

jersey devil press

OASIS
WATER NOT
DRINKABLE

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Jersey Devil Press

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Editor's Note: Born Free

This is our ninth issue, people. That's nine months. That means if this internet magazine was instead a human fetus there'd be a lot of screaming, a lot of drugs, and we'd be born right about now. So I think it's only fitting we honor that disturbing comparison with a new banner, a new logo, and... well, that's pretty much it. Nothing else is changing. We were pretty damn awesome for an embryo.

Anyway, this issue. It is precisely as magnificent as you would expect. Monkeys, trees, Jesus, other stuff. I hesitate to say too much more lest I ruin one of the stories. In fact, I'm not even going to tell you which story I might ruin if I did say more. I'm just going to list all the stories and then you're going to have to read them and figure it out on your own. And then there's gonna be a quiz. So there.

We start off with "Business with an M" by Matthew Amundsen, followed by "Hey-Zeus, Can You See?," a title I apparently cannot spell correctly on the first shot, by C.G. Morelli. Then a double-shot of unusual introspection in Matt Rosen's "Floater" and Sara Finnerty's "Big Girls." And we close out with William Farrant's "Athlete" and Eric Westerlind's "Slice of Life."

You've got your assignment. Get to it.

-- Eirik Gumeny

Business with an M

Matthew Amundsen

The first hour of my second day on my third temporary assignment, I was paid \$17 to drink half a cup of coffee, say hello to four or five people, and turn on a computer.

That left plenty of time for organizing my desk. I like to keep it clean and presentable. Even though it is only my desk temporarily, I still respect it and feel obligated to make it look nice. I spend a lot of time fussing over it because that is how professional I am.

I like to work. I know people my age are not supposed to give a fuck about anything, and I agree with them that most things are not worth giving a fuck about, but I like money. What a good little American I am! I would like to be rich one day so that I could buy a monkey. That would be outrageous! I just want a little monkey to sit on my shoulder and watch me type. I would teach it how to care for its nails and feed it frozen yogurt. That is a perk we have at this office, free yogurt. That is so nice of them to think of us year-round. Even in the winter, we can eat frozen yogurt, even temps like me.

Let me assure you, I am quite professional. I am always dressed in tasteful corporate attire: shined shoes, pressed pants, leather belt, ironed shirt, and a tie that is easy on the eyes but has just a hint of splash to betray my quirky but loveable personality.

I arrange all my clothes the previous night, laying them on a stuffed chair in proper order as if I was sitting there myself. I do not tie the shoes. Instead, I align the laces in orderly fashion, protruding them straightforward. Sometimes it frightens me

in the middle of the night when I wake up and see my own ghost. I should be used to it, but I'm not.

Once I wore a flashy tie on my second assignment and everyone looked at me all day. It was almost unbearable. A lot of people said they liked it but I think they just said that to make me feel better because everyone was staring.

I will never wear a tie like that again.

Even seated at my desk I make certain that my tie is centered upon my shirt. It is important for me to look symmetrical. That is how professionals dress.

There is a girl in the office next to me. I try not to notice her because that would not be professional. I do not know her name or what she does. Every time I am about to say hello, she avoids eye contact with me, as if on purpose. I do not know why. She is quite pretty and I am growing addicted to the scent that lingers after she walks by. It is very subtle; that is how I know she has class.

Once she looked me straight in the eyes when we passed each other in the hall. I was on my way to make copies. I like making copies. The rumble of the machinery and the smell of fresh ink make me giddy. But that was the only time she looked me in the eyes and she was lovely. I bet she would talk to me if I had a monkey.

If only I had a monkey.

When I was a child, my parents asked me what I wanted for my birthday, and I said a little monkey and they said I *was* a little monkey! That was not funny. And, as you can probably guess, I did not get a little monkey for my birthday. I got a chair.

The monkey I want would be one of those monkeys that plays with itself a lot because after work we would go home and masturbate to cable television or lingerie catalogs. It would be fun. I would even show him how to do it if he did not already know. If I were really rich, I could afford a hooker for him too. But if not, we would

just share one. I would not mind because I am not selfish, unlike some people in the office.

The second hour on my third temporary assignment on the fourth floor was more exciting and did not leave as much time for manicured ministrations. I typed a letter for one of my bosses. Some people say that I am a “whiz” at typing because I can type so fast. I “whiz” through every assignment. At the temp agency, I tested at 74.5 words per minute, but I made 15 errors. I was angry with myself because they were very simple errors. Once I typed “copmany” instead of “company” and “take aletter” instead of “take a letter.” I pulled my hair I was so mad! Although I am meticulous about my spelling, the program I am [writing on right now this very minute] using in the office has a spell check device I can implement after completing a document to make sure no misspelled words slipped by me. They rarely do, but I use it anyway, just to make sure. Better safe than sorry, I say. Better safe than sorry.

I wonder how much it would cost to have a monkey-sized keyboard made. He could help me type, maybe just numbers and special punctuation like question marks. I do not like typing numbers. They are so far away from the other letters and they slow me down when I am typing a world-class memo. The monkey could do that. He would enjoy that task, and I would feed him animal crackers. He would not even know if he ate a monkey cracker!

I would teach the monkey to use the fax machine too. If only our clients knew their faxes were sent by a monkey—that would be so funny! The monkey would clap and dance, dance and clap, and I would feed him animal crackers.

The third hour on the fourth floor in the building near Fifth Avenue was very hectic and I had no time to attend to my nails. I was so busy I forgot I even *had* nails!

Or at least I did not think about them, which amounts to the same thing. Whiz whiz whiz, fax fax fax, hello hello hello. That was my hour, not necessarily in that order.

Each office has its own rhythm, but it takes patience to learn this unique beat. I am like a chameleon because I can blend in anywhere. I am a dancer, or at least I should have been. I tell my sister that all the time. She is a little monkey!

The fourth hour in the building near Fifth Avenue, I began to type my sixth inter-office memo. I am very impressed by the system they use here. If I put a letter in a specially marked envelope and just write someone's name on the outside, a man will show up and take it to that person. What a good system! That saves me the time and effort of having to walk and learn new names. And it does not even cost a stamp, though I suppose they have to pay the man who delivers the letters. He probably does not do it for free. I have a lot in common with him because he probably likes money too. But I could not even guess what he does with his money. Maybe he has to feed a family of goats—wait, I just guessed and I said I could not! I sure am outrageous sometimes.

The fifth hour after photocopying my sixth memo for inter-office delivery as the seventh person in the department—including the pretty girl—was lunchtime.

Lunch hour, how soon it arrives! I must make a confession here: I like to test out closets at lunchtime when no one is around to make sure they would be suitable for my monkey. After waiting for everyone else to leave the office for lunch, I go into the closet, push aside whatever garments are hanging there—usually just my coat—and hang from the bar to measure its durability and grip. A good bar needs to be thin because my monkey will have small hands, but it must also be sturdy.

The coat closet in this office is practically ideal. Although I could not fully test it yesterday because I had to drop off last week's time sheet at the temp service on my

lunch hour, I remember its bar being particularly firm and sturdy and not too thin or thick.

When I hang in the closet, I occasionally enjoy a good hoot. But I have to be careful about hooting because it can bring attention. A good hoot is distinctive, unique even, like fingerprints or snowflakes. I practice my hoot at home when I watch shows about monkeys on PBS or the Discovery Channel. I must admit that I hoot along pretty well to them.

You may ask, why hoot? Is not “monkeying around” in the closet, hanging from the bar, enough? No, it is not! And do you know why that is not enough? Because when I get my monkey, he is going to want someone to talk to. I will be there for him to hoot with all day long. We will have a hoot!

