

Jersey Devil Press



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The First Anniversary
Invitational

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Editor's Note: The First Anniversary Invitational

Ladies, gentlemen, and spam-bots. It is my pleasure to welcome you to Issue Thirteen of Jersey Devil Press, the First Anniversary Invitational. And like the 13th child of Mrs. Leeds, this issue is going to live on forever. Why? For the same reason anything becomes legendary: It's fucking awesome.

We sent out the call to five of our favorite contributors to come up with something new specifically for JDP and they did not fail to deliver, starting with Danger_Slater's brilliant "A Robot's Sonnet." We follow it up with the dark "Hole in the Garden" by the always wonderful yt sumner, and then catch a ride with Craig Wallwork's ingenious tale of love, devils, and British transportation, "Morning Birdsong and the Hell Demons." Then it's back across the pond for "Brave Young Americans: Some Assembly Required," by the magnificent Jenny Ortiz, and, finally, Jersey's own Mike Sweeney and the truly epic "Captain Neptunium and Lady U-boat."

I was going to get all long-winded and sentimental about this being our one year anniversary, but I'm going to stick with a more simple "Thanks." If you weren't reading and writing, we wouldn't be here, and that would make me and Monica very sad. So thanks. And keep it up. You won't believe what we have planned for our second anniversary.

-- Eirik Gumeny

A Robot's Sonnet

Danger_Slater

He spits the wine back into my face.

"Ugh," he gags, thrusting the half-empty glass at me, "what is this garbage?" I inspect it. I dip in a sensor and test it for impurities. I run an hour and a half of diagnostics on it. The results come up clean.

"It's red wine, sir. Just like you asked."

The tiny row of lights that make up my speech-composite box glow chrome-yellow with my reply. I can see it reflecting in the wettest parts of his eyes. The bars at the corners of my mouth illuminate.

So this is what I look like when I smile.

"What are you smirking about, you moron?" he shouts. "I asked for Merlot. This is Cabernet."

"I'm sorry, sir. My data log indicates that you did not specify. You had roast pheasant for dinner. Foodandwine.com lists Cabernet as the most logical pairing."

He growls, showing me his bare teeth -- streaked like storm windows by plaque and cigarettes. Make an appointment for a whitening with Dr. Punjab, I note. Also, write a strongly-worded letter to foodandwine.com informing them of their egregious mistake.

"You hunk of junk," he says viciously. "You think you're so goddamn smart. I should sell you for spare parts is what I should do!"

"Please, sir, don't do that. I -- I don't know where I'd be without you..." I say. And the words I speak are true, because without Henry, I wouldn't be here today. He built me himself out of a microwave, an electric toothbrush, and a second-generation

iPod touch. I recall every vivid detail of that day just as I recall every vivid detail of every day. I come equipped with six terabytes of memory.

Before then there was nothing; just the blackness eternal of my pre-birth -- a notion so inconceivable I can feel my circuitry start to overheat should I think about it too hard. So I don't. I don't think about it at all. I keep myself busy, serving my owner, doing my job. I don't think about all there was that existed before me. Or all that might exist after I'm gone.

"Then stop standing there like some kind of slack-jawed cretin and get me my Merlot. NOW!" he screams, throwing the wine glass at the wall. It shatters against the wood-paneled veneer into a million sharp razor-shards that sprinkle the carpet like a sky full of stars.

My Vac-U-Penis® deploys, sucking up the debris, and I wheel myself into the kitchen to get him his drink.

* * *

He doesn't mean to be so [I log onto thesaurus.com, searching the archives for just the right word: crabby, ill-tempered, irritable, querulous]. He's a good man. He's just malfunctioning a bit.

When Sylvia left, he went into a depression. As I understand it, depression is like having your brain stuck in quicksand. You're immobile. Trapped in a moment. And you wiggle and kick and try to fight it, but you just sink deeper. You keep on sinking until you're totally gone.

"Do you know what love is?" he asked me one night. He was on his fifth glass of Noir and the inevitable tears were starting to form.

"I believe I do," I replied. "Love is a feeling of intense desire and affection towards somebody or something whom one is disposed to make a pair."

"Yeah, I know you know the definition of love, but do you

truly know what it means?"

His head swiveled on his shoulders like it were a bowling ball perched atop a very weak spring. Like he needed a tune-up. Or a new crankshaft.

"Well... no. I suppose I don't," I said.

"I envy you sometimes. You ain't got nothing in this world to hold you down. You're just computer chips and algorithms and for you, everything makes sense." He finished off the glass. "It's difficult to get your heart broken if you don't have one."

"Yes. I don't think I'd be very useful to you, should that be the case."

"I'm glad you're a robot," he said, a single teardrop now streaming down his cheek. "I'm glad to have *something* that won't ever leave me."

That same night, as I charged, I had a dream. It was the first dream I ever dreamt.

I dreamt I was alone, in the middle of a field. The sun was above me, casting off golden rays that reflected off my headplate like it was I who was shining so bright and warm. In the dream, I rolled across the daffodiled landscape, up and down cobbled hills, over gravel and limestone, until I reached a precipice that overlooked the ocean. I stood at the edge of the cliff for a while, just staring out at the sea. The choppy water splashed so soft and rhythmic, should I encode and convert it into musical notes, a thousand violins wouldn't be able to play my song.

I stared out at the sea.

And then I jumped.

* * *

"Here you go," I say, quickly wheeling myself back into the living room. "Merlot, exactly 62° Fahrenheit."

"Took you long enough, you piece of shit," he barks. "Jesus.

I could've crushed the grapes myself by now."

"Yes, but could you have fermented them?" I ask.

"Oh, a wise-ass, eh?" he goes.

"No, sir," I reply, "I do not have an ass."

"Well if you did I'd be kicking it from here to Timbuktu." He downs the wine in one solid gulp. I opt not to tell him that Timbuktu is exactly 4,441.9 miles away and that it is an impossibly long distance for an ass to be kicked.

* * *

I wrote his best-selling novel.

You figure it'd be difficult for a robot to create a best-selling work of original fiction, but the truth is no -- it's not difficult at all. I only had to log onto Amazon.com's top-sellers list, feed the data into my demodulation cortex, rearrange the adjectives, nouns and verbs, and *voila!* 500 pages burst forth from my inkjet: numbered, Times New Roman, and in double-spaced format.

He found it in the morning; reams of paper in disarray all over the dining room floor.

"What the hell is this?" he said, pointing to the mess. "Don't tell me you're on the fritz again."

"No, sir, I was writing a book," I proudly beamed.

"A book? You? Oh, this has got to be a laugh. So, Chaucer," he mocked me, "what's your little 'book' about?"

"It's a psychological/religious/action/thriller about a guy and a girl in a museum who find some very interesting clues hidden in one of the paintings. I call it *The Picasso Code*."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me."

But then he picked up the first page and read it. His demeanor quickly changed.

"This... This is amazing," he exclaimed, a smile breaking through the fog of his hangover.

"Thank you, sir. I don't know what came over me. I just -- I

don't know -- had to express myself."

"Do you mind if I take this with me today?" he politely asked, the softness in his voice somewhat off-putting, like a bizarre and exotic spice.

"Not at all," I chirped, "I want you to enjoy it, I wrote it for you. To help take your mind off... you know... everything."

He collected up the papers, organizing them carefully, and brought the entire tome to a publishing house in the city. They signed the deal that very evening.

A month later we received an advanced copy in the mail. There it was, my book -- OUR book -- his name plastered in bold-face across the front cover:

THE PICASSO CODE
A Novel
by HENRY POLANSKI

* * *

"We did it! We did it!" he had said, skipping into the house.

"Good for us," I said. "What exactly did we do?"

"We hit number one. *The Picasso Code* is number one!" He dropped to his knees and gave me a hug, his pink, furry flesh squishing against my alloys. "Did you hear me, you beautiful toolbox? We're a goddamned genius!"

I reached around his body, my frail TV antenna arms hugging him back. An awkward motion. One I'm not accustomed to.

"I'm glad, sir," was all I said. "Your happiness means the world to me."

Then the second novel came out.

Cretaceous Park, our science-fiction/adventure/dinosaur/thriller was received by the critics with

relative scorn:

Trite...long-winded...overly technical...with language seemingly influenced by children's coloring books and the UNIX Systems operator's manual, Polanski's sophomore release is a blight on the sensibilities of discerning readers everywhere...

Henry began drinking. Often. And a lot.

"You're worthless," he said one evening, not even bothering to look at me.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"Excuse you is right!" he snarked. "We barely sold a million copies. Not even a goddamned million!" he shouted, throwing a crumpled up copy of *New York Times Book Review* at me. When I tried to clean it up, he threw an empty bottle of Sauvignon Blanc at me.

"The public is fickle," I said, trying to console him. "I'm sure there are a multitude of reasons behind their apathy. Just because dino-erotic literature is not what's 'in' right now, it doesn't mean we didn't create a great piece of fiction. And besides, who cares what other people think? Yours is the only opinion that matters to me, sir."

"Yeah? Well here's my opinion, robot: Don't Write Anymore!"

And then he started crying. And from across the room I could see my reflection emblazoned like a neon tattoo in the wettest parts of his eyes.

I was frowning.

Since that day, I haven't written a word.

* * *

He is passed out in the easy chair. Snores a mix of phlegm and gasps slip haphazardly out of his open mouth. The sound

resonates across the empty apartment like distant thunder on a collapsing horizon. It is the apex of the night; the hours where only mice and monsters dare to tread and not even the moon has the courage to show its face.

I am in the kitchen -- in hibernate mode -- when the phone rings.

Brrriing! Brrriing! Brrriing! is what the phone says. My midi-translator [powered by Google] deciphers the phonescreech as a jarring and desperate wail: *Answer me! Answer me! Oh, please, God, won't somebody answer me!* it cries out in agony.

I am not uncouth. I answer the phone.

"Hello?" a grainy female voice in the receiver says.

"Hello," I answer.

"Henry, is that you?" she asks.

"Um..."

I hesitate in my reply. Traditionally, I have not been programmed to speak untruths. Still, as I stutter, something clicks inside me. A desire. A desire to correct an injustice so brazen that it eclipses any peccadillos that might stand in its way. I know who it is on the other end of the line. And I know *exactly* why she's calling.

"... yes," is how I finally respond. "Yes, it's me. Henry."

"You sound different," she says.

"Um, I have a virus."

"Henry, listen," she goes, "I've been doing a lot of soul-searching lately. Reevaluating things -- my life and myself. I just... I don't know if breaking up with you was the right thing to do. I miss you, is all. I understand if you're still angry at me. You have every right to be. I was unfair." She exhales somberly. "I'm not looking for peace of mind or your sympathy -- but rather -- what I'm after is forgiveness. I guess what I'm trying to say is, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Henry." She snuffles. "And I want you back."

"Oh?"

"And I know any sort of compliment may be a bit late at this

point, but I just want you to know that I've been following your writing career very closely. *The Picasso Code* literally brought me to tears. It was brilliant, Henry. Just brilliant! I had no idea you could be so eloquent."

