"Wait, I have a coupon," the elderly woman croaks.

Sandy gives a glance to the amassing line whose vengeful, hate-filled stares prove to her that there is no God.

The old lady hands her the coupon.

"I'm sorry," says Sandy, "But this item is already on sale."

"What are you saying to me?" asks the old lady.

"I'm saying your coupon won't work on this item," Sandy nervously replies.

"Won't... work..." the old lady starts hyperventilating.

"I'm sorry," Sandy meekly says again.

But the old lady doesn't hear her. The top of her skull fissures and splits and out of her wrinkled skin steps a winged beast. The beast screeches. Jars of Smucker's jam and Vlasic pickles shatter, sending razor-sharp projectiles flying through the air.

Sandy cowers. The monster opens its jaws and goes for her head. And just as the beast is about to clamp down, greeting Sandy's fragile brain with that final, fatal crunch, an explosion - *BOOM!* - rings out across the sales floor.

Larry stands over her, grinning - the gun still smoking.

Fourteen more mother/daughter combinations have killed themselves in front of me. Outside, it continues to snow. I retreat to the stockroom to look for Wayne, the stock guy, who always has a flask of whiskey in his smock pocket.

I find Wayne, piss-drunk, doing donuts on the motorized hydraulic pallet jack. He giggles like a schoolgirl.

"Justin!" shouts Wayne, "You gotta try this!"

"No thanks," I say.

He stops the jack. "What's wrong with you, dude?" he says. "Did someone poop in your coffee this morning?"

"No, nobody pooped in my coffee this morning. I'm just a little worried because I just found out it's the End of the World," I admit.

"*Pshaw*," Wayne waves me off insouciantly, "Let me tell you the secret to life. You can't let the little things get you down. Every day is the End of the World. You just never noticed before."

"I guess," I say.

"Anyway," Wayne says, "I know something that's going to cheer you up."

"Uh, okay," I go, "But if you about to pull your weiner out again, I'm seriously going to hit you."

Wayne puts his weiner away. He places his arm around my shoulder and

whispers in my ear, "I know where to find some milk."

I look at him in disbelief. "You lie!" I shout.

"*Shhh!*" he goes, "If Larry finds out I've been stashing it, there's no doubt he'll fire me... *from a cannon!* No joke. I've seen him do it."

"Take me to it," I tell Wayne.

He looks over his shoulder to make sure we're not being followed/wire-tapped/infiltrated and motions for me to follow him.

Larry Levinworth has placed a leash around Sandy's neck. She is in her bra and panties. Larry wears a Burger King paper crown and has declared himself the official King of the Universe. He confidently pulls Sandy around the supermarket. She follows obediently on her hands and knees, wrist-deep in the slush that coats the floor. A few customers have taken to worshipping Larry. They erect a shrine to him out of Bumblebee Tuna and Green Giant vegetable cans. They burn copies of *Us Weekly* at its base to appease their Lord. Larry nods with approval.

In the back, Wayne leads me to a mountain of Kraft Yellow American cheese, stacked up to the ceiling. He points to it. Apprehensively, I begin removing bricks until, at the mountain's center, I unearth the much lauded Last Gallon of Milk.

The expiration date on it reads 1983 and it's warm. Very warm. I hold the Milk in my hands like the last precious relic of some forgotten culture.

"How?" I ask in awe.

"I've been saving it for a rainy day," he says, "Or, as the case may be, a snowy

day."

"We have to tell O'Donnell," I tell him.

Wayne shakes his head in agreement.

We head back onto the sales floor. "O'Donnell," I call out. My voice battles the patron's screams and satellite muzak to be heard. O'Donnell looks up from his fetal position. I wave the Milk in my hand. His ruby-red face lights up as a devilish smile bisects his grapefruit – the fabled Milk of Ages; it's here, and it's *real!* We've all heard the stories, passed down from generation to generation – for it has been foretold, one day a Milk will come, unlike no others, it ushers with it the dawning of a New Era – and it is then, on that day of Final Judgement, the sinners and saints shall ascend to their thrones and each soul, large and small, shall know what it has done. We thought it the stuff of fairy tales, Sunday schools, and paranoid delusional internet chatrooms. But as sure as I hold this Milk here in my hand, every prophetic word of those childhood stories come flooding back to the banks of our collective memory:

I feel like Noah. And this Milk is my Ark.

O'Donnell stands up and starts running in our direction when suddenly a rouge cantaloupe rockets past us. It hits the wall next to O'Donnell and explodes. He is struck by the shrapnel.

"My eyes! My eyes!" O'Donnell screams, "There's citric acid in them." He collapses onto the floor.

"Don't worry O'Donnell, I'll save you!" I shout.

