



jersey devil press

issue fifteen december 2010

WORK SUCKS

Jersey Devil Press

December 2010, Issue Fifteen

ISSN 2152-2162

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Table of Contents:

Editor's Note	3
The Carpenter, Aaron DiMunno	4
You Can Take the Boy Out of Jersey, Isaac James Baker	11
Gooseflesh, Jack Frey	19
Nimrod!, Cliff Young	24
Devil in the Details, Nicholas Rasche	36
One-Fourth, Walter Campbell	44

Editor's Note: Work Sucks

If there's any one thing that we can all agree on – regardless of gender, religion, politics, or sports team affiliation – it's that having to work for a living is complete bullshit. Whether it's wasting away in a cubicle or hunting Nazi zombies in the Arctic Ocean, having to do The Man's bidding just to collect a paycheck is not how we'd choose to live our lives if left to our own devices. And it is with that sentiment in mind that we present to you, through no calculated efforts of our own, Issue Fifteen of Jersey Devil Press.

We begin with "The Carpenter," by Aaron DiMunno, a heart-breaking story about a boy, his father, and the project he spends all his time on. Then it's "You Can Take the Boy Out of Jersey," by Isaac James Baker, a very personal and cautionary tale about what happens when parents' jobs move a Jersey boy to the strange, terrible land of Chicago. Next is Jack Frey's "Gooseflesh," the aforementioned zombie-hunting story, and Cliff Young's post-apocalyptic, bosses-are-always-kinda-tools-even-if-society-has-collapsed epic "Nimrod!" And then it's not one but two tales of demon-infested workplaces with "Devil in the Details," by Nicholas Rasche, and "One-Fourth," by Walter Campbell.

So there you go. Six stories, all making sitting on your ass and eating Cheetos a more compelling option than a life of hard work and toil. Because, let's face it, if it wasn't for the whole "starving to death" part, we'd all rather be unemployed.

— Eirik Gumeny

The Carpenter

Aaron DiMunno

BANG! BANG! BANG!

A hammer, outside, in the night.

Summer dusk has settled, thick and dark and damp in the trees and grass behind the distressed solitary blue-gray farmhouse where Joey Melluso lives. Now and then, phantom headlights flash rectangles of light between the staggered tree trunks that separate the backyard from the rural highway beyond. Yard bugs are making their music in the dark.

Every window of the forlorn home is illuminated, but it sits silent and still. On a well worn rug, in a tiny bedroom up the stairs, curly-haired Joey is playing with his Matchbox cars alone.

Each night Joey's mother Diedre makes sure to kiss him good-bye before she leaves. Deidre works nights down in town, serving beer in cans and thick glass mugs to old drunk guys with abandoned faces. And ever since the summer before last, just after Joey's mom vanishes in a swirl of lipstick and cigarettes, his dad, Frank, disappears too. Out the back of the kitchen, with a creaking slam of the torn screen door, to his workshop, an old barn-like shed.

Frank usually putters around for a short time after Deidre leaves. Messing with household repairs, looking at notebooks and loose scraps of paper marked with stuff that Joey doesn't understand, smoking nervously at the window. The smoke goes in his eyes but he never squints. Now and again he'll stare blankly at Joey with a wet woeful gaze before suddenly smiling out from under his mustache and turning away. Joey is old enough to know that something is wrong, but too young to have any idea what it is. Just feels the dread in his belly. Like climbing the basement stairs alone with the darkness chomping at his back.

It's his father's eyes that make Joey wish his mother was home.

Not long ago, on a muggy summer Sunday evening, Joey sat crying in the running car while his father tossed a knotted burlap sack of rocks and kittens into the pond down the road.

The kittens had been mewling nonstop and Joey could feel their ribs when he tried to calm them. But their mom – a calico mouse catcher named Pumpkin – wouldn't feed them. The veterinarian recommended a clean clinical death but charged more than Frank or Deidre could pinch from their pockets.

Joey recognizes the look in his father's eyes. It's the same look he had when he came back to the car that day and slammed it into gear. It makes Joey want to cry. So he spends the evenings in his bedroom until his dad comes in from the shed and sends him to bed.