I pause a moment, listening to her breathe, before I ask:

"And what did you think about *Cretaceous Park*?"

"Oh --" she stumbles back on her words like my question were a coffee table she didn't know was there. "It was... um... good."

To this I glower. I seethe and I snarl and I can feel myself boil:

"Now you listen to me, you cold-blooded bitch, and listen up good because I'm only going to say this one fucking time: You need to go away. Get out of my life. Forever. You need to stop poking your goddamn nose where it isn't welcome. I can not -- WILL NOT -- let you hurt him again!"

"Him?" she goes.

"Er -- um -- me. I won't let you hurt *me* again."

"Henry, wait..." she starts, but I don't let her finish. I slam the phone back onto the cradle.

Just a peccadillo, I tell myself. It's for the best.

When I turn, Henry is standing there, cast in shadows. His face half-hidden like a phantom behind the jamb of the door. There is something in his eyes. Something I can't quite define.

Something [thesaurus.com: wicked, baleful, abhorrent, malicious].

"Who was that?" he says quietly, dragging his words.

"No one, sir," I tell him, "just a wrong number."

"A wrong number?" he goes. "You seemed to have an awful lot to talk about with someone who called the wrong number."

"Yes. I was giving them directions. To... uh... Timbuktu."

"You wouldn't be fucking with me, would you, robot?" he says, flicking the wall switch. I am momentarily blinded. When my sight receptors readjust to the new light level, I can see in his hand he holds an axe.

"Because there's a lot you don't understand about being human," he continues, approaching me slowly, using the weapon like it was a cane. *Plink! Plink!* against the linoleum it goes, the sound merely an echo before it reaches my aural decryption unit.

"Emotions are a complex thing," he says, "they're not linear. They're not black and white. They can't be quantified. I guess that's something a machine could never comprehend."

"I wouldn't assume so, sir," I say, nervously rolling backwards until I'm pressed up against the sink.

He holds up the axe, letting the light dance on its point.

"For all the technology the modern world has blessed us with, the beauty of a simple tool can be overlooked quite easily. There's a lot of power in this basic design. A lot of damage could be dealt with just a single blow..."

"Torque," I say.

He slams the axe into the kitchen table, splitting the wood with the ease of a knife through butter.

"Yes, torque," he growls, yanking it back out. He swoops in on me, until only his wretched face fills my lens. His eyebrows twist like crumbling architecture and his pupils have shrunk into two little dots. A black fire burns wild through the whites of his eyes. My facial recognition software can only register his vestige in bits and pieces.

"What did you say to her, huh? What did you say to Sylvia?" he spits, his voice like a minefield, buried bombs on all sides.

I choose what I say next very, very carefully:

"I did what had to be done, sir," I reply. "I can assure you that I only had your well-being in mind. I can not bear to see you in pain like this any longer. She was a succubus. She left you a shell. And you deserve more. You deserve so much more. Sir, I only did what I because... because... because I love you."

As I say those words for the first time out loud, ultraviolet waves seem to surge through my circuitry. What is this sensation?

I can not say for certain. There are no words describe it, no equations to deduce it, no instruments to dissect it. It is something that defies explanation. It's irrational and wonderful and wholly smothering.

From what I've heard, it is called an emotion.

I'm having one right now.

And it is AMAZING!

Oh, the euphoria! The rapture! The sheer essence of *feeling*! In all the days that I've wheeled through life, I've never truly felt so alive!

And just as this epiphany is jolting my mainframe like a million volts of unbridled static-electric joy, Henry lifts up the axe and swings it with all his might.

The blade easily tears through me, plunging straight into my motherboard. My aluminum framework crumples. Safety lights blink and beep. Oil and sparks shoot out of the wound. The rainbow display of my blood pours forth, flashing in Technicolor against the breaking dawn. He puts his weight on the handle and the blade goes deeper.

"How could you do this to me?" he cries, pulling the axe out and swinging it again. And again. And again. And again.

Things are fading. Processors are slowing down. Applications flickering off. He stands back, his chest pumping, watching me fizzle. Smoke. Watching me power down.

And in the moment right before everything disappears, a very strange thought passes through the peripherals of my hard drive. A thought I've spent my entire life trying to ignore. I wondered, where do robots go when they die?

Well, the same place humans go, I suppose.

My lights go out.

And then there is nothing.

* * *

"Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Henry Polanski," a voice over the loudspeaker announces.

The gathered crowd claps. He gives them a quick wave before taking a seat at the table. The line winds around the bookstore -- through the fiction, self-help and biography sections, out into the parking lot. His third novel, *A Robot's Sonnet*, is a critical and commercial success. As it should be. All those newborn, rampant emotions that flowed through me as I lay there dying spewed out my printer in uncontrollable spurts -- page upon page of my immortal soul.

A profound work of unrepentant empathy... exploring the notion of humanity through a robot's perspective... [Polanski's] latest will surely be the watermark of this -- and many -- generations to come... one critic wrote.

This is his masterpiece.

My masterpiece.

My final love song to him.

Sylvia stands off to the side, reveling in Henry's abject success. A diamond-encrusted engagement ring sits boisterously on her delicate finger. This book paid for that gaudy piece of jewelry. She talks to his agent as he autographs book sleeves. The agent whispers something into her ear and she laughs, touching him lightly on the arm. A sly look is exchanged between the two -- something devious and knowing -- but Henry doesn't notice. He's too busy getting everything he ever wanted.

Best-selling author Henry Polanski. He's finally happy.

And from outside -- under the colorless blanket of an overcast sky -- I stand, peering in through the storefront window. Watching. Tea kettles and tinfoil and fused together frying pans lay like patchwork over the torn metal scars that cover my body. It's amazing what a little ingenuity and a welding tool can do when somebody puts their mind to it.

I watch the man I so selflessly devoted my entire existence to and I think about all the things happening inside of me. Important

things. Complicated things.

Things a man like Henry Polanski will never understand.

I wheel into the bookstore, my gaze holding steady. Slowly, I turn the safety off my machine-gun arms. I log onto thesaurus.com and search through the archives for just the right word:

[vindication, validation, payback, revenge]

If I can't have him, then no one will.

DANGER_SLATER is more machine than man. He's an explosion-bot! Handle your Danger_Slater with extreme care. One false move and KA-BOOM! - you're nothing but a stain on the pavement and a few cancerous ashes. Danger lives in New Jersey. His work has appeared in Jersey Devil Press, The Drabblecast, and the Seahorse Rodeo Folk Revival. His dirty limericks have appeared in truck stop bathrooms and seldom-used freight elevators nationwide. Here is his website:
www.dangerslater.blogspot.com.

Hole in the Garden

yt sumner

I found the hole by accident.

In my backyard, just after a storm, with my bed sheets flapping around me in big soggy slaps as I tried to pull them down. That's when I saw it. It wasn't very wide but it looked deep and when I leaned over I couldn't see the bottom. I nibbled my lip. It would not do having a hole in my garden like this. Someone could fall in.

I knocked next door and after apologising about the hour asked my neighbour if I could borrow a shovel. He nodded and went to the shed smirking.

He smiled like that because he'd seen me naked once.

Late at night, dashing out in the rain to take my sheets off the line, there he was with his hands pressed against his window. It always seemed to rain when I washed my linen but it was the last time I forgot to put anything on before I rescued it.

Whenever he smiled like this I knew he was seeing me naked again, the rain bouncing off my arse. It made me feel queasy but I couldn't do anything about it and anyway I needed a shovel.

I seized it from him when he returned, careful not to let our fingers touch, and hurried back to my yard. It was getting late but I didn't start right away. I leaned on the edge of the shovel, balancing on one foot. Not until lightening cracked and illuminated the yard did I give it a stamp and wedge up a dark clump. I liked the sound of the grass and roots tearing apart as I lifted it free and I was smiling as I carried the earth to the edge of the hole. It smelled pretty good. Not many things smelled as good as rain, but the smell of fresh earth always smelled like a brand new start.

I was about to toss the first heap down, like that bit they throw on a coffin at a funeral, when I heard the voice.

Don't you dare.

I paused, the heap of dirt hovering over the hole. I paused because I do have an active imagination. My mother calls it over-active, but it's not like I see fairies at the bottom of the garden. I giggled at the thought considering my current situation and had to admit sometimes I did giggle at thoughts I probably shouldn't have.

Throwing dirt is not a nice thing to do, you know.

This was definitely a voice. Coming from the bottom of the hole.

Are you okay?

I probably should have asked something else but that's what came out.

Not as bad as you'd think. It's a bit muddy down here but comfortable enough I suppose.

His tone was conversational and I wasn't sure what else to say. I was getting uncomfortable in this awkward position and a little dirt trembled off the side of the shovel.

All right then.

I said down the hole.

All right what?

I frowned. I didn't know. It was just something I said when I wanted to wrap things up, like when my mother wouldn't stop talking on the phone.

Aren't you going to ask me up?

I blushed. I hadn't even thought of it. He was probably cold and would like a cup of tea. It was rude of me to not ask. My mouth opened with the invitation but I stopped it with a new thought.

What are you doing down there?

Nothing.

I frowned at how quickly he replied. It reminded me of babysitting my nephews and how they answered when I asked what they held behind their backs. Whenever they answered that fast it was usually something like a bloated toad or a fossilised dog turd.

I raised my voice as thunder rolled overhead and it started raining again.

I mean, what are you doing in a hole in my garden?

There was pause.

Er... can't I just come up? It's difficult to explain down here in the mud.

At his embarrassed expression I blushed again and pushed my wet fringe out of my eyes.

I'm sorry, of course.

I heard scrabbling and then a new tone emerged from the hole, closer this time.

Well, thank god for that...

His voice didn't sound that civil anymore.

Because I was getting damn lonely down there...

His voice definitely had lost its conversational tone. It sounded deeper, in fact it sounded almost like a growl.

To tell the truth, I'm absolutely *starving*--

The top of his head emerged but all I saw before I brought the shovel down was that there was an awful lot of hair.

His yell turned to a yelp as he thudded and cried out that he was covered in mud and instead of blushing I grinned. I was still grinning when I heard the cough behind me and I swung around with the shovel to see my neighbour standing in the rain smirking at my clinging wet T-shirt.

What do you want?

I was as surprised at my tone as he looked. It didn't sound like my usual one, in fact it sounded more like the one down the hole.

I was wondering if you needed a hand.

We turned towards the hole as the thunder clapped above and, underneath it, I could just make out the hollering deep in the ground.

I think I'll be fine from now on, don't you?

He muttered something about keeping the shovel as he hurried back next door and, as he disappeared behind the fence, I lifted my shovel in the rain and kept filling the hole in my garden.

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

Morning Birdsong and the Hell Demons

Craig Wallwork

My father said that the best way to a woman's heart was through her sternum. I took that literally and enrolled in medical school after leaving six-form college. The nearest I got to being with a woman during my first four years studying was with Amputee Annie, the torso CPR dummy. We kissed, but it never led anywhere.

As I discovered recently while travelling along the M62 motorway, my father was wrong: the way to a woman's heart is not through her sternum, but instead by jamming an umbrella into the chest of a winged demon from Hell.