Some of you are probably thinking that since I love monkeys so much, why do I not marry one? I will tell you why I do not: because that is dumb. I will never marry a monkey. They are for friends, not spouses. Anybody knows that—just ask a little kid on the street.

I eat bananas on my lunch hour because I want to establish a pattern which will easily accommodate a monkey. His presence in my life will be change enough. Sometimes I eat peanut butter sandwiches with bananas on them that I make the night before. I generally prefer not to eat at my desk because I like to keep it clean. Sometimes crumbs sneak away and then reappear at embarrassing times, like when a boss comes to your desk to give you a special task.

After every meal I rinse my mouth with mouthwash. I do not like food tastes to linger. Food tastes are for tasting food. Lunch is for lunchtime. If I am working and my mouth has a food taste, I feel unclean and I feel like my mind is still “out to lunch.” I should not get paid for being out to lunch.

Today after everyone had gone to lunch, I sneaked into the closet and closed the door. I hung from the bar, pulling my legs up behind me so that I was off the ground. Oh, yes. This was a great closet: roomy, not too stuffy. My monkey would love to work here. Maybe they have a permanent job available. You have to plan for your future. If I know anything, I know that much. I had never thought of a permanent job before. I am so used to new people and places. Maybe I would talk to that pretty girl if I worked here—at least after I got a monkey.

If I had a monkey, he could take her a note that says I like her. She would think it was cute because he would be a cute monkey.

Hoot!

I was feeling bold with my new plan.

My sixth hour as the seventh person in the department on March 8th was elegant. Because a lot of people were still at lunch, I had time to drink more coffee and clean my nails. I like to use a straightened paper clip to do this. It forces out dirt and dead skin trapped underneath.

There came a point in the afternoon when everyone had come back from lunch and was out of their offices and in the main room filing or copying or faxing or babbling, and I decided that was an excellent opportunity to voice my question.

I stood and cleared my throat.

“Ahem.”

A couple of people stopped what they were doing and looked at me, but not everyone.

“Ahem, ahem.”

That got their attention. Good thing I wasn't wearing a brash tie because that would make me nervous.

“Since everyone is here, I want to ask a question. It is actually one big question, with smaller ones attached.”

“Hurry up, we are right in the middle of a merger.” Some goon said that. Of course, I would hurry. Wasting time is unprofessional!

“Okay, my question is, are there any permanent jobs available at this corporation and, in the event I were to be hired for such a position, would it be okay if I brought a monkey to work? I do not own a monkey right now, but I plan to purchase one soon, when I am rich. And if my monkey is allowed to come to work with me, can I put it in my contract that we buy a custom keyboard for him to use, with only numbers and special punctuation on it?”

No one said anything for a moment, and then everyone turned away and went back to what they were doing. Good, they were considering my request. I knew they were professional because they did not say anything. I would not respect them as much as I do if they had made a hasty decision, even if it had been made in my favor.

The seventh hour at work on March 8th, I completed the ninth set of copies for inter-office delivery. When I returned to the office from making all those copies, which I sorted and stapled myself, everyone had left for the day. A lot of people left the lights on in their offices. This was unusually unprofessional of them—not only to leave early, but also to leave the lights on. What a waste! Diligently, I turned off all the lights.

Before leaving myself—there was no work for me to do if there was no one to give me work—I made up my mind to try the bar in the closet one more time. I had to push aside a bunch of coats besides my own. The weather must have improved if no one needed coats. I felt they should have taken their coats home with them, though there was no one for me to tell of my opinion.

I may be special because I am a “whiz,” but I bet I could teach my monkey my job. And then *he* could feed *me* bananas, and I would watch him work. And when it came time to do the faxes, *I* would clap and dance! Everyone would think a monkey was sending their faxes but it would be a human. That is outrageous! And *I* would type the numbers and special punctuation. I knew I could do it. What a great plan!

Hoot!

The lawyers did not know quite what to think when they found me in the closet hanging from the bar and hooting. If I say so myself, I have a very distinct hoot that any monkey would know as mine. To be honest, their discovery was a little awkward. I did not know my acrobatics would be scrutinized by such an impressive array of professionals. And my hoots—well, my hoots were my fault. The whole office had probably heard them.

“Where have you been?” I was still hanging.

“Uh, we were in a meeting.”

“Since you are back, I want to ask one more question. Will you hire my monkey, and if you do, can I be his assistant?”

“Maybe you should just go home.” They said that as if there was something wrong with me.

But I was not leaving, not after finding a bar this perfect. They stood around and I guess they just did not know what to do. They simply closed the door on me. I did not care. This bar was perfect and I did not want to leave. Maybe I could stay in the closet for the rest of the day and hang here like a little monkey.

Hoot!

That would be outrageous!

After a while I could hear them moving around outside the closet. I tossed all of their coats onto the floor so they would not be confused to find me still hanging on the bar. That is how thoughtful and professional I am. I heard them murmuring and scuffling around outside the closet and then everything was quiet.

I thought maybe I should go home after all, but then the door slowly creaked open. It was the pretty girl, and she was staring at me. She said she couldn't believe that there was someone out there that liked to do the same things she did. I made room for her so that she could hang from the bar too. The bar was perfect and would not break even with both of us hanging from it. She said we were both bananas.

Hoot! Hoot!

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Hey-Zeus, Can You See?

C.G. Morelli

Detective Barnum brushed the chipped edge of his coffee-stained mug against his bushy mustache and swallowed a few inky gulps. The liquid had long since cooled to the temperature of a meat locker, but the lumbering officer liked it that way. There was nothing he hated more than pretentious, old coffee sippers or, worse yet, any man who dared to drink tea.

“We got us a live one in there,” he muttered to his partner as he reworked the handcuff-shaped cuff links that peaked out from beneath the gray sleeves of his suit. “And, Graham, don’t let your voice get too warmed up because I get to be the hard-ass this time.”

“Oh, nuts,” Graham responded as he ran a slim comb through a mat of gray hair. He straightened the red bow tie he always wore with his blue and white seer-sucker suit and brown loafers. “Gotta get myself in order, you know.”

Barnum shook his head and wiped a few drops of moisture from his perpetually perspiring forehead. Then the two men slipped inside a room they’d used more frequently than any other in the precinct, minus the bathroom stalls.

A prisoner was already waiting for them inside. He was definitely not the garden-variety criminal. His long brown hair stretched casually down beneath his shoulders and he wore a crisply-pressed white robe which billowed to the floor to meet a pair of ancient-looking sandals. His welcoming smile was a far stretch from the

greasy sneers that usually stared back at Barnum and Graham from the same aluminum folding chair behind the same decrepit table.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, son,” Graham said politely as he flicked on the blinding light bulb that hung directly above the table. “Have yourself a glass of water. I can’t say you won’t be needing it.”

He winked at the prisoner and gestured over his shoulder at Barnum, who was wearing a very predictable grimace on his face.

“Let’s not pamper the little devil, Graham. He’s a scumbag after all. Isn’t that right, Mr.... what’d you say your name was?”

“Jesus,” the prisoner responded sheepishly.

“Oh, yes sir, my pardon,” Barnum quipped, “the one and only Mr. *Hey-Zeus*. King of the Jews. The only son of God. Just goes to show you, don’t matter who you are, crime doesn’t pay.”

“But I didn’t—“

“You’ll speak when spoken to!” Barnum shouted as he slammed a meaty fist against the old table. “I’m asking the questions here. I’m calling the shots. And I don’t recall today being no Sunday so, as I see it, I don’t have to listen to a single word you got to say.”