Joey has a baby sister named Marisa. She makes him feel like crying too. The doctor found a brain tumor and now Marisa's face is all slouched and scrunched like a doll-sized old man. Her hair is falling out in patches, heightening her geriatric visage. Joey doesn't want to think about his sister. So he plays.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Joey quits his carpet car chase and shuts his bedroom light off. Miniature cars paused mid-wreck, he puts his hands in the dusty canal of old paint chips and dead bugs filling the open windowsill. The window screen adds a metallic sour to the thick current of night squeezing through its galvanized mesh. Joey presses his nose to the flex and air. It's the only way he can see the big shed out there in the dark.

Cracks and crevices in the wooden hodgepodge of planks that make up the walls of the outbuilding, unseen by daylight, expose themselves as a plexus of sharp bright slashes. When a slash dissolves and reappears, Joey knows it's his father moving around in there. He has no idea what his dad is up to every night. But Frank always brings Marisa with him.

Joey hasn't been allowed in the shed since his father started working in there all the time. He used to play out there, hiding under the workbench, loading caulking guns with tubes of construction adhesive to defend against the imaginary alien hordes assaulting his lunar outpost.

Two years ago, just before the end of the school year, his dad put a big rusty lock on the door and it stayed that way.

Joey remembers those last few weeks of school. They were learning about jobs and a policeman had come in to speak to the class about his occupation. The teacher asked each of the students to tell the class what their parents did for a living. When it was his turn Joey got excited and forgot all about his mother. He stood up and beamed at his classmates.

“My Daddy's a carpenter! He builds things.”

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The hammer again. From behind the plank walls, the toothy “zoop” of a handsaw biting into wood. Then nothing.

A few crickets begin to tune up and then the nighttime concerto begins.

Then, all at once, the whine and grind of a power drill obliterates the backyard insect orchestra.

The yard falls silent again.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

From beneath the barn door Frank's shadow licks the graveled earth and sharp stones of the short driveway. The door slides open and the ground turns a sickly mustard yellow. Frank stands silhouetted in the doorway, the angry glow of a cigarette swelling red one last time. Then the tiny point of flame arcs into the wet grass like a comet.

There had been a night last fall when Joey had been down in the kitchen, up on a stool, about to pour himself a glass of milk. His father came through the wooden screen door from the backyard carrying Marisa in her baby seat. She was asleep. Frank's formidable forehead of creases and dents was glistening with sweat

and his shirt was soaked with dark patches. He stopped short when he saw Joey at the counter and put the baby seat down.

"Whaddya doin' sneaking around the house at night?" Frank snatched the carton from his hands and smacked him on the back of the head. "Get back upstairs. I don't wanna hear it from ya muther."

Joey was stunned. His dad never hit him before. But he did as he was told and the glass sat empty on the counter.

Now Joey watches his dad crossing the midnight lawn toward the house and he's frightened of him. He isn't carrying Marisa.

Frank comes for Joey in his bedroom. Doesn't speak a word but takes him by the hand and leads him through the deep dark night of the backyard. The cuffs of Joey's pajama bottoms get wet and heavy and cold against his ankles. The dampness is shocking. Joey has never been out in the grass this late. Not after the dew.

Father and son reach the entrance to the workshop. Joey stands stock-still in his sailboat pajamas. He is momentarily blinded as his father opens the shed door and lets go of his hand. Frank walks into the light.

Joey's eyes slowly adjust to the bright light and the first thing he sees is his old go-kart in the corner. It looks burned.

Before Joey learned to ride a bicycle, Frank built him a go-cart out of plywood, using the wheels, axles, and steering apparatus of an old pedal-powered fire truck. He had used a hacksaw to cut the end from a silver pipe on an old canister vacuum and installed it at the back of the car like a tail pipe. He even transferred the rusty silver bell, tying it to a string so Joey could ring it racing down the hill.

The go-cart was too heavy for Joey, though, and Frank quickly grew tired of pushing the weight of all that wood and metal back up the hill for another go.

"I wish it had a engine," Joey had said to his dad after his last ride. But the car went to the back corner of the barn to be forgotten.

Joey moves his gaze from the go-cart and finally sees what his father has been building.

There, in the barn-like shed, on the cracked concrete floor, under the highest part of the disintegrating roof, stands a rocket. The rocket is made of wood. Frank is beaming up at his unlikely creation.