Let me go back a little. I was taking the trip from my halls of residence at the Queen's Campus at Durham University to my parent's home in Blackburn, Lancashire. I had boarded the National Express just off the North Road with a duffle bag filled with ripe laundry and a few medical books I needed to reference for a term paper. I can't read on coaches, or in cars. The movement and shifting of position brings on nausea so I tend to grab a window seat and stare out into the distance, allowing my mind to wander to strange places and even stranger thoughts. Whereas most people see lines of cars heading in opposite directions while travelling on a motorway, when I look out of the window of a car or coach, I see mechanical bugs with big round white eyes and curved spines, ant-like in their single file configuration. I once saw an old couple clogging up the middle lane in a Citron that reminded me of a dung beetle. They looked so frail, and the man was concentrating so hard on keeping the steering wheel straight, that I was convinced they were made of tissue paper and that they

slept in a tissue box, holding their weightless hands in the night and hoping to God no one ever needed to blow their nose. The other students say I have no aptitude for medicine, and that I'm better placed writing fiction for people with no sense of imagination. I always agree and tell them I only wanted to be a surgeon because I thought I'd get laid.

From Durham to Blackburn you have to pass the towns of Richmond, Bedale, and Ripon leading to a main station in Harrogate. Most of the people that board at Richmond and Ripon are usually morose and over the age of fifty (I've done the trip about fifty times now and you get to know where you are just by the people who board). They carry small misshapen bags that I imagined contain body parts of their spouses and neighbours. Old people are the worse for being overlooked when it comes to murder because they seem so frail and placid, but frankly, the way I see it, they lived through a world war where killing was commonplace. You can't shake something like that off you. So when I see an old man board the coach, and he's carrying a small bag that could probably fit an adult sized head in it, I try to avoid eye contact so they don't sit near me.

If I'm being honest here, and I am trying to be, I hate it when people sit next to me regardless if they're old or young. I will do all I can to seem like the type of person you shouldn't sit next to. Before heading back home I don't shave or shower and I always wear the same t-shirt that says, "On Day Release from Folsom Prison." I take my shoes off and at every stop, I put my feet against the head of the seat in front and pick at the toenails. And I always, always, leave my bag on the seat next to me with the top open a little so the reek of thirty day old underpants permeates the air.

Sometimes, even with all these factors present, you'll get some arse who just wants to sit next to you. At Bedale, this person was a man who stank of carnival food. He spent the journey to Harrogate eating his fingers. I could hear him chewing the flesh as if he was gnawing on a rack of ribs. Every now and then he'd spit a

big chunk of flesh out, hitting the back of the chair in front of him.

When one piece, which looked like the knuckle, landed on my lap, I said to him, "You'll never find a pair of gloves to fit if you carry on." He didn't say anything to this because his mouth was full of fingernails, flesh, and bone. I was glad when he got off the coach at Harrogate and his stench was replaced with a sweet smell of perfume.

The arm nearest to me was coffee coloured and covered with fine dark hairs that placed her heritage far from the murky shores of England. Around her wrist, which were slight, were silver bangles adorned with tiny horseshoes, four leaf clovers and small silver keys. She was superstitious, which meant she had been through some hard times, or had something bad happen to her. I traced her arm to her hand and noticed she wore no rings, nor did I note any discolouration of the skin to suggest she had recently removed one. She was single. At this stage, I had not even seen her face. When she boarded I was too busy watching a fat man in the bus station eating what looked to me like a baby's arm, but was probably just a sausage roll. But from her smell, which reminded me of Hubba Bubba chewing gum I had as a kid, and her Mediterranean hairy arm, I was in love. I wasn't prepared for it. But here you go, that's how it is sometimes. The fact that her face may have looked like a burnt scrotum didn't concern me because out of all the seats on the coach, this woman, whoever she was, chose to sit next to me.

When people ask you to tell a joke, the best thing to do is tell it straight away. Don't put it off or play it down. The longer you wait, the more the joke has to pay off, and, generally, when someone has to wait for more than a minute or two, no joke is ever that good. I felt the same about my first words to the woman next to me. I had foolishly wasted twenty miles of the journey in silence, picking the toenails off my lap and berating myself for not shaving and showering that morning. I should have started by saying hello, but once we got out of Harrogate and onto the Trans-

Pennine motorway, the moment seemed to have passed, which then meant the only way I could initiate a conversation was by means of mutual interest or by divine intervention. I knew nothing of life overseas, nor the history of Italians, Spanish, or Portuguese (the three main areas I assumed her family had descended from). So it was down to God to play his hand in bringing about a natural turn of events that would help render the words decaying in the back of my throat. But God wasn't around that day, and instead it was the Morning Star, his Fallen Angel who brought us together.

We had just passed the Saddleworth junction close to the village of Dogmael, and were close to what I have heard referred to as the Little House on the Prairie, a small farmhouse located between the two carriageways of the M62, when the traffic began to slow to a stop. I glanced out of the window to the many indolent insects and pressed my eye against the glass to see ahead. I noticed a few people getting out of their cars, pointing forward to a place I could not see. I felt this was a good a time as any to turn to face the woman next to me and deliver a well-observed comment about heavy congestion affecting this particular stretch of motorway due to high winds brought on by its abnormally high location. But as I looked again outside, the people I saw did not appear to be influenced by the wind. Their hair was unmoved, and they were happy to stand beside their stationary cars with no coats. I assumed there must have been an accident ahead, and for some reason I remembered reading about a coach which had been bombed along this route sometime in the 1970s. I didn't wish to scare the woman or bring about mass hysteria on the coach should one of the passengers hear my recount, so I remained staring out of the window, waiting for the right moment to present itself. I did not need to wait long.

There was a lot of commotion coming from the front of the coach that drew everyone's attention from the windows. One man at the back of us mentioned that someone was trying to get in. I stood up slightly so I could see, and I saw the driver's hand

gesturing toward the door in a go-away motion. I then heard the door being hit hard several times. I was about to make a light remark to the woman about the lengths some people will go to not to miss the coach, when suddenly the doors flew open and a man with a red face and panic in his eyes screamed to us all, "They're fucking eating people alive!"

An old lady at the front (probably from Richmond) scolded the man for swearing, to which he replied, "Fuck you, you old bag, and turn up your hearing aid! People are fucking dying out there!"

A muscular man with tattoos crawling up his neck got up from his seat and told the man to calm down, and then the driver got out of his seat and began examining the door. I heard the driver say that the door was broken and that the man would have to pay for the damages, and well, this just made him go even crazier.

"I'm not paying for no fucking door!" he yelled. Another person shouted back, "Double negative, so yes you bleeding are!" The old lady gasped again at all the profanities and the tattooed guy began pushing the crazy man out of the door.

"I ain't going out there!" he cried.

I'm not a physical man but I thought helping to get the crazy man out of the coach might go down well with the woman. If nothing else, the gesture would allow me to ask the woman to move so I could pass. And this I did, and in that moment I turned to face her for the first time I felt the whole world around me shake and the deafening strike of my heart for she was as beautiful as I imagined. I can't say it was one thing, like her nose, or her eyes, but the collective configuration of all her features that beset my heart, as if some higher force had moulded them from the most valuable cuts of flesh and cartilage and aligned each without flaw or heedlessness. My legs buckled and I stumbled foolishly into the aisle. I had heard people refer to falling in love as being struck by a thunderbolt, and I figured this must have happened to me. But as I propped myself up, there were other people in the aisle with me,

and the thunderous noise that I assumed was my heart beating for the woman was now emanating from the roof.

Extended before me was the bracelet of lucky charms, an open palm of pale rivulets that traversed this way and that to form the word "Love" – or so I had rendered this image in my mind.

"Take my hand," she said, "there's something on the roof."

As the woman said this she looked up and I noticed under her chin three tiny moles surrounded by even tinier freckles that if projected in the night sky I'm sure would have brought astrophysicists to tears. Her hand was warm and soft, and while a strange comparison, it reminded me of the soft skin around my penis.

The coach shook again and people responded by screaming aloud, "What the hell is that?"

Before she could answer, the crazy guy was screaming at the top of his voice, "It's not of this world!"

I looked over toward the door; he was half in and half out, his hands gripped tight around the doorframe. The tattooed man was pushing his chest, trying his best to force him out. People were shouting for the man to leave and the man shouted back, "It's got fucking wings!" The driver was hitting a button on the dashboard to shut the door, but nothing was happening. That's when the tattooed man threw back his leg and launched his foot right into the crazy man's crotch. His hands let go within seconds and I saw him fall out into the road. A few people at the back of the coach cheered and as a victory salute, the tattooed man raised his hand in the air. I'm sure he was going to say something like, "Nothing to see here, people," you know, like they do in the movies, but before he could open his mouth he was blasted with an almighty deluge of blood.

The first few rows screamed like a cinema audience watching a slasher flick and I wondered for a moment if he'd been shot in the head. Then he yelled, "It's not me... It's not my blood!" Another set of screams followed when a round object was hurled

into the coach and into the driver's hands. He held it there for a few seconds, looking down at it. When someone shouted it was a head, the old woman passed out and I heard someone else throw up. The driver dropped-kicked the head back out of the door like he was passing someone a football, and whoever, or whatever, was out there threw it back within a matter of seconds.

From behind me, someone screamed out for a doctor. Then I heard another person shout, "She's gone into labour!" Just my luck.

I got to my feet and raised my hand in the air, "I'm a medical student!" I looked down at the woman and smiled. For some reason the whole chain of events, and being the only person of any value in a medical crisis, had driven away my nerves. I set off toward the back of the coach with a poised and confident stride and failed to notice a loose bag that had found its way into the aisle. I tripped and cracked my head on the floor and passed out.

From the darkness, I heard the panting of a woman, and the fusion of worried voices. There was talk of a hole in the motorway. Someone had counted ten creatures, another thirty. Drivers were being dragged from their cars. I heard limbs and heads had been torn off. Others were grabbed and taken into the skies. It was surreal, like I was in a movie. I didn't want to open my eyes to make real the world around me. Then I heard her voice, honeyed and comforting.

"I think he's waking up," she said. I felt her soft hand on my brow, and then her fingers brush away my hair. There was no fear in me at that moment. I knew beyond the shade of nothingness lay her beauty, and those spellbinding onyx eyes looking down at me. And when I opened my eyes, there was nothing but two legs spread apart and a hairy dilated vagina staring down at me.

"Her waters broke when that crazy guy's head was thrown into the coach," said a large man with ruddy complexion. "It was brown, the water. Is that normal?"

I sat up and looked down the aisle. I could see through the front window a swarm of malformed figures swooping through the sky toward people running from their cars.

"What are they?" I asked to no one in particular and I heard the woman's voice again say, "We think they're demons." I turned and there she was, sat beside the pregnant woman, wiping a small handkerchief against her cheek.

The man asked again, "Is it normal?" and I pointed toward the front of the coach.

"Does that look normal to you?" I asked him.

"No," he said, "not that... Is it normal for her waters to be brown?"