“Now, Barnum,” Graham added soothingly, “couldn’t we just give him a chance to explain his side of things? It couldn’t hurt, could it?”

“I suppose you’re right. But it’ll be on my terms. You got that, maggot?”

The prisoner nodded his approval.

“Now it seems to me... with you being, you know, all powerful and whatnot, that you’d have a pretty good handle on things. So why in God’s name are people starving all over the planet?”

“That’s not exactly correct,” said the prisoner.

“Oh, I see,” Barnum said slowly.

“Looks like an outright denial,” Graham added. “Mr. Jesus, I been doing this a long time and I ain’t never seen a prisoner get away with something they haven’t been truthful about. Now it’s just my friendly advice that you be completely open and honest with us. I doubt my friend Mr. Barnum here will be apt to show as much hospitality.”

“But didn’t I—“

“I said *I’m* asking the questions here!” Barnum bellowed. “Now we got these pestering liberals ready to give handouts to any shabbily-dressed millionaire off the street and the damn communists are populating the planet like a nest of rabbits. Between them there’s not a morsel to swallow for all the poor little orphans out there. They’re growing children too!”

“But, detective, I don’t follow your argu—“

“I told you, maggot! You’ll speak when spoken to or you’ll wait until Sunday, whatever comes first. Now what about this whole creation nonsense?”

“Yeah,” Graham chimed in. “I’d like to hear all about that scientific mumbo jumbo straight from the source.”

Confusion quickly flashed across the prisoner’s face.

“The source?” he asked.

“Yeah. Says in the big book you created everything in seven days.”

Barnum leaned back to admire the knowledge he was spewing.

“That wasn’t me.”

“Sure it was,” Graham protested. “Been reading about it all my life.

“And since you created it all, you must have created science along the way too.”

“Again, not me, but I still don’t—”

“So why in God’s name can’t you get a handle on those guys? I mean, these scientists are hell-bent on claiming your work for their own.”

The prisoner had no response other than a blank stare that he tossed like a grenade upon the sheer naivety of his interrogators. Neither Barnum nor Graham noticed, and they simply continued their frenzied theorizing.

“Great point, Barnum,” Graham added. “They expect me to believe this planet was created when a couple of rocks slammed together?”

“Yeah,” said Barnum. “Or that humans were nothing more than a couple of circus chimps swinging from a tree?”

He pressed his meaty palms flat against the table and inched his bulldog snout to within a hair’s width of the prisoner’s face.

“Looks like he ain’t got much to say on this account neither, Graham. Another admission of guilt.”

“Yep,” Graham cooed. “It’s a damn shame, Mr. Jesus. I was starting to like you. Was rooting for you, actually. But I can only help you if you can answer Mr. Barnum’s questions.”

“Let’s not soften the blow here, Graham. I still have another question for him.” Barnum took a long, smooth swig from the glass of water that was meant for the prisoner. “Now, on a final account it occurs to me that all these new religions are just mucking up the works. Couldn’t we just save ourselves a lot of trouble if you just up and eliminated all the heathens?”

“Yeah,” said Graham, “it does seem like high time for you to be raining down hellfire and brimstone on the non-believers.”

Both Barnum and Graham stood erect and puffed out their chests and admired what they saw as their own lofty reasoning amid the temporary silence.

“Looks like he ain’t got another thing to say,” Barnum finally mumbled when it became apparent his questioning had fallen on deaf ears.

Graham responded in a somber tone that mocked all reality. “Then there’s nothing more I can do for him. Seems like he’s guilty on all counts. Will you do the honors, Detective Barnum?”

“It’ll be my pleasure.”

The overgrown detective reached beneath his jacket pocket and pulled out a pair of shimmering handcuffs. He grabbed the prisoner by one of his wrists and slapped one of the cuffs tightly around it.

“Come with me,” he said harshly.

And then Jesus looked him directly in the eyes. His countenance was that of a newly-born fawn mixed with the defiant glare of incredulity. But he went softly nonetheless, as he’d done once before, and he left the two detectives with only a few parting words for them to ponder.

“Look, fellas,” he said as they led him out of the interrogation room and back into the intestines of the precinct, “I think you have me all wrong.”

C. G. MORELLI’s work has appeared in *Highlights for Children*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *SI.com*, *Long Story Short*, *House of Horror* and *Fiction at Work*. He is the author of a short story collection titled *In the Pen* (2007).

Floater

Matt Rosen

It was a virus, they said. Some kind of new flu, they told us. Idiots. They were all idiots.

It's been hundreds of years since I last gazed upon a person. At least it feels like hundreds of years. I have no way of telling time, and as it happens, time has no way of telling me.

Did I tell you about the virus? A new flu, they said. Nothing to worry about, just wash your hands and try not to puke on anyone. It seemed simple enough at the time.

But the virus changed people. It changed me. Each case was slightly different. There were people flying, bursting into flames, turning invisible, you name it.

It was random. It was messy. There were no heroes, only villains and misunderstandings. It was as if, overnight, millions of new one-man nations had emerged, all with the power to end life on earth. The most modest dispute could end in the death of hundreds or thousands of people. What at first seemed so magical and dumbfounding quickly became the norm, and that kind of standard lead to strange tribal warfare on a scale never imagined, both in terms of the size of the gangs and the amount of tribes themselves.

All things considered, I didn't get a bad card. I seem to be able to heal from all wounds. As far as I know, I cannot die. I have since learned that my body can adapt to live in the most uninhabitable environments. I don't even know if I age anymore.

I knew two others who got the same card I did, my sister's boyfriend, and a local painter. If I had known we were all going to end up in space, I might have tried to befriend them. I might have tried to be near them, to be with them when it happened. Hindsight is always so clear. Too clear.

In the beginning I didn't use my ability for anything. I wasn't an active person before I gained the ability, and for all the things the ability changed, it did not change my sedentary lifestyle. Of course, I was still aware of the perks. I didn't get hangnails and when I stubbed my toe it didn't even hurt. Still, I spent most of the time watching television and surfing the Internet. I was quite handsome you know, before the virus creamed the cheese, I did fairly well with the ladies. But in this new world, powers were the latest thing, and my power wasn't sexy enough.

Eventually a group of common-minded scoundrels decided to thrust every person, animal, insect and jellybean on the entire planet into the cosmos. I think so, anyway. It all happened so fast. I saw men, women, children, goats, dogs, mice all shot into the air without warning. Well, maybe some warning. We had all heard the rumors. They wanted the planet for themselves. I can't say that I blame them.

All I had with me at the time was the jeans I was wearing and a pencil in my pocket, and those were the only objects I had with me for a long time. They kept me busy in all kinds of ways; one has to be creative when spending an eternity alone in space.

One night I accidentally let go of the pencil. I never saw it again. Part of me wonders if I let it go on purpose.

I still have the pants.

I have to assume there are others like me floating around out here, but I haven't seen them. I haven't seen anyone in a long time.

Sometimes I have the misfortune of being in the path of a sun. In my earlier days I would try desperately to swim out of the path. It never worked. It took a lot of failed attempts before I gave up on space swimming.

Sometimes I get hit with rocks and other space debris, which I use to find quite annoying, but these days I must admit it is kind of entertaining. It is how I position myself when I make contact with these objects that provides my only real system of navigation. I have become a fine sailor of the stars, but alas, I am a sailor without a map.

Sometimes I see dark shapes in the distance. Crafts, perhaps. I hope so. They pop up now and again; it's been that way for a while, though I have no way of calculating how long. Every day I hope for them to make contact. Maybe they think I don't want to be bothered. I'd imagine there aren't a lot of hitchhikers in this galaxy, contrary to the book. Probably just as well. I still have the virus.