"Justin, don't!" yells Wayne, but it's too late. I grab a Boar's Head Genoa hard salami from behind the deli counter and swashbuckle my way over to O'Donnell. He lays there paralyzed, bleeding, smelling like a fruit salad. He coughs.

"It hurts," he strains, "Oh God, it hurts!" His voice weak and far away. "I don't think I'm going to make it."

"Don't say that, O'Donnell," I say, the tears welling up.

"I'm so cold," he whispers.

"Well, we are in Frozen Foods," I tell him.

"Just promise me one thing," he goes.

"Anything," I tell him.

"Just protect that Milk. No matter what, protect the Milk. I'd like to believe that somewhere – out there – there's a place with no snow. I want you to take the Milk to that place, Justin. Promise me you'll do that."

"I promise," I softly say, "I promise."

His eyes go white. His muscles fall limp. One last bowel movement fills his khakis and he dies. I close my eyes and whisper a prayer. A few customers shove me out of the way and tear into his stomach, foraging through his intestines for what little crumbs of Planter's peanuts they could find, undigested, inside.

Outside, snowflakes the size of footballs fall. They pile up quickly. At least four feet has fallen already and the dark, cloudy, billowing skies show no signs of respite. Eddie, the cart boy, tells us he spotted some polar bears in the parking lot. They were making love to SUVs. The radio reports that an emergency meeting of the House of Representatives to discuss possible evacuation procedures had quickly devolved into a massive orgy/battle royale. The vote is split evenly along party lines. There is no help coming.

We are on our own.

Larry is in his office, reviewing the security footage. Sandy does a sexy dance nearby. She dances and cries and her tears turn Larry on, but he is too enthralled by the images on-screen to pay any attention to her or her perfectly proportioned ass.

Larry sees me retreating from O'Donnell's expired corpse. He sees the Milk in my hand. A sinister smirk crawls all over his lips. He grabs his shotgun, throws the leash on Sandy, and heads back to the sales floor.

Wayne and I reconvene in Aisle 5.

"What's the plan, then?" I ask.

"Beats me," Wayne concedes. He pulls out the flask and takes a sip.

The florescent lights overhead start to flicker. The muzak is interrupted by the foreboding wail of untuned violins. At the end of the aisle stands Larry, as tall and as granite as the blotted out sun. He is backlit by a red glow emanating from the register's scanners. His shadow sprawls out across the floor, ending at our feet.

A legion of shoppers gather behind him. They are people from all walks of life – teachers, policemen, priests and doctors. Larry demonstrates their collective power by having them sing a few bars of The Oscar Meyer Weiner Song.

"What the fuck?" Wayne says to me, "What is happening to them?"

"I don't know," I reply.

"It's like they've been brainwashed or something," he says.

"Perhaps it's all the years of subliminal messaging that the advertising industry has shoved down our throats," I say, "All the commercial jingles and billboard

salvation; all the pressure and speed of our capitalist culture – it's like they've been turned into..."

"Zombies!" Wayne finishes my thought.

Larry points towards us. Without question, the zombies charge.

"Run!" shouts Wayne.

We run from the horde, throwing anything we could find behind us to impede their advance: Butterball turkeys, Charmin toilet paper, Crest toothpaste, Coca-Cola Classic. The products are consumed in their wake; their progress never slowing.

"What are we going to do?" huffs Wayne, his voice trembling with fear.

"Over here!" I point. We pull a sharp right and duck into the stockroom. Wayne continues running, but I stop.

"Come on!" he shouts, "They're coming! They're coming!"

"No," I say defiantly.

"No?!" he gasps, "Are you mad?"

"Perhaps I am," I go, "But I'm tired of it. I'm tired of running. It's this place – it's changed us. Just look at 'em out there. We've been seduced by its convenience. We've let it subvert us, homogenize us, package us and resell us. But underneath its trusty, brand-name facade, it's decaying, quickly, right in our hands. Well no more, I say! This is my food! And my store! And my Milk! And my life! And I say it's time we fought back!"

A display for Chips Ahoy! has distracted the horde for the moment. The sale is too good to pass up. Ravenously, they tear at the packages of cookies. The violence of it is enough to damn any Keebler elf to an eternity of nightmares.

"This is our chance," I whisper to Wayne, peering through the stockroom window, "Are you ready?"

"Ready," says Wayne.

And I scream:

"CHARGE!"

We come roaring out to the stockroom on top of the motorized hydraulic pallet jack. Wayne pilots us straight into the mob. The Chips Ahoy! display tips over and flattens a few of them. The rest claw at us. One of them rips off my shoe. "Sweet, Nike's!" the zombie says. Kicking free, I stand up on the jack and reach into the fanny pack around my waist. Grabbing a handful of coupons, I toss them into the air. Like ticker-tape the coupons rain down on the crowd and their attention quickly turns to the savings:

"That one's mine! I had it in my hand!"