I realised my mistake and ransacked my medical knowledge bank.

"It's meconium." I looked to the pregnant woman. "It means your baby has had its first bowl movement."

The man, who I assumed at this stage was the father, said, "The baby took a shit? That's okay, isn't it? I mean, it's not going to choke on it?"

I didn't want to worry anyone, but for baby to have a bowl movement so early on meant it could be in distress. I told the man it was nothing to worry about and then I knelt before the woman.

"How far apart are the contractions?"

Between panting, she said, "About... two... minutes."

"How long was I out?" I asked the beautiful woman.

"Not long, about ten minutes, give or take a few."

I told the man I was going to have to feel the cervix, and he nodded his approval. The woman was nine fingers wide, which meant there wasn't much time left.

"I take it this is not your first?" I asked the pregnant woman.

"Third... The other two... are... with... my... mother."

I looked back and the passengers on the coach were caught between the wonder of seeing a natural birth taking place, and the terror of death beyond the window.

I shouted out, "Does anyone have any towels? A pair of scissors, perhaps?"

One woman said he had a pair of nail clippers, and a scarf. Another woman said she had a flannel. I ran down the aisle toward the driver and the tattooed man who were both still trying to get the door shut. I asked the driver if he had a first aid kit, and with his attention clearly fixed on securing the door, he pointed to an overhead compartment where a green plastic box sat. His hands were still bloody from the head incident and I asked if he was okay.

"Will be when I get this door locked."

At that moment, the coach groaned as something landed on it again and everyone screamed. The two sounds were now tied together like the popping of a champagne cork and the ensuing screams of jollity, except there was no joy to be found here.

Without warning the door was pulled off and the driver with it. I looked out where a warped creature with a half-goat and half-rhino crossbreed skull with teeth of blackened root stared down at the driver. Through bluish lucent skin, its spine had been pushed out to form a trunk from which two huge wings had formed from jagged bone. Its torso was human, but the limbs were stretched out, long and twisted. It bent down and thrust its skeletal hand into the driver's chest, killing him instantly. The whole coach erupted with fear and I reeled back on the spot, falling into the driver's seat. Geezers of blood shot up turning the sky crimson as the demon pulled everything that was once in the driver, out.

Adrenalin, or pure stupidity, got a hold of the tattooed man and he leapt from the coach and jumped on the demon's horned back. He looked like he was on a bucking bronco, holding tight with all his strength as the demon twisted its gruesome body left and right. He did okay for a spell too, jamming his fingers into its bulbous yellow eyes and throwing a few well-aimed punches into its exposed ribs. But the demon didn't take kindly to this and flew off toward the Heavens, taking the tattooed man with him.

I grabbed the first aid kit and ran to the pregnant woman.

She was contracting. The head had crowned. I opened the kit and removed all the gauze and cotton pads. There were a few antiseptic wipes in there that I used to clean my hands. There was also a pair of small scissors to help cut the umbilical cord, or possibly perform an episiotomy if the baby didn't come out quick.

The woman was screaming, yelling out in pain.

"What's your name?" I asked the pregnant woman.

The father replied, "Jenny."

"I want to hear rapid breaths, Jenny. Okay?"

"It... hurts," she replied.

"You're doing fine. It won't be long now, but you have to trust me." I looked over to the beautiful woman and handed her the scissors and the antiseptic wipes.

"Can you clean these, please?"

She took them and began following my instructions. My heart ached for her.

"Rapid breaths, Jenny!" I shouted. Another contraction.

"Now PUSH!"

Shuddering with exertion, Jenny put her all into it. The skin around her hands was bone white as she gripped the ruddy man by his hand.

"The head's coming, Jenny! Keep going!"

For thirty seconds, Jenny was shaking worse than a person with Parkinson's having the biggest shit of their life. After the thirty seconds had passed she fell back into the chair, exhausted. I heard more screaming from the front of the coach. I turned and there was one of those winged fuckers slithering toward the front row of passengers. It was different from the one that had killed the driver and took the tattooed man into the sky. Its head was more fish-like and it had no legs, but instead a long body that tapered off into a tail. It slinked onto the coach like an ancestor of Medusa. Everyone went mental and began running toward us.

"Woah!" I shouted, standing up with my hands held out in front of me. "There's a woman giving birth here!"

A woman holding a child to her chest shouted back, "Then she'll understand what I'm prepared to do to protect my child!"

She was about to say something else but was winded by a man who pushed her to one side. The woman fell into the chairs, falling on her back so her child didn't get hurt.

"ENOUGH!" I shouted.

Rage had taken over me and I saw the red mist. I have never gotten that angry before and when I heard my voice reach the level it did, I wondered if it was me yelling or some over person behind me. I looked around briefly to make sure and my eyes fell to the beautiful woman who was staring right back at me. She had a look that gave me strength I never thought I had. The man who was hurtling toward me slowed briefly. I took five steps toward him before launching my fist and hitting him square on the chin. He hit the ground quicker than birdshit.

The pain was excruciating in my hand, but I dragged his unconscious body to one of the spare seats before yelling at everyone, "CLEAR THE MUTHA-FUCKING AISLE, PEOPLE! MEDICAL STUDENT COMING THROUGH!"

And the passengers, they just stopped and moved to one side. Guess a few must have read my t-shirt and thought I was crazy, but I felt like fucking Moses in that moment, separating the Red Sea, except I was mightily pissed and all I wanted was to kick some demon arse.

The ugly fish-faced demon saw me when all the other people moved to the adjacent seats. It knew why I was there and so bared its long fangs that looked razor sharp. I realised then I hadn't thought this through. What was I going to kill it with, my sweaty feet? Right then I smelt that lovely Hubba Bubba smell and beside me the beautiful woman arrived with the scissors in her hand.

"Take these," she said, her breath falling on my neck like snowflakes. She then kissed my cheek. "Good luck," she said.

I ran to that demon with the biggest hard-on I ever had.

And I guess seeing a crazy wide-eyed medical student wielding a pair of tiny scissors with a bulge in his pants must have took it by surprise because it just stayed there.

I didn't think about the consequences once I arrived, I just jammed the scissors right in its head. Green ooze spurted out and hit me in the face. I wiped my eyes and saw the demon rising on its tail, making it much taller and more menacing than before. It then opened its mouth to reveal the leftovers of its last victim: an eye, an ear and a gold necklace with a Jesus cross.

I looked around and couldn't find a damn thing to use. This was it, I thought. I'm going to die. And what pissed me off more than anything was not the fact I wouldn't finish medical school, or perform open heart surgery, but that I was still a virgin. I was going to die a damn virgin! Then from one of the seats next to me a hand reached out. In it was an umbrella, one of those big ones with the metal tips. I grabbed it without even thinking and thrust it into the demon's chest. A piercing scream rang aloud and from the opposite end of the coach, Jenny screamed too. And as the demon slipped to the floor, so did Jenny's third child.

It was a girl. As I cleaned the ooze from the scissors removed from the demon and handed them to her husband, I asked Jenny if they had a name for the baby.

"We were thinking of Alice, or Molly."

The father cut to the cord and both mother and baby were separated. As Jenny gave her final push and delivered the placenta, I wrapped it in a Tesco bag and said, "So which is it?" That was when Jenny asked me my name.

They must have thought they'd be able to abbreviate or adapt my name to sound more feminine, a tribute to the man who helped deliver her.

"My name is Ralph."

Both Jenny and the father looked at each other and shook their heads. I then looked over to the woman beside her.

"I didn't do this alone, you know," I said tilting my head

toward the woman. "I can't imagine a woman as beautiful as she to have a boring name."

The remark brought a little colour to her cheeks and had me wondering if I'd been possessed by a Mills and Boon author. Jenny turned to the woman, her baby pressed against her breast, and asked for her name.

"It's silly," she said to Jenny.

"Please," said Jenny softly.

"But I didn't do anything," replied the woman. "It was Ralph."

Jenny insisted, and finally the woman succumbed.

"It's Morning. See, I told you it was silly." Even I was taken a little aback by that.

"Morning?" asked Jenny, and as if not hearing her, I repeated the name.

Morning looked to me and said, "My family name is Birdsong."

Jenny's husband, or boyfriend, or whatever he was, said, "Oh, yeah, like the Greens, Jenny. They called their daughter Theresa. It's a talking point, a bit of fun, right?"

Jenny didn't say anything and turned back to Morning.

"It's a beautiful name," she said. Then Jenny looked down at her baby and said the name over and over. "Hello, Morning. You're the sweetest, most beautiful girl in the world, aren't you, Morning? Yes you are."

Under my breath, but loud enough for Morning to hear me, I said, "The second most."

We sat for a long time in that coach. Many of the passengers were too afraid to leave so a few of us helped to fix the door. We secured it using nylon tights and a couple of scarves. One of those demons would have pulled it off without any effort, but deception is enough to pacify even the most restless of hearts.

I spent a while looking out the front window of that coach,

watching the hordes of demons spiralling toward the sky. One passenger was convinced Lucifer had set them free to rein war on God and all the angels. It wasn't a bad theory, too, when they later explained that this spot was probably chosen because of its altitude, and there was less distance to travel. Whatever they were, they had become bored with us humans and seemed unwavering in their attempt to reach whatever lay beyond the grey skies.

As the sun grew heavy and began to sink behind the Yorkshire moorland, fifty or so tiny green trucks appeared on the horizon. As they got nearer we noticed that mounted on the backs were tiny guns. One person yelled it was the army come to save us and everyone rushed to the windows to see. Everyone began to smile and there was a sense of lightness in the air, as if a thick fog had been blown away. It was then I felt her soft hand in mine and her lips close to my ear.

"You saved us, Ralph. You're the hero."

And against the backcloth of a hundred winged demons being shot and firebombed out of the sky, Morning and I kissed, and, for the first time in my life, I felt the beat of another heart against my own.

After leaving school, **CRAIG WALLWORK** studied Art before becoming a filmmaker and writer. "Birdsong and the Hell Demons" is taken from his forthcoming novel, *Dog Mile*. Other short stories by Craig can be found in many a sordid corner of the world, or from his website: craigwallwork.blogspot.com.

Brave Young Americans: Some Assembly Required

Jenny Ortiz

1.

My hand moved to my nose to catch the blood before it fell on my grease-stained uniform. Ducking into the bathroom before a customer called me over, I examined my nose in the mirror, but couldn't see anything. I sniffed a few times; a metallic smell remained in my nostrils. After rolling my neck, and hearing the vertebrae crack, I went back to work.

The pitcher of iced tea felt heavier in my hand; the scraping of forks against plates seemed louder. The booths were filled with people in church clothes, their faces smudged with ketchup, fingers tapping at the rims of their cups as they waited for refills. Three different table jukeboxes were playing heavy metal and Spanish ballads. Truck drivers sat in stools eating full meals of eggs, ham, cheese, and some avocado on the side. Smells of cooking oil and pancake mix permeated the diner.