One day I hope I will come across another pencil and maybe a piece of paper or two. But I know that is asking a lot. I would draw a picture of hills and happy trees like that bearded man on television who seems to be latched onto my only remaining memories of life on earth.

I like the quiet though. The quiet is the best part.

MATT ROSEN was born in Upstate New York. He currently resides in Southern California where he spends his time floating around in hot air balloons.

Big Girls

Sara Finnerty

Sadie was as big as a tree. She was as tall as the tallest tree, and at her hips as wide as the widest. Her skin was many rusty colors all at once, and her hair was the kind of red that made you feel like you might be dreaming. When she blinked, sometimes an eyelash would fall, big as a feather, swaying with the air, onto the ground.

When she was young and able to fit through the doorways of school buildings, kids craned their necks up to look at her and called out, "How's the air up there?"

From high above she wasn't sure if they were making fun of her. But she figured they probably were.

Soon she was too big for doorways anyway.

The Sierra Nevada Giant Sequoias are the largest living things on this planet earth. They are not the tallest, but they are the largest. They have the most volume. They take up the most space.

Sadie grew. She was too big for anyone to see her eyes, her face. As she grew, so did her hair. It grew in straight lines and snaked curls and calm, windy waves. It grew and stuck to her body. It grew and made cracks in her skin. Her arms, thin compared to her massive body, reached out for someone who could heed her.

The root system of the Sequoia is unusually shallow, but they compensate for their shallow roots by extending them outwards, in excess of thirty feet, and tangling and braiding their roots together with the underground arms of neighboring Giant Sequoia. In this way, they anchor each other for thousands of years.

Sadie slept in a meadow big enough to contain her. She touched her nose and felt it getting longer and fatter. She cried sticky tears into the grass. Her tears stuck to her face. Her tears stuck to her body.

Sometimes Sadie sat and lowered her head to look at the people that passed by. She wondered if any of them would talk to her. She said, "Hello."

Her hair swept onto the ground and tripped everything it touched. Sometimes she didn't mean to hurt anyone, but sometimes she did.

Sometimes she wanted to hurt them.

The Giant Sequoia's bark can be up to five feet thick. The thickness of its bark is one reason why the Sequoia is essentially fireproof, this and its tendency to retain moisture.

Boys jabbed holes in Sadie's ankles. She was a giant.

"I am a giant."

Sadie wanted to cut herself into pieces, smaller.

The whole world was big enough for millions of Sadies, but she felt too big for the world.

"You are a fat giant."

A chorus of boys yelled up, slow, enunciating each word, all together and as loud as they could, to make sure she could hear.

She said, "I am a fat giant who will never die."

They said, "You are ugly. Too ugly to look at."

The Sequoia is resistant to most things that kill other trees. An insect, for example, cannot kill a Giant Sequoia.

Sadie walked away from the boys, from the people that passed by. She walked into the city and found buildings as tall as her. She looked into their mirrors. It was the first time she saw herself.

"I am quite beautiful," she thought, looking at herself reflected back in the windows.

"Yes, you are," the buildings said. "But we can't help you."

Sadie touched them. Some of their windows broke.

"We are not immortal," they said.

Sadie walked back to her meadow, the only place she knew. She wanted to be alone.

But a crowd of people followed her from the city and set her on fire. They made a thousand person circle around her. The people set the meadow on fire.

And then the people set Sadie on fire.

Sadie stood as still as she could, to make them think she was dead, until eventually the people left.

When she opened her eyes she found that she was not in pain. She was on her knees. She got up, she could still stand. She could still walk.

I followed Sadie in secret for years. No one saw me. And I was too small for Sadie to know I was there.

I was one of the thousand to set Sadie on fire, even though I loved her. I didn't want to burn her. But it was easier to hate her than to love her.

And then I saw her stand. Burned. I went to her, climbed her, and hid in her hair. I used her tears to stick myself to her.

Sadie walked away from the meadow. Her shoulders were hunched. She was too sad to cry.

Sadie reached her arms up and tried to touch the clouds. They were too far away.

“I am not big enough, but I am too big.”

She wanted to touch the moon. She wanted to be in outer space, where she could find someone bigger than her. So big that they would pluck her from the earth like a toothpick, someone so big that she would splinter off in their teeth.

Sadie found the ocean. It was much bigger than she was. She rested herself on it and circled over on her back. She floated. I thought I might get stuck underneath her, underwater, and drown, but I didn't. I slid to her armpit and watched the water go by. I felt Sadie's sadness through her thick, thick skin.

Sadie backstroked the whole ocean. Birds landed on her stomach and perched on her face. She liked the feel of the ocean on her back and she liked feeling small.

But soon she hit land.

I could assume things about Sadie, because loving something leads you to believe that you know things you could never know for sure.

When Sadie hit land, she stood, tentatively, slowly. Her hair was slick. Her fingers were tucked into her hands. Sadie was on a beach. People stared up, horrified at her size. She stood there and let the water drip from her skin and puddle around her until she stood in a lake. Sadie stepped out. She heard girls screeching. Sadie quietly said to herself, "I'm a monster."

As Sadie walked away, I whispered into her skin that she was beautiful. She was a color that didn't exist. She was the biggest thing.

When western settlers first reported the existence of the Giant Sequoias, no one back east believed that these trees could really be true. But they are.

Sadie went up a mountain and down a valley in just a few great strides. When she was tired she curled into open meadows and slept. She didn't cry as much, so there was nothing to stick me to her anymore. I was beginning to fall off. I spent my days clutching at her thick skin and her strong hair, not wanting to let go.

"Sadie!" I screamed. "Don't let me go!"

I don't know why she didn't hear me.

The mountains got taller, and it took her longer to climb them.

"I'm going to climb until I am tall enough to always touch the clouds."

Sadie reached up. Almost.

"Sadie."

I was the one crying now. My tears stuck to her. I had never had sticky tears before.

It wasn't enough to keep me from falling. Just when I thought I didn't have the strength to hold onto her anymore, Sadie stopped walking. She stood, still. I wound my hands into her hair. I dug my heels into her. Her head moved, from side to side. Slow. She stopped breathing.

"They—"

I turned to see a whole mountainside of Sadies.

"They're—"

Sadie lowered her arms to touch her torso.

She pressed her fingertips against her body. A giant finger pushed against my stomach. She buried me in her skin. My torso sunk into hers. I am sure she never even knew I was there.

"They are as big as me."

Sadie walked forward until she felt arms stretch, reach for her. We flooded in.

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The Athlete

William Farrant

All Cameras standby. Sound Crew, ready? Steve, run the opening sequence of triumphant classical music set against a backdrop of snow capped mountains intertwined with historical looking footage of the Greek God Mercury running around an Athenian track. And five, four, three, two, one, bring in Camera One of our hosts, Steve... and action.

Good morning everyone, I'm Bob Pachorelli and this is Marie Vander Staadt and welcome to the Program. Today we will see the Athlete compete against a Typical Day. It should be an intense competition, Marie.

Yes, Bob, the Athlete has a tough series of events ahead of him. Some he excels at and others will test all of his mental faculties. It looks like the action is about to begin, so let's head to the first event of the day, Waking Up.

Steve, bring in Camera two, and... now.

It looks like the Athlete is waking up, Marie. He's rubbing his eyes. He doesn't look quite with it. Is he up before 9:30? Yes, he is, it's 9:07! This is amazing! It's Monday and he's up before 9:30! What could his next move be, Marie?