It looks like a cartoon. Or as if a 1950s' sci-fi landing party might emerge with helmets and laser guns. Joey's father helps him up the aluminum hardware store ladder leaning against the side of the craft. The rungs have ridges and Joey remembers his father holding the same ladder for him when he climbed onto the porch roof for a styrofoam glider gone astray.

The ladder leads to a small circular opening just below the nose of the rocket. The opening is sanded down and smoothed to perfection. No splinters. No sharp edges. The glow from the incandescent bulbs strung about on orange extension cords projects a perfect stage-light oval into the interior of the craft, directly onto Marisa. An old vaudevillian in a child's safety seat, she flails her little baby arms and a laugh burbles from her strangely septuagenarian face. Her right eye droops instead of carrying the smile.

"Give ya sister a kiss, Joey," says Frank from down below, his voice thick.

Joey climbs into the wooden rocket. Tears are on his cheeks. The interior of the craft, walled and floored with rough damp plywood, seems incomplete and desperate. It smells of sawdust and sweat like his father after a day of hard work.

It also smells of gasoline.

"Go on, we gotta get goin."

Joey kisses his sister on the cheek below her good eye. She spits and giggles. Frank prods him back down the ladder.

Joey is a zombie. He's out on the driveway. He feels the press of his father's mustache on his forehead and the heavy T-bone-steak weight of his father's calloused hand on the top of his head.

Frank goes back into the shed and closes the door. Joey doesn't know what to do. Warm pee soaks his pajamas against his legs. It turns cold in the night air and he stands there.

From behind the barn door he can hear his father's work boots clanking up the ladder and Marisa's distant muffled baby laughter... then the alarming clatter of aluminum on concrete. Silence returns and the insects get back to their music.

At first there is just a vibration, the ground and rocks trembling against his bare feet. The driveway is warm. It hasn't cooled much since the sun went down.

The rumbling quickly becomes a roar and there is a tremendous flash. An invisible wave hits Joey in the face and he is on his back, skidding across the wet. He can't grab a breath and his ears are ringing like he exploded a whole roll of cap gun ammo with a rock.

The shed nearly explodes as what's left of the roof blasts up and everywhere and the wooden rocket shoots out against the stars.

Joey just lays there, dumbfounded and sobbing in the grass.

The cartoon rocket ship is not a cartoon at all. It is real and it is made of wood. Almost immediately it catches fire and plummets back to the earth. The fireball drops like an apocalypse down behind the dense border of big trees that separates the backyard from the old turnpike.

There is a second explosion and a screeching of tires across that thick summer night. Then silence, before the bugs begin again.

AARON DIMUNNO likes putting words together and having sex and sleeping in a sunny bedroom. He's taking a break from New York City to do more of the words and sunny bedroom thing. Too much coffee makes him shake and shit. Right now there are squirrels fighting on a branch outside his window.

You Can Take the Boy Out of Jersey

Isaac James Baker

I quickly learned to apologize when people asked me where I was from. It just made things easier to get that out of the way early. It was obvious to the kids in school that I wasn't one of them. I said words like "dat" when pointing at something. My sentences were laced with "friggin'"s. I slurred my words together with the slick, lazy tone of Joe Pesci drunk on wine. Still, they asked, begging for the chance to jump on my response.

And I guess I don't blame them. I was the new kid in town. And my place of birth was an easy target. It's a big red bull's eye tacked onto the foreheads of everyone who hails from the most populated, polluted and thoroughly unpretentious state in the nation. Yep, I'm talking about Jersey.

I was thirteen when my father and mother, chasing after career opportunities, told me they were ready to uproot me, my brother, and my sister from our beach bum haven and move to Chicagoland.

Leave Belmar? I couldn't understand the notion. No one left Belmar. Especially not me. I was born in Belmar – which means "beautiful sea," by the way. It didn't have any hospitals – that would take up too much real estate that could otherwise be used for bars or billiard joints. I was born at home, in my mother's bed. And the house I was born in was two blocks from the beach.

That ocean was my home. The sand, the cold water, the jetties covered with crabs and barnacles, the splintered planks on the boardwalk. From May to September, I spent every hour I could at the beach, bodyboarding, skipping rocks, digging for sand crabs, jumping into the rough surf during high tide, collecting sea glass (sometimes just regular broken glass, jagged and shiny new). Sure, I got sick a few times a year from some bacteria or trash in the

ocean. Sure, the lifeguards would call everyone out of the water every couple of days when a mass of bacteria-infested red tide would drift in. There was always the inevitable dirty diaper, used syringe, or hunk of scrap metal that would wash up on the shore. My friends and I would run over to check out such items with Christmas morning enthusiasm.