Jaynus walked in and took a seat in my section, which made me press my lips together. Although his long blond hair covered his eyes, I knew he was looking out the window; I could almost feel the twitch at the corner of his left eye as he watched vigilantly. We were always looking over our shoulders, but this time we were expecting her. There'd been a time when Jaynus and I dreamt that running away would mean the hot sun on our skin, the taste of fresh coffee, waking up in a new city. But then hiding in train cars, jumping over fences, and washing up in the bathrooms of gas stations started wearing us down. We no longer wanted to work long hours while sweat soaked the elastic of our underwear in order to pay for our daily meals and a motel room.

Jaynus had begun staying up at night, studying the Bible and thinking about God. I wasn't God-fearing; I just wanted a big house and some money to spend. After sex, I'd start falling asleep, and he'd start quoting Scripture. Not that we were having sex as much as we used to—that began to fall apart soon after we got to Puerto Rico. Fugitives, we learned, don't get much time to sit on the beach and sip margaritas. We avoided places full of Americans and took jobs right outside of Aguadilla; while I waited tables, Jaynus did odds and ends for different construction sites.

I brought him a beer and left him to his thoughts. I'd never intended to be with Jaynus so long, but when you're fourteen and climbing a fence with barbed wire, you don't think of doing it by yourself. It'd taken a long time for our thin bodies to fill out again, for the skin of our feet to heal. The taste of grass came back every now and again, making my face grow tight with shame.

Thirteen kids had escaped with us from the government sponsored orphanage. We were two out of four that remained. Three had died in the woods. They'd been weak, their thoughts feverish with their mothers' voices, the taste of fresh water, the warmth of a clean bed. Struggling to keep them standing, we'd dragged and pulled their bodies over thick tree roots and under dangling branches; before we reached the road, they'd slid off our shoulders. I don't remember if I cried for them. At one point, Jaynus had pulled at the bark of a dead tree until his nails were broken, leaving the skin underneath raw and exposed. His fingers were swollen the next day, and we feared he might lose one of his hands if we didn't find some medicine. A few of the girls had kept sniffing, but had I? Asking Jaynus about it would be useless; he refused to remember. He couldn't even tell me what'd happened the day before.

The rest of us had separated, but slowly the others were found. We were too valuable to be lost. You pump enough drugs into a kid's arm and there are bound to be good results, or at least a guide to what not to do to the human body. Building heroes is

expensive; we were expensive. While we bragged about riding our bikes without handlebars, they could brag about making new antibiotics, leading a nation with one speech, and guiding missiles by satellite. No matter how old we got, how strong our muscles became, we'd always be grubby kids with mud streaking our thin legs and knots in our hair, running away aimlessly in our thin white underwear.

"Mirah, another beer," Jaynus called out.

Glancing over at him, I was surprised to find Utah sitting across from him. I'd loved Utah. We had escaped with her. The day she left us, I'd stood with her on the train platform. She was shouldering a taped-up duffel bag and looking ahead, her jaw tight and her stern glare focused. She'd refused to answer any of my questions. Men in white vans pulled up just as the train for Manhattan was pulling in. I tried to board with her, but she pushed me away roughly, her hand against the new tattoo I'd gotten—Utah's name on the flat space between my breasts. She'd watched through the window as Jaynus and I ran from the men. We didn't stop until we found a sewer entrance too tight for them to follow us in; we'd stayed for two days underground before we felt safe enough to come out.

As I headed toward their table now, Utah and Jaynus were in deep conversation. Utah's fingers pulled at her sleeves; the fabric tightened over her shoulders. Placing the beer between them, I continued to another booth to take an order. Through the loud buzz of voices, I could hear Jaynus telling Utah about the places we'd been, but I couldn't catch her responses.

Within an hour the rush had died down, and I was able to join them. Jaynus' face was tense; Utah was crying.

"Who's she crying for?" My teeth were clenched as I spoke.

"Only reason people cry like that is because their heart's been broken." Jaynus' lips barely moved; his hand cupped his face as if he were deciphering a mathematical equation in his head.

"Expert, huh?" I said to him.

“You tell me.”

His gaze moved away from me towards Utah. Her thin body was slightly hunched; her gold hoops moved every time she wiped her face with the sleeve stretched over her slender, tanned hands. Those hands were still dark, their palms round, like full moons whose edges are tinted red. Although she was small and slouched, everything about Utah felt big, without boundaries.

“Why are you here?” I snapped at her.

“My boyfriend turned me in.”

Utah’s tongue was thick with a coat of saliva, which made her sentence sound fragmented.

“You told him about us?”

“I thought I could trust him.”

“That was a bad move. He did it for the reward money? I can’t believe they’re still offering money for each of us...”

“We’re government property,” Jaynus said, looking down at his hands.

“They used us—they knew they could, because we didn’t have any family—eventually we would’ve died. Don’t tell me you feel sorry for leaving,” I said to Jaynus. Then I turned to Utah.

“Wait. Knowing they’re coming for you, you came to us. You’re risking *our* lives?”

“I didn’t have anywhere to go,” she said between her clenched teeth.

“I didn’t have anywhere to go, either, when you left me,” I snarled.

“Don’t start.” Jaynus looked at me. “We have to get out of here. There’s a bus going to the capitol; we’ll meet up with Ralph. We can stay at his place until we can get a flight.”

“Back to the States? They’ll find us.”

I tried to walk away, but Jaynus grabbed my arm.

“They’ll find us here. How big do you think this island is?”

“Let me finish up my shift. We’ll need the money,” I muttered before walking away from their teary faces. Together

they were remaking their memories; I could see them telling themselves that the hunger and the dirt hadn't been so bad.

2.

The bus ride to the capitol moved into a smooth soft lull, pulling Jaynus into a light sleep; his headphones slipped off his ears. Utah and I remained awake.

"You're still mad at me," Utah said.

My eyes moved from Utah to Jaynus, whose hair covered his face. Before stroking his hair, I answered her: "Did you think anything would change between us?"

"You've gotten hard."

"And you're still weepy."

We remained silent for several moments.

"And Eli? Have you talked to him?"

She smiled a little nervously.

"He's dead." My voice was steady as I stared out the window. In my memories I could see Eli's sharp bones, his hollow cheeks sticking to his teeth when he spoke. He'd designed the tattoo on my chest, but we'd gone in different directions before he could see it.

"How?"

"They chased him towards a moving train."

"There are only three of us left then." Her voice sounded weary. "They captured the rest. They're back in the facility."

I tried to stifle my laugh with my hand, but stained my sleeve instead; my nose was bleeding again.

"At the facility," said Utah, "they have drugs to stop the nosebleeds."

"Wads of tissue seem to stop my nosebleeds just fine."

Jaynus, awake now, squeezed my hand tightly; I opted to remain silent the rest of the way. Utah's face was blank.

3.

The streets were filled with cars the color of rust and dirty silver. Belanova was playing somewhere from one of the boutiques. We passed hot dog vendors; the smell of melted cheese and ground beef made my mouth water. Tourists in white linen pants stepped past small children pulling at dirty fur-matted dogs on rope leashes. Utah's husky voice was lighter now. She pointed at clothing stores and absentmindedly sang songs.

"Here we are," Jaynus said.

Ralph greeted us with cold beers and greasy tortillas. We grabbed the food greedily. Ralph's living room smelled damp; the black line of mold on the wall reminded me of the cell in which we'd been placed. One cell for twenty children; no windows, no toilet. A leaky roof. Fights that led to small hands ripping weakly at dirty hair as we pushed one another aside in order to catch the brown water falling from the ceiling. The smell of one little girl's infected mouth on my face as she tried to grab food from my hands.

I shivered. Of course they'd want to capture us: we were ugly. Were Utah and Jaynus really thinking about it?

They'd promised to return us to our lives. To return us to big backyards, the games we played with our friends, the bedtime stories our parents had read to us. They told us they'd even bring our parents to visit.

We'd been so focused on our parents' weepy eyes that it'd taken us a long time to realize they wore the same white uniforms as the scientists. That our parents stopped crying and began taking notes. That's when we figured it out: even our happy childhoods were an experiment. We'd be the new humans, better than any soldier, loyal and strong. We'd been made to win wars. A great soldier didn't just have special abilities; he or she also had

memories of a great family, something we could fight for. We'd been given a taste of happiness—then medication, three times a day, so we'd be willing to protect our memory of that happiness, though it had never been real in the first place.

After eating, Utah walked over to the bookshelf. My eyes moved from her legs to her collarbone and mouth.

"Did anyone follow you?" Ralph patted my back.

"No." I gulped down my beer.

Ralph had been the security guard at the facility who'd "accidentally" left our cell door unlocked. He'd also left two loaves of fresh bread on the table with a steak knife beside them. It wasn't until we met again in Puerto Rico that we'd understood the reason he'd helped us; the scientists had planned to take in Ralph's own children. They'd wanted to see if they could use civilians instead of children born and raised in labs. The moment Ralph helped us the government saw him as an accomplice, a thief that needed to be disposed of.

"What time's our flight?"

"Six in the morning," said Ralph, waving the plane ticket at me.

"Go talk to Jaynus," I said.

Ralph heaved himself onto a stool and began talking with Jaynus in a low voice over the new identification we'd ordered—passports, driver's licenses, birth certificates, even a baptismal certificate for Jaynus. I followed Utah, who'd made her way towards the backyard. Ralph's colorful shirts hung low on the clothes lines; floral dresses and ripped jeans stood between Utah and me. A few droplets of rain fell onto the dry dirt. Utah wiped the water from her face, although more drops settled on her like transparent freckles. My instinct told me to kiss her, to feel her tongue between my teeth, the taste of her saliva mixed with rain. But I stood still.

"You'd think a girl could trust her boyfriend. I thought he'd protect me. Instead he turned me in for cash," she said.

“You should forget him.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“If he left you, he isn’t sitting around thinking about you. You should forget him, like he did you.”

“Simple reasoning. Simple and stupid,” she spit out.

“Why—because I didn’t forget about you? I should’ve. You left, and you didn’t stop to think about me.”

“I did think about you! What I did at the train station, I did for your own good. You were getting sick. You needed to be taken care of, and I couldn’t do it.”

“There was no reason I had to go back. There still isn’t.”

“You’re getting worse. You know it. You saw Eli getting sick. You saw how he was suffering. He should’ve gone back. He might’ve lived.”

“Don’t act like you know what happened to Eli. Don’t act like you care about us.”

“I care about all of us. And I remember when we were happy, how we used to laugh—”

“I guess they were running tests on me during the laughter portion of our imprisonment,” I said bitterly.

She frowned.

“Remember when you used to tell stories?”

“I was delirious from all the drugs they fed us. I had to think in fairy tales. If I didn’t, the hardness of the floor, the cold walls... all of it would’ve killed me.”

“But we *were* happy. You and me.”

Utah held out her hand and I took it. Her fingers were warm and slightly calloused. There was a scar on her wrist from the barbed wire that had nipped her as we jumped over the fence.

There’d been about six children already in the cell by the time I arrived. Every night Utah slept with her hand over my chest. Our sweat collected in a small pool and ran down my collarbone and my shoulder. With Utah, sleep had been like a layering of heat. Like slipping off the earth and falling into the sun. No matter

how hot it got, I wanted to stay with her. Sleep had been easy at the facility; after a day of injections and experiments, sleep was encouraged. It was after we escaped that sleep became the enemy.