It looks like he's rolled over and turned on his laptop. He's checking his email. It looks empty, Bob.

And he's out of bed now and he's gone down the hallway. Rounding the corner, to the chair, sitting. If he keeps this up it would be an extraordinary beginning to the day, Marie.

Yes, Bob, it's a really promising start. He's shuffled some papers, picked up a pen, and now... he's put it down... and... oh, no, what is he doing? He's left the desk and he's going back down the hallway!

Maybe he's going to put his pants on, Marie!

No, no, he's crawled back into bed, Bob, he's turned off the lights and... he's sleeping! He's gone back to sleep! This could have terrible implications for the next event, Doing Something Constructive During the Morning Hours!

This is a dreadful start to the competition, Marie, but let's not cast judgment here, because as we know from the advanced scouting reports, he's never being very good at distance events.

All Cameras zoom out. Steve, cut to footage of past successes.

Well, Bob, because the Athlete did not complete Waking Up and chose to go back to sleep instead, he's missed the second event, Doing Something Constructive During the Morning Hours and it has been subsequently cancelled with no possibility of a re-schedule.

It's really a shame, Marie. He's down two-nothing on the day and will need to win the remaining events to have any chance of victory.

He's really up against it now, Bob.

Steve, take us to commercial.

And... we're back. And ready for the next event, Marie. He needs a good showing here for Making Lunch.

He sure does, Bob.

Steve, bring up Camera Four of the Athlete staring at the open fridge.

The Athlete is at the cutting board now. The meat is out. It looks like Corned Beef today.

Indeed, it is Corned Beef, Marie. And the Athlete has his knife out. He's got the bread on the board. He's swiping the mayo. And just look at those smooth strokes!

It's all in the wrist, Bob. He's unwrapping the Corned Beef now and he's putting it on the bread, one slice at a time. Such precision!

I've just been informed, Marie, that the Athlete has run out of cheese. But it doesn't seem to be affecting him. He's adapting well, the sandwich is coming together, and now the bread is placed on top and... the sandwich is complete. And, I don't believe it; he's added a handful of Sour Cream and Onion Chips on the side. What a touch!

This is unprecedented, Bob! We never saw this one coming! To the finale now, Bob, and there he goes, off to the table. And he's sitting down, he's seated, and now we're waiting for the result and... yes, he's won, Bob. He's made his lunch in a great time! The Sour Cream and Onion Chips have impressed the judges with their added degree of difficulty and that has put him over the top and he has won Making Lunch.

This is tremendous, Marie. The Athlete has bounced back from his sluggish start in Waking Up, and from the cancellation of Doing Something Constructive During the

Morning Hours. This sets him up nicely for the afternoon events now. He's put himself in a good position here; he's heading in the right direction.

Sound Crew, fade in the optimistic choral ensemble.

The crowd is growing, Marie. It's getting crowded in the apartment now. And here comes the Athlete for the next event, Reading. He looks poised and focused. Let's see what he can do.

He knows the pressure is on, Bob. He can't afford any slip-ups for the rest of the day. You can really sense that the crowd is behind him.

Camera Two, zoom in to the couch. Camera Three, zoom out for an overview of the crowded apartment.

The Athlete has picked up a book, Bob. He's on the couch... and... he's reading. He's flipping pages. A good pace here.

Yes, Marie, he's jumped into this event full steam ahead. My only concern is that he burns himself out. He needs to realize there are several pages to come.

Right, Bob. It looks like he's slowed a little. No, wait, he's just re-reading a paragraph. He's reading normally again now, he may lose a little time from the re-read, but it's a long book. I don't think it will affect his final score.

Camera One, pan to the crowd. Find a child with a painted face and zoom in.

He's still going, Marie. He hasn't put the book down yet. The big question is: can he finish the book before Tea? It's going to be close.

He's a trooper, Bob. We know his weakness is the distance events but he seems buoyed by winning Making Lunch and it looks like he's really sticking in there. The pages keep flipping. He hasn't put the book down once. His eyes are focused. He's fought off the urge to take a nap several times. He just keeps going.

Camera Two, zoom out. And... cut to the short documentary about the Athlete's sister who has polio, Steve.

And... bring us back, Steve. Give us the image of the face-painted child from Camera One, and then take us to Camera Two, nice, nice...

And he's done it! He's finished the book before Tea, Marie! He's clocked in at just over two hours! This just might be a record! We'll have to get the guys in the truck to verify this. But nevertheless, he's come away a winner here!

He's battled hard, Bob. If he can put a run together for the evening events he still might end up as the Champion. The score now stands: The Athlete Conducting His Life in a Positive Light, two, and The Athlete Showing a Lack of Discipline and Drive, two.

Well, Marie, that's two events in a row for the Athlete. He's looking very strong right now, really relaxed.

Yes, Bob, he's in fine form. But this next event is a big one for him. It requires a lot of concentration. Let's see if he can find the courage to win Leaving the House to Run Errands.

Camera Three, Camera Four, cue for the street scenes. Steve, prepare the graphic of the route the Athlete will take, and ready...

Well, Marie, it's about five p.m. local time and the Athlete is preparing to leave the house. His coat his on. His keys are in his hand.

It looks like there is a delay here, Bob... he's retying his shoes.

It's important to make sure the equipment is in working order, Marie.

Right, Bob, this is a distance event. Let's show our viewers the graphic of the course.

And... bring up the Leaving the House to Run Errands graphic, Steve.

He's going to start by walking to the Grocery Store to pick up a Pork Chop; then he's going to return a Movie and, at the same time, he's going to rent another Movie; once he leaves the Video Store, he's going to the Beer Store, where he will buy one can of Beer, then return home, thus completing the event.

And he's off, Marie! The door is locked and he's heading down the street. He's at a good clip here. There's a slight wind, but there are no pedestrians in sight.

He's in the Grocery Store now... and he's stuck behind a trio of elderly people... but he finds an escape near the Produce Department and it's clear sailing now. That was close, Bob!

Another near disaster, Marie! There is a man the Athlete knows filling out a lottery ticket. What's he going to do about this? Oh, he's done well, Marie, he's lowered his head and gone down a different aisle. And it looks like he's picked up Toothpaste. This wasn't in the cards, Marie. I can't fathom why he'd pick up Toothpaste!

Steve, give us a still-shot of the Known Man and a tube of Toothpaste.

This is unexpected, Bob, but perhaps sensing a potential lengthy conversation with the Known Man he's compensated by going down another aisle and picking up the Toothpaste. He hasn't lost any time, and the Toothpaste aisle takes him straight to the Deli.

Good analysis, Marie. And you're right: he's lost no time. He has his pork chop now...

...At the cash register, Bob. He's keeping it tight. He's having no conversation with the cashier, just "Hello" and "Thank you," quick and easy. This is great stuff from the Athlete.

Steve, I want a slow motion replay of the Athlete smiling at the Cashier as he turns to leave.

Leaving the Grocery Store, approaching the Video Store... he's dropped the Movie on the counter and has gone straight for *Tootsie*. He seems to know what he's looking for, Marie. This is a great piece of advanced planning on his part.

And what a stroke of luck, Bob! The Overly Chatty Video Store Clerk is talking to the Owner of the Video Store. It looks like another quick transaction!

And he's out, Marie; he's on his way to the Beer Store. He's left the Video Store with just the one quick comment to the Overly Chatty Video Store Clerk: "And that's why I wear the scarf."

Bring up the sequence of images showing the Athlete as a child playing in the snow wearing a scarf, Steve.

The Beer Store is empty, Bob, another stroke of luck. He's going straight to the back where the Tall Single Beers are; he's picked up a Lowenbrau. He's doing a price check here, Bob. This is wonderful.