Yeah, Belmar was a dump, but at least no one pretended that it wasn't. When no one worries about what other people think, they can calm down and enjoy what they've got, even if what they've got is just sand, shoreline and drunken vacationers from Brooklyn who puke all over the sidewalks every night.

Leaving Belmar meant I wouldn't be pulling broken glass out of my bare heels anymore. I wouldn't be stepping over used condoms on the way to the beach in the morning. I wouldn't have to worry about seaweed getting stuck underneath my balls anymore either. But I also wouldn't be sneaking out late at night to look through the windows of the rental houses on our block to see drunk girls undressing. I wouldn't be getting together with the neighborhood kids, filling empty beer cans with sand and throwing them at tourists' cars. I wouldn't be sneaking into the high surf during storms when the lifeguards wouldn't let anyone swim. I wouldn't be collecting shells or picking up starfish from the tide pools, letting their hundreds of tongues lick at my palm.

Instead of sticking around town, letting my early teen years drift by like the changing tides, we loaded down our vomit-colored Dodge Caravan and set out for the Midwestern plains. Moving at thirteen is hell enough as it is. And it's not like we were moving down the shore to Ocean City. No, we left Belmar for a place that, at least in the mid-nineties, had to be the richest, most Jewish, and most mind-meltingly boring suburb in the entire country.

Deerfield, Illinois. Where nothing grows unless sanctioned by a landscaping firm. Where construction crews work in the middle of the night so the residents don't have to see their dirty and scruffy faces. Where even at the public library you can't find

homeless people. Where bankers from the north side of Chicago go to hide from their misery in half-million dollar condos. Where cul-de-sacs reign. Where good times go to die.

A few days out of the van from the cross-country trip, I donned a pair of worn corduroys, a sun-bleached surf t-shirt, and a pair of two-tone Chuck Taylors and walked into the first day of the seventh grade at Alan B. Sheppard Junior High School. I was anxious to scope out the kids that populated this strange Midwestern land.

For the most part, I found the kids in my school to be about as interesting as a cross-sectioned map of Illinois' soil and bedrock. They were so damned simple! So clean! They all had the heavy-duty Land's End backpacks and gleaming shoes: Doc Martens, Nike Airs, Michael Jordans, Airwalks. They had unwrinkled shirts emblazoned with snazzy-sounding names like Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, Abercrombie and Fitch. Some company always seemed to be announcing its existence in huge letters on everything that these walking billboards wore. The only names I had on my shirts were Bob Marley and Don Mattingly. These kids' clothes were always spiffy and new. The best clothes I had were from the discount rack at The Gap. These kids all took the school bus or had their parents drop them off in shiny Cadillacs. I trudged over the railroad tracks to and from school. These kids lived in developments with names like Elk Run Gardens or Chesterton Fjords or something equally as ridiculous. I lived in a small house with splintered porch beams and peeling piss-colored paint that was sandwiched between a lumber yard and an abandoned factory that used to make Little Debbie dessert pastries.

They poked fun at my Converse All-Star shoes right away. A place where Chuck Taylors were actually the butt of jokes, not objects of worship? Where in the hell was I? They called me a bum because of my family's rundown Dodge Caravan, which was known around town for polluting the tree-lined Deerfield streets by spitting filthy, black smoke. When walking around town, or even

to and from school, I would frequently get stopped by cops in squad cars. They always looked at me like I was high when I told them I was just walking around, that I didn't have a particular destination in mind.

When I'd order a soda at lunch, the kids would smirk: "No *soda*. They only have pop." No one knew what pork roll was, but they were disgusted when I told them it was delicious when served on a Kaiser roll with eggs, cheese and ketchup. When I brought ham and cheese to school they'd mock me for eating a "filthy animal." It followed that I too was filthy. When I ate my p.b. and j. sandwiches during Passover, the kids — who all brought matzo and cheese sandwiches — would stare at me like I was peeing on their shoes. I'd never had a matzo before, so during Passover I asked a kid named Ethan if he would like to swap his matzo with turkey for my p.b. and j. on a hard roll. He told me that I could go to hell.