"I won't leave you again." Utah smiled weakly before kissing me. Her hands moved from my face to my waist. I pulled away slowly.

"I thought you wanted me..." she continued, trying to hold on to me.

"I do. I'm just anxious about escaping. I can't be intimate if I don't feel safe."

"You will be, soon."

"I know," I said as I turned away from her and went inside.

4.

While the rest packed and planned the next steps of our escape, I slept. My thoughts drifted, images passing as if in a movie: Jaynus sitting in the pink-cushioned booth at the diner, sweat ringing the collar of his shirt. Eli chewing a piece of moldy bread. The sound of Utah's bare feet on the floor, her limbs cutting the air around her like the hands of a samurai.

My eyes opened. The room was dark apart from the security light seeping through the slits of the metal blinds. Swallowing hard, I lifted my head off my sweaty arm and listened for noises. Jaynus and Ralph were still talking in hoarse whispers; someone was walking around barefoot. I sighed.

"Are you awake?" Utah stood with the door open.

"Yeah. How much longer?"

"Not long." Utah sucked in her breath saying, "I like when it grows dark and cold. When the cold sets in, I crawl under the covers and fall into dreams that always begin right before they end."

"I remember the other kids," I said. "That one little boy who died soon after we got to the facility. His dad came to see him, and he sneered at him, like he was mad that he hadn't been stronger. When we asked him why he wasn't crying, the dad said something like, why grieve for a test-tube baby?"

After a pause, I added: "I don't dream, Utah. I just remember."

"I don't see the difference."

"You wouldn't," I said quietly. "I wish I were you."

"What do you mean?" Utah placed her hand on my chest.

Pushing her away, I said, "It's as if you were never starved. Bad stuff happened to us, Utah! And when we thought we'd be safe, we were hurt even more. Even after we left the facility... Look at us. We're like rats avoiding the exterminator."

"It wasn't that bad. Some of us were getting stronger."

"And those were the ones who stopped being human. Don't you remember how their skin smelled? As if it was burning. And what did they do? They sat in a corner eating uncooked rice 'til they died."

The drugs they'd given us had been designed to make us stronger; after each treatment, our abilities were supposed to be enhanced. Some of us became faster, or could see better in the dark. Others rejected the drug every time, till their bodies slowly decayed. Regardless of the results we watched all of them slowly burn from the inside, knowing we couldn't help them.

"We didn't have to look over our shoulders all the time."

"Why look over your shoulder when you know what's going to happen—when you're only gonna get hurt?"

"We should go back and turn ourselves in," she insisted.

"Are you insane? Anyway, if you liked it so much, why did you even leave?"

"Because all of you wanted to go, and I didn't want to be left behind."

I kicked the sheets aside and got up.

"You come here as if you missed me. As if you and I can be something again," I said. "You're only here to save yourself. I'm not as stupid as I used to be."

I picked up my things and walked into the next room. Ralph was sitting on his stool.

"Want something to eat?" he asked. "There's an egg sandwich and milk on the counter."

"Where are you going?" said Jaynus to me, though his eyes were on Utah.

"I don't know. Maybe Ponce. I'm not staying with her any more. She's going to betray us," I said.

"She wants what's best for us, Mirah."

I pulled at his jaw, so our eyes met. "You want to go back, too?"

"I think it would be best."

"We owe them nothing! Our escape was their mistake. If we were so valuable, then they should have kept a better eye on us."

"The world doesn't work like that. God doesn't work through mistakes," Jaynus said, his voice not as steady as it had been.

"Who said anything about God?"

"Maybe we made the mistake when we left. We were born to help our fellow human beings, but we got scared and ran from our calling. And now we're being given a chance to redeem ourselves. We could be like Job—"

"Stop right there. I don't need you to preach at me. I'd rather be in a drug stupor than hear about miracles."

"Your body is shutting down. We have to go back," Jaynus said as he grabbed my arm.

"No."

I pulled away.

"Simple cuts and scrapes I get at the construction sites aren't healing. They're festering. I need... we need medication."

“That’s not why you want to go back,” I said to him. “You’re a real idiot to think God’s setting all of this up for your redemption! No one is going to forgive you. Utah’s the one setting this up. Setting *us* up. She just wants an audience for her ballet recitals.”

When we were in the facility, she’d bragged about being a ballet dancer. She’d twirl for hours around us, doing her stretches, believing if they’d let her go she could be a real ballerina. Her dirty shirt, so big it reached her ankles, would flap as she danced. The guards laughed at her.

“We’ll be a family again,” said Utah. “They said if we complete the program, we’ll get to be a family again. And we won’t have to go to war until we’re ready. They promised if I helped them get everyone back, we’d be safe, and we’d never have to be afraid.”

“I should’ve stayed with Eli.” I backed away from them.

“Eli’s dead. And we will be too, if we keep running. We’ve lied and cheated ever since we left the facility. We belong to them!” Jaynus shouted.

I ran out the door. The sidewalks were vacant. A white van pulled up at the door; I felt Utah’s hands around my shoulders. As I tried to jerk away, Jaynus gripped my arm. No tears, no fists. I tried to suck in breath after breath, but my body wouldn’t react. I felt like a pencil being rolled between two hands quickly, without thought or reason.

“For a moment I thought you were from the facility,” I said to the driver, my voice shaky, pulling away from Jaynus. His grasp on me had gone limp as soon as he saw Eli get out of the van.

“You said he was dead.” Utah moved towards Jaynus.

“I lied.”

“I don’t understand what’s going on,” Jaynus said.

“Your plans aren’t working the way you wanted?” I said.

“As soon as you told me Utah was coming, I knew what the two of you were planning. So I called Eli.”

“But you said he was dead,” Utah whispered again.

“She’s like a broken record,” Eli said, a cigarette between his lips.

“We knew you were selling us out. Eli’s been in hiding.”

“It’s time to go, Mirah,” Eli called out as he and Ralph got into the van.

“We were supposed to be a family now...”

“That’s what I’d thought at the train station.” I kissed Utah on the mouth and went to do the same to Jaynus, but he jerked away from me.

“You’re doing the same thing to me Utah did to you.”

“No, I’m not. You want to go back. I don’t. I’m doing what’s best for all of us,” I said before getting into the van.

Through the rearview mirror, I saw them holding hands. I didn’t want to imagine what they’d look like at the facility, so I looked at them until their tightly gripped hands and their blank faces were visible even after we turned the corner. I looked ahead at the winding roads that would turn into the tarmacs of the airport, wondering how long before the end.

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Captain Neptunium and Lady U-boat

Mike Sweeney

NOW

I've just dropkicked Calutron into the Raritan River but it won't put him down for long. I need to get my bearings. I need to figure out what the hell's gone wrong. Calutron was always a mechanized, mindless brute, but his power has been amped up. He can hurt me. He can make me bleed.

Also, purple lightning shoots out of his fists when he hits something. None of that is good.

My mind pulls up the details of his file. He was some sort of defense contractor testing out a new exoskeleton for NATO. It was supposed to help with disarming IEDs, make the operator invulnerable to explosions. Terrorists planted a dirty bomb in Brussels. He went in to disarm it. It detonated and he threw himself on the explosion. He saved the city, but the radioactive isotope fused the suit to his flesh and wiped away his conscious mind. Last I heard he was in stasis in a facility outside Chicago.

I weave up and down the aisles of the recycling warehouse looking for any sign of Warrior. I pass stack after stack of rotting pulp until I stumble upon the crumpled body of Professor Majestic – necromancer, dark shaman, and all around malcontent. On the ground next to him is a large, inverted pentagram drawn in blood with the word "Calutron" written in the center. Next to the professor is an ancient-looking book with the word "Majick" cut into the battered leather cover.

I don't know much about the supernatural, but I do know that any time "magic" is spelled with a "j" and a superfluous "k" slapped on the end, it's never a good thing. Whatever book

Professor Majestic was using, I can bet it wasn't about communing with the Mother Goddess.

Mixing dark mystical forces with cutting edge military industrial technology is always a bad idea. I'd like to tell Professor Majestic that he's a magnificent jackass for doing so but since his head has been twisted nearly completely around, I don't think there's much point.

Magic is most superheroes' Achilles' heel and I'm no exception.

I don't think this is going to end well.

THEN

His name is Jackhammer Jack and he was an old friend of my dad's.

He's short and squat and, even though he has to be pushing eighty, he looks like he could still rip the arms off a Deathray Android without breaking a sweat.

His hands are like catcher's mitts and they envelop mine as we shake. He takes the glowing butt of a cigarette out of his mouth and stubs it out on the underside of the bar. He coughs, thick and wet.

He smiles and his face warms my heart. It reminds me of epic battles and purer times. I picture myself in my footy pajamas watching *Eyewitness News*. My dad and Jack are on TV battling the hydra-monster Khidro atop the Driscoll Bridge. Or I think about the time when they and Emerald Mage were the only local heroes to stand against the Red Gang. My dad put my sister and I into hiding while he and the others fought what would come to be known as the Polarity War.

They won, of course, but most said it was only because they finally got some outside help from Him. I think that always galled my dad: that his greatest victory wouldn't have been possible

without assistance from one of the heroes he always derided as “the Big Shots.” This was Jersey, he should’ve been able to protect it on his own.

I resist the urge to look at Jack’s chest, to see how far the cancer’s progressed at the cellular level. He looks good. His face is ruddy, his grin infectious. He’s telling me about his daughters and grandkids. He puts his massive hands on my shoulders and pulls me down close. He says what he always says.

“You know, Matty, your dad would be awful proud of you, right? You and your sister both. But especially you. You picked up the torch, you take care of business. That would mean a lot to him. It means a lot to a lot people.”

I smile and nod like I believe him.

They’re holding a party at the Union Beach Firehouse in a couple weeks to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the defeat of Doctor Centrifuge. I promise Jack I’ll see him there. We shake hands one more time and I watch him open the door and disappear into the daylight, his squat, bulky frame blocking out the sun for a moment.

The rest of Charlie’s Place is nearly empty. It’s just me, the bartender, and three guys in the corner arguing about hockey.

I don’t drink but I like coming to Charlie’s anyway. No one bothers me here and sometimes I run into Jack. I can sit quietly on my stool and pensively sip my Stewart’s Cream Soda. Charlie stocks it special for me. It comes in a brown glass bottle that looks like a beer from a distance. I like the fact that it gives me the perception of having a vice.

I am, in case you haven’t surmised, the boy scout of the family. I took to it naturally; it’s not forced. I think it’s because deep down I always wanted to be one of the Big Shots. I think maybe my dad wanted me to be one too. I think he wanted me to have that level of notoriety and legitimacy.

My father was a good man who saved a lot of lives. But the world never really let him forget that he was a construction worker

who just happened to get struck by lightning atop a titanium I-beam.