Oh, no! What's he doing, Marie? He's put the Lowenbrau back! He's looked up; he's grabbed a Taller, More Expensive Beer. It's nearly twice the price!

Let me show you on the telestrator. You can see it here, right here. Out of the corner of his eye he sees the Taller, More Expensive Beer. Freeze it, Bob. You can see him rationalizing, making a split second decision. There was no going back from that point. Could the fancy labeling have thrown him off? We might never know, Bob.

You're right, Marie.

The Athlete makes yet another quick transaction at the cashier, Bob. He's well under his targeted time, and adjusting for wind and pedestrians, there is no reason he shouldn't come in under an hour.

Camera Three, get a front profile of the stretch walk. Camera Four, go with the back profile. Steve, alternate between the two to create the illusion of speed and urgency.

And here's the finish, the key is in the door, the clock stops and... it's a record! It's another record, Marie! Fifty-five minutes and eleven seconds. This is outstanding! He's avoided meaningless conversations and pedestrians, and compensated for wind. The only blemishes on this near perfect performance being the purchase of Toothpaste and the Taller, More Expensive Beer!

He's up three-two now, Bob. He needs a win in the last event, the Shower. A tie is not an option. It will null the day. It's almost worse than a loss for the Athlete. At least in losing one can contemplate what went wrong, make adjustments. A tie will just reinforce the unfortunate repetitious and stagnate pattern in the Athletes game.

Steve, cue the camera in the local pub of the Athlete's hometown. Sound Crew, start the beat of a kick drum in four-four time... in four, three, two, one...

Welcome back folks to the final event of the day, the Shower. There is definitely an energy in the apartment tonight. Anticipation is high. And the crowd is on their feet. A win here would score the Athlete a four-two victory on the day. It's all come down to this, one of the Athletes marquee events. And it looks like the officials are in place and everything is set to go.

I don't see the Athlete, Bob. He's nowhere to be seen with the event only moments away.

No dead air, Steve. Fill it with crowd shots.

Here he comes, Marie, through the front door! And it looks as if he's gone for a bike ride. Yes, he's bringing in the bike! What a great method of preparation for the Shower! I don't believe it! What guile! He's covered in sweat, Marie! His hair is a mess!

This is extraordinary, Bob! He's down the hallway to the kitchen now. He drinks a glass of Chocolate Milk. And he's in to the bedroom. The clothes are off, Bob. Nothing is stopping him here. He's in full flight. He's got the towel; he's off to the bathroom!

He's focused, Marie. He has that Steely Eyed Look of a Champion. He's running the water now, and... the Shower starts... and... the Athlete is in the Shower, Marie ... and he's tilting his head back, his hair is wet, and now he applies the shampoo... he's whipped up a strong lather, he's rubbing vigorously and... the soap is out of his hair, and now he moves on to... to... to... my God, Marie, he's picked up the toothbrush and the TOOTHPASTE! He's brushing his teeth! What a play by the Athlete! We doubted the purchase of the Toothpaste at the Grocery Store but we've certainly underestimated the Athlete! We never saw this coming! Surely he can't be caught now! And the toothbrush is away and he's covered himself in body-wash and he's scrubbing furiously with the loofah, and we're on the homestretch now, Marie and... the Shower is off! And he's out of the Shower now and he's toweling down, first the hair, then the arms and legs, and now the shimmy down the back!

Camera Two, get water on the lens. Steve, bring up Camera Two.

He hangs the towel and he walks out into the apartment completely naked, he's full of confidence, and he's into the bedroom, and... the socks and the underwear are on, Bob,

it's coming together in rapid fashion and... and... now the shirt, the shirt is on, and here come the pants, when the belt is buckled it's all over... and... and... and... he's done, he's completed the Shower by dressing himself and buckling his belt and this is just incredible, he's won, he's won, the crowd is going wild, the Athlete is pumping his fists, he might be crying, the noise in here is deafening, I can barely hear myself, this a day to remember, Bob, a day to tell our children about and our children's children to tell their children about, and the Athlete is taking a lap, waving to the adoring fans, taking it all in, and now he pops the top of the Taller, More Expensive Beer and sprays it around in a circle, and the crowd is soaking it up, and he raises the Taller, More Expensive Beer to his mouth and this, Bob, is the true mark of a Champion who knows how to live his life!

Steve, show Camera Three of the crowd, capture his parents crying. Now, bring in Camera Two and the shot of the Athlete in the hallway hugging an unknown female. And now pan to the camera in the pub of the Athlete's hometown and the frantic cheering of a former baseball coach and several locals all telling each other how they used to know the Athlete. Sound Crew, play that Queen song.

He deserves this, Marie, it's been a long day, with the disastrous performance in Waking Up and the cancellation of Doing Something Constructive During the Morning Hours, but he's come back with a strong showing in Making Lunch, showed grit and determination through the Reading and Leaving the House to Run Errands, even with the surprising purchase of the Toothpaste, which at the time we thought odd and unnecessary, but he was ahead of us Marie, he had a game plan today and he brought the Toothpaste into the Shower and brushed his teeth there and he's won it all, Marie,

and I can tell, from the pandemonium in this apartment, that there are going to be some wild celebrations tonight!

Steve, Sound Crew, bring up the black and white montage of former competitors celebrating to the frantic commentary of their victorious moments while a chorus of orphans sing "We are the World" slightly out of tune in the background.

All Cameras zoom out. Sound Crew, slowly fade out the orphans... keep fading, keep fading, slower, slower, and... Steve... roll credits.

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Slice of Life

Eric Westerlind

When I turn the corner and get past the Music Mogul, I slow up. Our street doesn't often have too many walkers this time of evening, especially when it's all grey-dark and spitting—but somebody turned on the people-switch—probably ten, twelve folks just idling on the sidewalks.

The apartment is up Gerard, so another right, but I walk past it. There're even more people up our street, in tight groups of threes, all like the same size, same dark jackets.

There are flashing lights too, police lights rolling off the buildings. Two squad cars are pulled up at my apartment building. None of the stand-arounds are drifting toward the lights. No crowd gathering. They look like survivors.

I walk back around the block, the other direction. Amber can cover my groceries and we can take the pizza-rain-check and then maybe grab a coffee or something.

My roommates aren't out on the corner so I walk in the front door, that little restaurant bell clattering more than ringing, the dust of the cold hugging me even inside.

We've never eaten here before ('Plaisante's' apparently, from a dangling wood sign); the first three months in the new apartment we stuck to street vendors, the grocery store. Twice, Macelroy's over down Rue St. Germaine.

Plaisante's is dark, not closed-dark, but low-lighting. A couple of booths hug the walls below the small windows, a square table in the center, and the pizza bar in back.

The kitchen's glow is a gaping mouth of fluorescence. I flex my fingers, knuckles pinkblue, shading my eyes at the same time.

Nobody in here, no movement.

I rock back out into the cold, sort-of dive out the door, rub my elbows, look down the street.

A police car hauls past me, the same half-spit drizzle warps the lights it's got running at pell-mell.

Does sticking your fingers in your ears warm them up? Rotisserie-chicken style? I pass up the opportunity, instead slam them home into my parka's pockets.

"Pete." I didn't even hear the door open behind me, Alexander 'Priss' Risprisbur's face sticking out from the darkness. "What're you doing, man? Get in here."

I'm way cold all of a sudden, popping back into the restaurant. That cold when you're expecting a car to be warm and it isn't so you're colder than you were outside. The lights are definitely brighter now and Amber's definitely sitting over in that corner booth, albeit hugging the wall, hair draped over an eye.