But I'll give them one thing, the kids at Alan B. Shepherd Middle School could be pretty damned witty with their Jersey bashing:

"Isaac's mom's driving? Hell, no, I'm not getting in her car! She's from Jersey!"

"That's right, you don't even think Gino's East is real pizza. You're from New Jersey, so you like those wimpy thin slices, all greasy and sloppy."

"Hey, for field trips growing up, did you guys go to the place in the tall grass where they whacked that guy in The Godfather? That was, like, the next town over from you, right?"

"Jersey? Aren't there lots of Irish out there. I'll bet your Catholic, too, right? Don't they, like, not even have bar mitzvoahs?"

It quickly became clear to me that I had one of two ways of trying to survive in this hostile new environment. Option 1: I could stick to being myself, the kid from The Dirty Jerz. I could retaliate, poke fun right back at these damn cornfielders for their Chicago-style "pizza," which everyone with a brain knows is just an

abomination, the messy bastard child of lasagna and some sort of tomato pie. I could keep calling it soda no matter how many kids giggled. This, of course, would result in me being branded the outcast, the uncircumcised misfit from The East.

Or there was Option 2: I could adapt. I could change. I could try to become one of... them.

I chose the latter option. I tried to mold myself into a Chicagoan. I cheered for the Bulls even though I didn't give a damn about basketball or Michael Jordan or Scottie Pippen. When other kids took off for the Indiana dunes during the summer, I joined them, even though those dunes had nothing on Long Beach Island, Cape May, hell, even Belmar. I went swimming with schoolmates in Lake Michigan, a shimmering blue body of water that was so clean it terrified me.

Pop. I even called it pop. I ran over that word hundreds of times in my mind until I engrained it into my East Coast psyche.

Eventually, my chameleon methods seemed to work. I made what could loosely be called friends at that school. A stricter definition would be "people I could be seen with at lunch tables." But, in seventh grade, that's not something you just pass up.

Over time, I found pretending to be someone else exhausting. I was not a Chicagoan, no matter how hard I tried to be. I was a Jersey Boy. I was made in the Garden State. (Yeah, that's right, Jersey's called The Garden State, not The Paper Mill State.) Out in Illinois, surrounded on all four flat sides by Jewel grocery stores and Old Style billboards, who was I? What the hell was I doing there? Transplanted from my cracked blacktop, my sand-swept home, I began to wonder if Deerfield's loamy soils were just too rich for me.

Still, I told myself, I was there. I had to do the best I could.

The first girl I dated — or "went steady" with, as they said out there in those days — was named Michelle, Michelle Something-or-other-stein. She was a rich Jewish girl with these pug-like puffy eyes and she was three inches taller than me. But

she had a nice rack and decent curves, which, again, in seventh grade, is not something you just pass up. I still don't know why she agreed to go out on a date with me. I don't think it was a pity date, maybe more of a curious sociological experiment she wanted to undertake. Our first date consisted of us making out in a parking lot behind a movie theatre. After a good minute or two, I slipped my hand up her shirt, making my move toward the bra strap. Out of nowhere, she pulled away from me and tried to strike up a conversation.

"So, you're from Jersey?" she asked, chuckling awkwardly, like she was desperate to get me talking about something, anything.

"Yeah," I huffed out as I slid my hand out of her shirt in defeat. What the hell was she doing? Here I was about to round second base and she wants to talk about where I grew up? What the hell is wrong with these people?

"I heard people from New Jersey have health and mental problems because of the stuff that washes up on the shore. They basically swim in toxic waste, you know?"

"Oh yeah?" I said, trying but failing to peel my eyes off of Michelle's boobies, which were bobbing mere inches from my face.

"Yeah. My mom told me that there's condoms and needles on the beaches, all this shit that they dump in the water up in New York."

"I saw a used tampon in the sand once," I said.

"Really? Gross!"

"It was all wet and soggy."

"And bloody?"

"Yeah."

"God, I bet you're so glad you got outta there!"

I laughed aloud. How wrong this girl was.

See, I had been hoping my tough East Coast roots would score me some street cred in Chicagoland. After all, I was a Jersey Boy and this was an affluent Jewish sleeper community with

country clubs and organic grocery stores, even in the mid-nineties, way before the organic thing became super hip. These kids all had Audis and Volvos just waiting for them to turn sixteen so they could wreck them after drinking a bunch of wine coolers in their friend's basement. Compared to these Chia Pet yuppies, I thought I'd seem edgy, maybe even a bit of bad ass. I thought this might help me get some action.