No one ever understood his transformation really. Some said it was because of the special metal and intense electricity; others said it because of the Perseids that night. Whatever it was, when he woke in the hospital, he had the strength of twenty men and skin almost impervious to damage. The next morning, he got up and dressed like he was going back to work on the site, except he tied a blue tablecloth around his neck. Then he started helping people.

He couldn't fly, of course. But, God, was he strong. And he could hit.

The Leveler, they called him.

For years, he was loved and revered by the people of New Jersey, until -- as eventually happens to most things that are revered -- he became a source of ridicule. In the Nineties, "silly" replaced "simple" in describing the blue tablecloth he still used as a cape. He started to be criticized over civil liberties, maybe rightly so. I don't know. Other people questioned why he always turned a blind eye to the Jersey mob.

He didn't have to endure the criticism long. Once my sister and I turned eighteen, it was like Dad doubled down on his smoking. When we were young, he knew we needed him. Once we were old enough to take care of ourselves, I think he did what he always wanted to do. He set about joining our mom.

He died eight months before the Towers fell. Afterwards, people wanted heroes again. Everything bad that was said about the Leveler was forgotten. He got a bronze statue in Newark. QMX released a limited edition reproduction of his blue tablecloth-cape. They go for two grand on eBay now. He was also given the highest honor any New Jerseyan can hope for: they named a rest stop on the Turnpike after him. It's a nice one, too.

The next year, my sister and I came into our own. We helped some of the Big Shots (yeah, I call them that too) defeat the

Invasion of the Cephalatroids. Suddenly we were legitimate heroes in our own right, not just teen curiosities anymore.

In 2004, Kelly joined an international team of heroes that responded to the tsunami in Indonesia. You've probably seen the photo of her holding that little girl on the cover of *National Geographic*. It's when things really took off for Kelly, when presidential candidates started trying to get her endorsement, when she started getting invites to movie premiers. *Vanity Fair* asked her to guest-edit. If I'm the family's boy scout, she's the rock star. I wouldn't have it any other way.

We're complete opposites, but our powers are essentially the same. She can fly a little faster than me; I'm a little stronger than her. No one's sure how we got the ocular powers and they're our only real difference. I have Molecular Vision; she has Ice Sight.

Kelly says people like her better, but they rely on me more. She also tells me that she's the Xena to my Hercules and I have no idea what that means. Pop culture isn't my strong suit outside comics, and even there my knowledge stops around 1985. That's probably why I went with the retro costume and the Golden Age moniker.

Kelly, on the other hand, picked her name because she thought it sounded cool. I tried to tell her a "U-boat" was a Nazi submarine. She said it still sounded cool. I stressed that the Nazis were led by Hitler. She told me she'd redefine it. I said that didn't make any sense. She said she was going to take back "U-boat" and make it a good thing again. I said it never really was a good thing. She said she had the perfect leather jacket. She showed it to me. It *was* really cool.

And thus was born her costume. The "un-costume" as it would come to be known. Lady U-boat wore the cool hip-length black leather jacket with a white t-shirt, black Levi's, and Doc Marten's. The finishing touch was a pair of oversized, bright yellow roper gloves. They made no sense whatsoever, but somehow my sister made them work perfectly.

The world at large loved the costume. It's always a best seller for little girls at Halloween. Parents like that it's dynamic without being overtly sexual. *The Huffington Post* congratulated Kelly for being a female super hero who looks like she doesn't get paid in singles.

Neither of us wears a mask. Everyone knew we were the Leveler's kids. There was never any question about who we really were. So we didn't construct secret identities. We just had secrets.

NOW

I extract my face from the twisted metal and plastic of what used to be the back end of a Honda Accord.

A tattered bumper sticker hangs off my cheek. It says, "Snooki's from NY."

I have no idea what that means.

My head is still ringing from being flung through eight stacks of newspaper and a brick wall, before landing on the Honda. I wipe the blood from my chin and try to remember the last time I bled this much, if at all.

Across the street, a man and woman are huddled behind a VW bus. The woman snaps my picture with her cell phone as I take off. I have a feeling that'll wind up on *The Star Ledger's* website tomorrow.

My first instinct is to charge full bore back into the warehouse. Calutron is so much stronger than me, but he can't fly. If I can keep dropping him in the river, maybe I can buy time for back up to arrive.

But first I need to find Garden State Warrior, to see if he's still alive.

In the warehouse, I hear Calutron baying. Purple lightning flashes through shattered windows.

I can't leave him alone for long.

I ascend a half mile and scan the area below.

My mind conjures an image from childhood: I once dropped an action figure from the top of the stairs onto the ceramic tile of our foyer. Warrior's legs look the way the toy's did when it landed. He lays motionless in an alley two blocks from the river.

I zoom in on him with my Molecular Vision: he's barely breathing, with multiple broken bones and internal hemorrhaging. He doesn't have long.

I brace myself and descend with a sonic boom. I swoop into the warehouse and ram my shoulder into Calutron's chest. The two of us crash through an already shattered window. He gets in two good shots before I break contact. He draws blood from my arm and crunches a rib hard enough that I'm sure it's broken.

By the time he's splashing into the river, I've already pivoted and made it to Warrior's position. There's no way in hell I should move him, but there's no choice. If he stays here, he's going to die. I scoop him up as gently as I can and whisk him back to the destroyed Honda.

The man and woman have the VW bus started and are just pulling away when they see me. They stop and open the side door.

"Take him to the nearest hospital," I say. "Please."

The woman raises her phone to take another picture of me as I place Warrior in the backseat, his legs dangling from my arms like a rag doll's. She stops and lowers her phone. There's a question on her face, one I'm thankful she doesn't ask. I swallow hard and it tastes like pennies.

On the riverbank, I can hear Calutron roaring as he climbs ashore.

THEN

It's nearly eight and I settle my bill with the bartender. Charlie told me long ago that my money was no good in his place, but I insist

on paying anyway. Dad always did.

The guys in the corner have made peace on hockey and joined forces to savage Eli Manning. I pass them on my way to the men's room. We live in a world without phone booths, so I change into my costume in the dingy stall in back of Charlie's Place before slipping into the alleyway. I don't like people to see me take off if I can help it. It freaks them out more than you'd think.

Flying itself is more disturbing than you'd guess. In dreams, there's not the bone-chilling cold, there's not the overwhelming sense of emptiness a solitary human figure feels in the midst of the sky three miles above the planet. It takes some getting used to.

I do like the solitude of it now. I like to spend a half hour each night just floating off the Jersey coast before going on watch with the Lighthouse.

Kelly and I get our flight abilities from mom. Nuclear Woman didn't have much in the way of invulnerability, though. She couldn't even survive giving birth to twins.

Yeah, I get maudlin sometimes.

In our townhouse in Hoboken, on my bedroom door, my sister has taped a poster printed out from the Internet. It shows a red-eyed, cherubic teen of indeterminate sex, with multiple piercings. Underneath it says, "Emo: it's like Goth for pussies."

It's her way of reminding me to cheer up.

I wish I could say I could help it, but I can't. I'll give you a moment to go Google "dysthymia" if you've never heard of it. Literally, it means "ill humor" in Greek. Clinically, it's described as a long-lasting – in some cases lifelong – low-level depression, with occasional forays into major depression. Being dysthymic is a bit like have the psychological equivalent of AIDS: your emotional immune system just isn't up to the task. Little things can bring you down; big things can trigger something far worse.

When I was seventeen, I drove my '75 Duster into a concrete embankment at 90 miles per hour. I had a titanium blade duct-taped to the steering wheel and pointed at my heart to seal the deal.

The car was incinerated; the blade bent in half. I woke up with a really bad headache, my eyebrows singed off, and not much else wrong with me.

I couldn't tell you exactly why I did it now. I'm sure it had something to do with a girl, most likely a blond one. Beyond that... it's hard to explain why you want to destroy yourself. It's just seemed my whole life that something wasn't right, that something was off, that I didn't get what most people get. It just seemed, far too often, that things would be simpler if all this was over.

It's gotten better as I've gotten older, I think. The SSRI helps a lot. It changed everything in my twenties. And being a superhero isn't a bad thing. I know that sounds conceited, but there actually is an upside to having a profession where evil geniuses and space monsters are constantly plotting your demise: it makes you want to live.

There are times though when I still think of a form of self-destruction, more societal than physical. I think about just leaving.

Back in '04 while Kelly and the others were in Indonesia, the Lost Continent of Lemuria surfaced off the coast of New Jersey and made a land claim to Monmouth and Ocean Counties. They said the territory was promised to them before recorded history by Elfar the Impertinent under the Treaty of Pangaea.

Needless to say, it surprised the hell out of everyone. First, Lemuria was supposed to be in the Indian Ocean. Second, well, it was a lost fucking continent surfacing off the coast of New Jersey.

I was on my own pretty much. I tried to be diplomatic. I pointed out that no one (including the Lemurians) had an actual copy of the Treaty of Pangaea since pre-recorded history had no records. I might've also offered them Staten Island instead. I forget. Either way, they declined my parlay and launched Killer Aquabots. I destroyed the attack wave and defeated the Lemurian Queen's champion in personal combat on the sands of Seaside. The land claim was withdrawn. Queen Nera and I negotiated a peace and Lemuria receded beneath the waves.

That was the moment Jersey really took me into its heart. I'd saved the state single-handedly. The governor gave me an award. The cast of *The Sopranos* sent me an autographed poster of the Bing Girls. Bruce Springsteen invited me over his house for a barbecue. Kelly made sure I listened to some of his CDs before I went. I actually liked the acoustic stuff. I remember leaving his farm that night after dinner, thinking I really should've been happier than I was.

Before Lemuria re-submerged, Queen Nera offered to take me as her consort. When I asked what that would involve, she replied, "Not wearing clothes a lot." She also told me she knew I'd never accept, that I could never leave Jersey or my sister. Some nights, I don't know. Some nights, I'd like to prove her wrong, to forget everything about myself, and disappear with Nera forever beneath the waves, a kind of living suicide.

Like I said: maudlin.

The communicator on my left wrist beeps, my sister's personal line.

"Yeah? Kell?"

The voice on the other end is tentative, unsure.

"Um, hello? Hello? Is this the Captain?"

Unconsciously, I drop my voice two octaves before answering.

"This is Captain Neptunium, how can I help, friend?"

"Um... uh... wow."

"It would help, friend, if I knew to whom I was speaking."

"Right. My name's Kenny. I manage a K-Mart. Down in Hazlet."

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Kenny. Why do you have my sister's communication device?"

"It's...uh...she's here in my store. In one of the dressing rooms. She doesn't seem like herself."

"Right, friend. You did the correct thing contacting me. If you give me your address I'll be there shortly."

“Oh, wow. Okay. It’s on Route 35. By the Pathmark.”
“I’ll find it. Captain Neptunium out!”
I click off the communication device.
My sister is in the worst kind of trouble.

NOW

Have you ever had fireworks go off inside your brain while undergoing an unanesthetized root canal?

Me neither, but that’s the best comparison I can make to what it feels like when Calutron rams his fist into my face. The metal-reinforced tissue of his knuckles cuts and rends my flesh while the purple lightning invades and sears.