"We saw you come in and then like you just turned and walked out."

I walk behind Priss, shadowing his steps.

"Amber suggested you might've been blinded by the lights."

Amber perks up at her name, definitely humming, and gets this horrified look on her face.

"What is that?"

Priss looks, I look.

That—my right hand is coated in black, this ooze black. I flip my hand over, muttering a handful of expletives. My palm is uncoated, just the backside.

"Ink?"

"I don't think I—"

I pull the broken pen out of my pocket.

Now my palm has ink on it.

There are certain situations you just have to roll your head back and sigh at; when vitriol is useless. I do so.

"Bathroom?"

Both of them haven't been, do the daisy-head look around, and I find it myself, just past the fluoro-maw.

The bathroom's as bright as the wrong kind of day and the mirror above the sink is that borderless square of glass they provide in old libraries, gas stations, and other joints where everyone is the nobody-particularly-interested-in-looking-at-themselves-today self. The ink sticks, glossy and still dry'ish. So much that I'm up on the edge of the sink with a boot on its lip, the sink, going at it with one hand and two fingers.

Priss comes in.

"Amber told me she's in love with you."

Somebody farts in the stall and the ink mopes down my hand, mixing only slightly with the water.

I try to make out whose feet are under the stall but it's the second one so my angle, boot still on the sink's lip, is like perfectly wrong. Another one of those moments where the expletive is useless, so the sigh.

"I don't know when she turned on this whole Alex-you're-my-priest-and-gay-friend, but she's been practically melting onto the table since we got here."

I can sort-of see the bottom of a definitely black boot.

"And she says that she thinks you are the sweetest and so smart and she's pretty much gunning for me to like her so I can make sure you are in-the-right way into her and what not."

"But Priss—"

"Yeah, you're not, *je sais*, but she's been dropping all these comparisons to some New York ex who had like way less commitment issues and was less and worse and—"

The jungle roar of the toilet flushing. The stall door swings open. Of course: the stiff fart, black boots—Officer Telpère, accent grave for serious, the North African who'd had my number since he'd caught me bus-hopping fourteen-ish times in a day.

He's got some very NA-French look on his face. It reads: consequences.

"I mean, I don't really know what to even begin to tell her, man. She's been begging me to talk to you; track your emotion is how she's putting it. Sounds sort of new-agey to me, don't know how you feel about new agey but—"

Priss has his back to Telpère, and he stops talking when Telpère's big mitt is on his shoulder. Priss turns, noble-like for a man who's just been shoulder-grabbed by a man who audibly passed gas and then has not audibly commenced the post-stall washing of said hands, to face Telpère.

"You can tell her the nothing..." he's got this rapturous throat-swelling English, Telpère does, wherein he tries to set his mouth even lower on his face than it already is, "...for your friend and his ink-stain comes for some talk. Some conversation at the station."

We've tried to have this conversation at the station enough times. I hit the door at slightly lower than full-speed, past an Amber who has definitely been staring at the door with the same half-cocked smile waiting to full-cock and who scrambles

admirably but can't say much more than oh before I'm out the door and into the god-Fuck-its cold once more.

Hiding in shadows has never really been my thing. I mean, I've tucked into trees before, or rather, behind trees, but usually in the daylight and usually for something summer-camp related. It's very different trying to flatten the body into a corner comprised of nothing but the absence of something else, like light.

But here I am. In a corner, shoulder braced against a building. I can see Plaisante's door, see Telpère come out, hands on his hips. I didn't see his squad car before, down the street, lights off. He's a huge guy with a stiff walk. Pretty much the only of Besançon's policemen willing to deal with my pauvre French-English sputterings, explain that one must obliterate all of your bus tickets because that's how they know you've paid and all that.

Telpère's got two daughters. I saw them on his desk, pictures anyway. They had red hair, not from him.

Three folks skirt by my hidey-spot, scarves up to their eyes. They're talking about the situation up Gerard, that's all I can tell. Telpère's headed back to his car, peels back, lights on, heads up the street at a crawl. I tuck back as far as I can, but he turns up the street, past Music Mogul.

I'm not ready to go back in. I figure I can douse the hunger in other ways. I walk down the river, hood up, feeling at my tooth. Too much sugar, maybe. French honey is so much damn much gooder than its American cousin. However, it also leaves a much less gooder ache between my back molars.

The river's shored up against these big old rock walls, runs right around centre ville, moat-style. It's got a flat glassy reflection, except for some duck-v's scooting around closer to the bridge, looking for crumbs.

I'll walk it off. I'm sure stuff'll have settled down in an hour'ish. Amber will be a bit of a nuisance, nothing new and nothing altogether unfixable. She's cute enough, but so negative. All the time.

I run my hand along the wall, feeling at the bumps, the moss. The ink on my hand looks like a bog-monster or something, some deformity – stuff that back into my pocket. The ink in there has hardened into a little crust on the fabric of my pocket. I clench my hands.

C'mon. Not my night.

"Not your night, eh Pete?" Priss jogs up next to me, toothy grin on his face.

"Where's Amber?"

"Back at the place. I told'er I was gonna go look for you."

I scratch at my face with the non-ink hand.

"Can smell you from the Mogul."

I have to turn to look at him, my hood blocking my peripheral vision.

"Here," he holds up a slice of pizza, "Amber took the rest home but."

"Is this your slice, Priss?"

"Nope, had my fill. Here."

I take it and we cross the bridge, the pizza warm on my hands. Priss suggests Macelroys for a beer, and we make our way there, mutual feet sloshing in the growing puddles our only conversation.

The pub is remarkably quiet for a Thursday; we find a corner booth, slide in, order some full-pints from the stringy haired waiter-type guy.

Priss sniffs at his beer, looks at me over the glass.

"What?"

"What what?"

"What's wrong with your beer?" I settle into a gulp, the stuff is cold then warm.

I pull back my hood.

Priss laughs, staring at my forehead.

"What?"

"Guilty as charged," he says, puts a thumb up to his mouth, thinks twice, dips it in his beer, and reaches over. He scrubs at my temple, the finger all wet. A little bit of beer hangs in my eyebrow.

"Nope, not coming off. Though I wouldn't go to the bathroom here," he glances around, mock-surveying, "apparently, they're hiding cops in stalls these days."

I'm looking at his neck, at a long strand of black coming out past his collar.

"What, is it ink?"

He looks back at me, winks.

"Yeah, brother. The black smear is upon you." He laughs, Priss has a good laugh, not practiced, like mine.

"So," he leans across the table, "the Amber."

I take another long gulp, close an eye, measure our relative beer levels.

"She doesn't love me, man. She's just lonely out here. She and her boyfriend broke up what, ten, twelve hours ago?"

The door swings open: Amber, soaked, hair in rivulets down her face. She's hardly wearing appropriate rain-gear, just a long sleeve shirt and some pants.

Priss and I stand up, move toward her. The girl is shivering, big old wild-eyed shivers. She sees us and runs over, throws a hug around Priss, staring at me. Man, huge eyes, windows.

Priss is just sort-of thump-caressing her back, and I stare at her, stringy-haired waiter stopped mid-glass-polish. I've never been much of a comfort to those in need so I keep my mouth shut and wait for her to say something.

We stand like that for awhile, until Amber's breathing is a bit slower. Priss gets her to sit down, pulls a chair from another table over for himself. The waiter comes over with a large towel and offers it to Priss who offers it to Amber. I try to remember what the word for towel is and draw a blank, opting instead for more silence, and a nod at the guy, who just keeps staring at Amber like he's seeing something he's seen before.