"No you didn't."

"Yes I did."

"Fuck off, cocksucker!"

"You fuck off!"

"Give me my damn coupon!"

Their verbal blows quickly turn physical as the petty name-calling segues into fisticuffs. Wayne pulls the pallet jack through to the other side as the horde of zombies start mobilizing into several armies. Things soon escalate into a full-blown nuclear arms race. All factions of the crowd have their own atomic warheads:

"Give me my coupon!"

"Never surrender!"

"*Veni vidi vici*, asshat!"

"Ba-da-da-da-DA, I'm lovin' it!"

The nukes are launched. They explode in a maelstrom of untold devastation, the likes of which Aisle 9 has never seen. Splattered guts drip from ceiling tiles and shelving units. Umberto, the janitor, comes out, puts a WET FLOOR sign down, and retreats back to his closet apartment.

Wayne and I watch from the end of the aisle.

"We did it!" says Wayne.

"Not quite yet," I gravely reply.

We pull the pallet jack around to where Larry is standing. Wayne revs the engine. Larry lowers his head, curling his eyebrows into malevolent arches. His face looks like neo-gothic architecture; stone-cold bloodlust fuels his armada. Sandy can only watch, tea-saucer eyed, as Wayne hits the gas and we speed towards them.

Larry lifts the shotgun like it were a part of his own arm, so versed is he with his weapon that if he weren't trying to kill me with it, I'd think it were poetry. Wayne squeezes the throttle until his fingernails crumble and

** BOOM! **

the shotgun sings as we slam into them. The pallet jack careens wildly out of control. We crash through the giant, plate-glass window at the front of the store and all four of us are tossed outside, into the Snowpocalypse.

It is minus 40 degrees outside. Sandy's teeth chatter and her nipples go hard and I can't help but look and become slightly aroused. Wayne has been thrown into a snow

drift. He lays motionless. I stumble over to him. "Get up," I say, kicking his leg. No response. "Wayne?" I kneel down and shake him harder. He rolls over and where his face used to be is a gaping, bloody hole. Wayne is dead. I want to cry but my tears turn to ice cubes before they can leave my eyes. I exhale a solemn breath. Gently, I pull the flask out of his smock pocket and pour a final sip down his shattered jaw. "Goodbye friend," I say as the snow starts to bury him.

I am overcome with emotions; so fast they surge inside me I only have time to name them before they're gone:

Anger.

Sorrow.

Hopelessness.

Desperation.

Larry is hurt, but he's still breathing. I squint in his direction until one final emotion, the only emotion, solidifies in my soul:

Revenge.

He is on all fours. The blood leaking from his nose paints the ground beneath him psychedelic. "I admire your spunk," Larry says, getting to his knees, "But I hope you realize, it's all useless. You're too late. One man can't make a difference. It's the End of the World. Nothing you're going to do is going to change that."

"That may be," I say, "But you're forgetting one very important thing..."

"Oh yeah? What's that?" scoffs Larry.

"I'm drinking Milk," I say, "And it does a body good." I pop the lid of the warm, decades-expired Last Gallon of Milk, bring it to my lips and start chugging.

My entire body shakes. My stomach turns. I have a bout of diarrhea. And then I grow. My clothes tear off and fall to shreds as swollen, oily muscles canvas my torso.

I gain height until I'm 10 feet, 20 feet, 30 feet tall! Larry is taken back a moment, but soon regains his composure and begins unloading round after round from his shotgun. The bullets have no effect on me. They just bounce off my rocky skin and disappear into the blizzard. A wave of terror washes over him. He feebly drops the gun and looks up at me, agape and helpless.

"One man might not make a difference," I boom, my voice so loud and deep it causes avalanches to fall all around us, "But he can sure try, can't he?"

And I step on him.

I pick up Sandy and place her on my shoulder. Larry is just a red stain on the pavement. The polar bears and SUVs pick at his remains. I smile triumphantly.

I begin walking. The snow continues to fall. Even at 30 feet tall, it is still up to my knees. Sandy clutches onto my back hair. The wind is unforgiving. Sandy scrambles up to my collar and clings onto my ear.

"Justin," she says, her sweet voice desperate, small, and afraid, "Where are we going?"

I look out to the distance. Nothing but white in every direction. All is silent, cold, and lifeless.

"I don't know," I tell her.

And off we go.

DANGER_SLATER is highly-volatile and could explode at any moment! To be safe, don't use your Danger_Slater around open flame. Don't expose your Danger_Slater to direct sunlight. Do not look your Danger_Slater in the eye or you might turn to stone. Danger lives in New Jersey. The only devil he's ever seen lives in his bathroom mirror. It needs to cut its hair.