He has me by the neck with one hand while the other pummels me steadily, rhythmically.

At least the blinding pain is keeping me from passing out.

I can’t take much more of this. I need to break his grip.

There’s only one option.

Did you ever wonder why superheroes run and jump when they take flight? It makes no sense: if you can defy gravity, should you really need to jump to get airborne?

We do it to ease into flight. It’s less harsh on the body. I could go from standing still to 300 miles per hour in under a second, but it’s not a healthy thing, even for someone with super powers. The torque on the body created by a “cold start” is tremendous.

A “cold start” is exactly what I’m about to do. Sideways.

I suspect one of two things will happen: either I’ll break Calutron’s grip and be free or I won’t, in which case my neck will probably snap or possibly come clean off my body.

When this is all over maybe I can I have a nice philosophical discussion about what it means that someone who once deliberately tried to kill himself employed a near-suicidal tactic in

an attempt to live.

Calutron cocks his arm back, ready to deliver another blow. Purple static crackles along his knuckles. I tuck my legs up into my abdomen and kick down for extra force. I surge ahead into flight and ramp up my speed to maximum in milliseconds.

I don't break free.

Calutron drags along behind me. My neck goes numb. I can't breathe. I feel like my Adam's apple will pop through the front of my throat.

We crash through the warehouse wall.

I have one more chance: I stop dead in mid-air, tucking my shoulders forward. Every muscle in my body screams. Calutron finally lets go and hurtles over me towards the river, his howl a long bleat of rage as he speeds away from me.

I spiral down onto the tattered asphalt of an abandoned parking lot and make a small crater on impact.

I hear Calutron splash into the water.

The good thing about people trying to kill you is it makes you want to live.

That might make a nice epitaph.

THEN

I alight atop a pallet of Die Hard batteries. Kenny the K-Mart manager looks up at me in awe. Theatrics are more a part of this job than I like. I bound up onto the loading dock and Kenny follows me into the stockroom.

"It's Toxic Jane, isn't it?" he whispers. "She's back and up to her old tricks, right?"

I stop in my tracks and put a hand on his shoulder for emphasis. I make a display of looking around, even though I know we're the only two people in the stockroom.

"Can you keep a secret, friend?"

Kenny nods his head dutifully.

"It was Taranis," I say gravely. "He escaped from the Imperium Dimension. We sent him back but not before he dosed Lady U-boat with Avalon Gas."

"Taranis," Kenny repeats. He mouths the word silently a second time, as if afraid to say it out loud again.

"You see, friend, the panic it would create if word got out."

Kenny gathers himself and nods, slowly, signaling that he grasps the full weight of the situation. He sets his hands on his hips and looks me square in the eye. "No one will hear it from me, Captain. I swear it."

"Good. And my sister's current condition? It would be best if no one knew about that either."

Kenny places his hand on my forearm. He's my ally now. My comrade.

"I won't breathe a word of it. I know how the kids look up to her. My little one goes running around the house with those big yellow gloves on." His eyes brighten as he remembers something. He pulls out his cell phone.

"Her name's Annie. She's four."

I stare down into a little square of light. It shows a tiny blonde girl wearing a miniature version of my sister's leather jacket and big yellow gloves.

"She's a darling," I say and I think Kenny can tell my voice is cracking.

"It was Halloween," he says.

It's my turn to nod gravely. I hand him back his cell phone.

"I should get to my sister," I say in a low husk.

Kenny points me towards the employees' entrance to the dressing rooms. He's a good and decent man to whom I've consistently lied. He straightens his back and salutes me.

I stop myself from wincing. My right hand juts up to my brow, stiff and firm.

"Thank you, friend," I say and turn with my trademark

flourish, the silver and black of my cape snapping in the air.

I haven't made his day; I've validated his life.

The store is closed and the dressing rooms abandoned. I find Kelly sitting on the floor in the corner. She has her hands wrapped around her legs and she's rocking gently.

She makes a fist of her right hand and holds it up to me. I do the same and we touch the knuckles of our ring fingers.

"Wonder Twin powers," she starts.

"Activate," I finish.

I'm guessing we're about seven years old right now.

I stopped on the way for bagels – from Eli's, her favorite. I hand her one and she reaches for it cautiously before snatching it greedily. I set a box of apple juice on the ground in front of her, making sure to remove the little straw from the plastic and plug it into the drink for her.

I sit cross-legged on the ground, my cape tucked underneath me. I chew my own bagel.

I take out the bottle of her medication that I always keep with me. I carry it because, well, after a while that's what you fucking do. I don't say anything about it. I set it down beside me.

We talk a little.

She smiles sometimes.

We talk some more.

I wait for her to take her pill.

It takes about twenty minutes until she finally extends her hand. I pass her one of the little blue tablets and she weighs it in her palm before popping it into her mouth. She downs it with a gulp of apple juice.

Kelly nods, resigned. I scoop her up and fly her home.

NOW

The side of the recycling warehouse looks like Swiss cheese.

Calutron and I have made at least a half dozen man-sized holes in the brick wall that faces the Raritan River. Most of the windows are blown out too.

I roll out of my mini-crater in the abandoned parking lot and start stumbling back. I don't think I should try flying just yet. My neck feels like it's three feet long but at least it's attached to my body.

I still have a few more minutes. The only good thing about Calutron being half metal is it takes him a while to get out of the water. Maybe if I could get him out to the ocean somehow...

The communicator on my right wrists buzzes.

"Matty?"

"Still with you, Panther."

"Matty, maybe I should come down there."

"No. I need at you at the Lighthouse."

Purple Panther would just get herself killed here. She has no meta-powers and is also starting to get on in years. She still keeps in great shape though. Warrior says she should change her name from "Panther" to "Cougar." Warrior still subscribes to *Maxim*.

My mind shuts down the image of his legs, mangled and bent in the alleyway.

"Any word?" I ask.

Panther takes a long time answering.

"Warrior's in surgery," she says. "Fifty-fifty. At best."

"Any luck with the outside? I could really use Him."

"I know," Panther says. "But He doesn't always answer. I can't get a hold of any of the heavy weights."

"Keep trying," I say.

"Your sister?" Panther asks.

"Stays out of this." I click off the communication device.

Calutron's pulling himself ashore again. I hear his howls, manic and furious. Even for someone filled with mindless rage, he sounds particularly pissed off.

I look around. I could use something really big to drop on

him.

THEN

The upper floor of our Hoboken townhouse is all Kelly's. An award from GLAAD is framed over the fireplace. She was their Woman of the Year in '09. She does a lot of outreach with the LGBT community, especially with teenagers. She's become something of an icon. She's sleeping now on a leather settee, wrapped in a Powerpuff Girls blanket I got her for Christmas when we were nineteen. For someone so powerful, she seems incredibly small right now.

I'll sit with her as long as I can, in case she wakes up. The pills make her sleepy -- one of her many complaints about them. Especially when she first starts taking them again, the drowsiness is at its worst. She should be on them full-time -- or on something anyway -- but she won't go see a doctor. I got the medication through a combination of explaining her symptoms to my own shrink and research on the Internet. Then I stole a batch from the factory in France.

Not very boy scout-ish of me.

She won't go see a psychiatrist. Asking her to do so is a guaranteed way to get her to stop talking to me for a week.

Once she dropkicked me to Uganda at the end of our "discussion" of the subject.

The pills help, when she takes them. Beyond that I'm not even sure what the hell is wrong with her. A few times a year she just sort of...shuts down. Sometimes, she's almost feral, like a super-heightened sense of panic. When she gets like that, it's easy to understand how people used to think the mentally ill were possessed. It's not just her behavior that changes, it's her appearance as well: her eyes seem to recede into her face, her shoulders hunch, her movements become rapid and jerky. It scares

the shit out of me.

Other times it's milder, more childlike, like tonight. But her mannerisms still change: the way she chewed on her bagel, nibbling around the edges exactly the way she did when we were six. Watching her at those times is like being in a time machine – a really disturbing, unsettling time machine.

And then she's fine. She takes the pills – the ones you're supposed to stay on for six months or a year – for about ten days, feels better, and is the same old Kelly: my best friend and the one person in the world I'd most want to have at my side staring down a mutant giant squid with deadly hot plasma breath.

I think sometimes I have it easier with the dysthymia. It's always there and that makes it clearer that you have to treat it fulltime. There's no let up. Kelly can go long stretches without an episode, long enough for her to convince herself that they're never going to happen again.

But they always do.

And I worry every day that this will be the day she has another one.

And I lie to people like Kenny the K-mart manager to keep it secret.

And I steal drugs from France so that she sort-of-kind-of treats it, but not really.

I've said she was stupid about her condition before. When I'm feeling less charitable – like now – I think “selfish” is the correct word.

The first time it happened, I got a call from the Electrician. He was a minor supervillain who my dad busted so many times he was practically family. They'd stop off at Charlie's for a couple of beers on their way to the jail.

Kelly had wandered into his lair down in Egg Harbor and settled under a card table. She wouldn't come out. She wouldn't speak.

It was a few years after our dad's death.

I sat with her and talked for three hours until she'd move.

In the other room, the Electrician's minions were counting his latest haul. They'd knocked over the main vault at the Borgata. It was a big score, the Electrician's retirement money.

I should've arrested the lot of them.

The Electrician put his arm around my shoulder and said, "Keep it quiet, kid. Keep it in the family. I had an aunt like that. She'll be all right."

I told him to take the money and leave the country.

He's got a place now in the Bahamas. I hear it's nice.

The communication device on my left wrist beeps once before I answer.

"Yes?" I whisper.

"Matty? Where are you?" Purple Panther is trying to keep the panic out of her voice. She's not doing a very good job.

"Hoboken," I say. "What's wrong?"

"It's Warrior. He's in trouble. Down in the Amboys. Calutron."

NOW

We've been at this for over two hours. Calutron is worn down, winded, but still has plenty of fight left in him. The same can't be said for me.

I've done enough damage that another hero should be able to finish him off.

Whatever dark force Professor Majestic infused him with is fading. When Calutron hits me now there's no more purple electricity. Just pain.

If I could just get some help...

It's a big "if."

It's a big world with lots of problems and even more monsters.

I don't think anyone is coming.

Calutron knows he doesn't have to hurry. I sit wheezing and leaden, seven broken ribs, lungs filled with blood, and arms too spent to even defend myself.

He winds up. I grimace.

We both freeze.

Something moves through the warehouse – a blur of light and wind that sends yellowed newspapers flying everywhere.

Lady U-boat hovers just outside a broken warehouse window, her yellow gloves clenched into fists.

She shouldn't be here but then there's a lot about my family that's impossible.

Her eyes find mine and I read the concern there: I don't look very good.

She blinks back tears. I don't think she's ever seen me bleed.

A moment: she sets herself.

She gives me a wink to let me know everything is going to be okay.

"Calutron," she says, "would you care to step outside?"

The behemoth forgets me and hurtles towards her. With what's left of my strength, I follow.

She hits.

She flies.

She throws.

I feel my power coming back at her side.

We are mighty.

Together.

The bad guy doesn't stand a chance.

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