"There were police everywhere," she starts, "there were police in the streets, all through the apartment complex. I got up to our floor; they had 330 all cordoned off but the door was open and I could see the floor in the room was coated, I could see, just coated in black ink. I couldn't see anything beyond that, some people in the streets were talking on my way up about biting dogs or vicious dogs but I hadn't been paying attention and I'd just gone right in and the police hadn't stopped me but I went into our apartment, and that big cop from the pizza place was like there, up on our table, and all of our stuff was everywhere, so I shouted and Pete, I'm sorry, the pizza..." she dazes off weird-like, looking at me there, and I shake my head in a doesn't-matter-keep-going and she holds out her arm and what I thought was one shirt is actually two, but one sleeve's been ripped off.

"I ran and he grabbed me and it ripped right off," she says, "and he's an animal, I could see it there, his eyes were wild. He's the dog, he's a vicious dog." She drops into a sob, but then she looks up at me, across the table.

Priss offers her some of his beer.

"I've gotta take a piss real quick. Be right back." Priss looks up at me as I walk past him. I ask the bar-back, an older lady, la toilette? and she points at a stone spiral staircase in the back corner of the room. I knew that, I'm thinking, but I'm real nervous, hands are cold. Making a fool out of myself.

I almost fall down the stairs, catch my breath at the sink. Macelroy's has got a nice big mirror in which to scrub at the ink fingerprints on my forehead. Priss knows, and I keep scrubbing. He knows about Telpère. My forehead pinks up underneath the ink, but the stuff is not going away.

"Fuck!"

I splash some water on my hands and face. I'm lookin' pretty ragged, that pub bathroom lighting isn't good for the hollow cheeks. Something smells in here too, mildew. Snots in my nose though. I stand in front of the urinal, unzip.

"Couldn't help it." Priss stands, shoulder on the doorjam. "It's been a month, Pete."

I let my chin drop to my chest – gotta start drinking more water, piss is like greening up.

Priss approaches me, hand on the sink. Scratches at his neck.

"Dude, c'mon, I can't—"

I hold up my free hand, finish pissing. Sniff again— it isn't mildew.

I turn and knock on the stall once, zip up my pants. Knock again.

"Oui?"

"Ouvre la porte."

Silence. I give the door a solid kick, no lock. The waiter is up on the john, standing, pants definitely not in any position to be relieving any sort of internal build-ups – he's even still buckled, which I finish doing while giving him the international get-the-fuck-out thumb. Dude is scared.

Priss continues once the waiter is back upstairs.

"The guy never came out of his room. I saw him once, maybe, taking out some soy sauce bottles. Middle-age guy, big belly. You ever see him?"

I shake my head.

"So I figure," Priss has this face he gets, and always has gotten, whenever he's done something that he's rationalized to himself but knows is going to be tough to rationalize verbally, "we've waited for a month. If the shit's going to settle—"

"Priss." I scratch at my jaw. "What's with the ink?"

"That's the thing," he says, "dude's got like hundreds of posters all over the wall. Big old black pictures of the transform. Plus buckets and buckets of ink. And he was waiting, Pete. Soon as I saw that stuff, I was headed out but he was waiting, sure as shit. Had a big old sword too. Samurai sword.

Priss is holding his hands out, body length.

"A hermit samurai?"

Priss chuckles at that. "Yeah," he rubs at his chest, "funny, now. But the thing with the ink – by the time I got him off me I was coated." He flashes his shirt down, the black ink coating what I can see of his chest, "The stuff was like gum in my fur. Didn't come off in transform."

"Pete, the guy was set up for a siege or something. I mean, food in bulk, water in bulk. Mounds of..."

"Hang on."

"... I mean he was just waiting for us. I don't—"

"Priss, shut up for a second. I'm trying to think, man."

He lapses into silence, rubs his chest.

"What'd you say the guy looked like?"

"Big belly. Middle aged. Covered in ink."

"How big?"

"He laid me out even in form."

"Black?"

"Not drastically."

I wonder about relations for a moment. I think about our upstanding Telpère, about the photos on his desk.

"Curly hair?"

"No, bald."

Feels like were playing Guess Who. Is your samurai-slasher Maria? No, he had no hat, dummy.

My stomach grumbles. It has been awhile.

Amber screams upstairs.

We sprint up the stairs and she's backed into a booth, good ole stalwart Telpère sure enough, samurai sword in hand, is just dripping in Macelroy's front door. The old-lady bar-back's behind him and left of center, our mildewed ex-waiter has got some sort of blade in his hand.

"Wolf boys!" Telpère's got that consequence look on his face again.

They're definitely blocking the door and the only theoretical other way out I can muck up is back down the bathroom, transform into sludge, flush-self, and rediscover human form in the Doubs, swim to the street and get the hell out of town.

But I can't do any of that, so Telpère looks very big in the doorway.

Priss boldly stands in front of me. Not sure what he means to do by that but Telpère repeats himself, re-emphasizing the plural, re-emphasizing the wolf as well.

"You've got kids, man." That's all I can really say. "Go."

A shooing motion feels a bit pathetic towards a guy with a samurai sword.

He advances slowly into the room, the restaurant staff shadowing him.

"I have a brother also, wolf-boys."

Translation: had. A big bald brother, likely. Covered in ink. I shouldn't glance at Amber, she'd probably have something snotty to say about lying to her all this time. Plus it's one more pair of window-eyes I'd have to ignore.

"Priss."

He knows. "I know."

No survivors.

He's already half-way through his transform and I look at Amber, feel my jaws widening, my clothes begin parting at the seams. She's shaking her head and I nod and keep nodding, like sorry baby, best way to tell you it can't be is show you it can't be.

At the crunch of impact, I whip around – Priss is dragging the waiter through the table-wear, the guy screeching, and in so many ways it feels good to howl right in the face of an oncoming swordsman.

He's big, Telpère. Big throat, big hamstring, neck like a hunk of lamb. I'm around him and on his back, take a rending bite from his shoulder. Bar-back had a

knife too, though – she plants it in my leg. I send her scattering back across our table, hoping she lands on some glass, keep her down for a bit.

Telpère drops his sword – sword, silly thing to be using in this day and age – and he's definitely groping for a gun but that blood smell has got me moving and the waiter is for sure down, judging by the crunching and the spatter and Amber's screaming, so I don't wait for the big man to get it unholstered.

He's only got one hand to block my lunge and he knows he made a mistake, using the sword first, some sort-of French heroics, and I flatten him against the bar and our weight takes us from there to the ground in a roll that dazes him and for a second looking down at him, and he up at me, I see the whole big thing – his eyes, his daughters on his desk, with their red hair and the sword, his brother and then the girl, no woman, a month ago and how her hood had stayed on her head even after we'd finished but that in the moonlight in retrospect I could imagine they'd had similar noses, her and the girls, and mouths and maybe hair.

Rules, though. No survivors.

We step out of Macelroy's, Priss and me, and splash into the puddles outside. This sky-drool keeps most folks inside; it should keep us in, too. Unfortunately, we've gotta move, again. I lead us up the road, headed east out of town, club-limbed trees hanging over us. Priss pulls his shirt closed, tries to anyway, hide the ink.

"I did Amber for you."

My stomach growls, didn't even get a chance to eat.

"I did Amber fo—"

"I know. Thank you, Priss."

"I knew you wouldn't want to."

He's trying too hard to be perky. He'll probably a—

"So where too?"

I pull the hood tighter, point up the road into the grey with an ink-stained finger.

"Probably Morocco or something."

"Chance we could stop for some grub before?"