It didn't really work out that way. I never got a second chance to try for Michelle's tits. She dumped me the next day via a note written on ruled paper and passed underneath my desk during English class. It said: "Isaac, it's been fun. :-). But let's break up. K? Cool. Bye. Michelle. XOXO."

This set the tone for the rest of the semester. Months passed and I still never rounded second base. Rich Jewish tits still eluded me. So did any meaningful friendships. I hadn't been invited to join a schoolmate at temple, let alone attend a bar or bat mitzvah. It seemed every weekend someone was having a huge party, becoming a man or a woman, getting tons of money and presents. The kids would all come into school with personalized T-shirts announcing the mitzvahs they had attended. "I Rocked All Night @ Eugene Cohen's Bar Mitzvah! 9-20-95." "Betsy Orenstein Became a Woman and All I Got Was This Bat Mitzvah T-Shirt!" I felt like a loser in my sun-bleached Quicksilver threads. When I turned thirteen, no one noticed. No one wished me a happy birthday, not even my teachers. I brought some of my mom's homemade cupcakes into class, but nobody ate them, not even the fat-ass kids.

When I told some classmates that I couldn't go to Six Flags (they call it Great America out there, not Great Adventure like they do in Jersey) with them because my mom said she couldn't afford it, the last rich nail was driven into my East Coast coffin.

Option 2 had failed me. I had tried to squeeze myself into their uniform, but it didn't fit. I was now a boy without a tribe.

One Saturday that winter, I was perusing CDs at Best Buy. I bought an album by Less Than Jake, a punk-ska band from Florida

that I had followed for a year or two. *Losing Streak* was filled with a dozen or so poppy, punchy songs, one of which started off with a recording of what sounded like a 50s-style barbershop quartet. It went like this:

*I'm from New Jersey and I'm proud about it.
I love the Garden State.
I'm from New Jersey and I brag about it.
I think it's simply great.
All of the other states throughout the nation
may mean a lot to some,
but I'll pick to New Jersey
for New Jersey is like no other,
I'm glad that's where I'm from.*

I remember listening to that intro a dozen times as I walked along Deerfield Road, noticing how there were no empty beer cans or McDonald's wrappers littering the side of the street. I hit the skip back button on my Discman to hear it again and again from the beginning of the track. Finally, I listened to the song all the way through.

Of course, when Less Than Jake kicked in after these proud New Jersey brothers of mine finished their little ditty, the tone shifted drastically. The song, after all, is titled "Never Going Back to New Jersey."

Well, I thought, I sure as hell am.

ISAAC JAMES BAKER was born in Belmar, New Jersey, in 1983. He grew up surfing and causing trouble on the Jersey Shore long before words like "Snookie" and "The Situation" further diminished the Shore's already terrible reputation. He writes poetry, short stories, and novels, and is working on his master's degree in fiction writing from Johns Hopkins University. His novel, *Broken Bones*, the story of a young man's struggle in a psychiatric ward for anorexics, is forthcoming from The Historical Pages Company. He lives in Washington, D.C.

Gooseflesh

Jack Frey

Two minutes is a long time underwater. It was a dupe, right from the start, Konrad now realized. A plot to uncover the research program and maybe even to start a war. The fake scuba tank, with a gauge that always read *full*, even if there were just three breaths left. The phony GIs, with their perfect Midwestern, Corn Belt accents. And now, beneath him, in the black depths of the Arctic Ocean, the divers were circling.

The program, codenamed *Gooseflesh* and overseen by the Pentagon, had been in existence for three years. Here's what they knew for sure:

- 1. The Soviets had developed (accidentally discovered?) a way to revive the dead.*
- 2. Although the corpses regained some function, and were apparently capable of following orders, the necrotized flesh decayed rapidly.*
- 3. The Soviets had begun using the undead as divers beneath the polar ice cap, where the freezing temperatures maintained the bodies in a state of near refrigeration.*

With the permission of the Canadian government, a monitoring station had been built on the northern tip of Ellesmere Island, where the Navy could track the progress of the Soviets. Of course, this was particularly difficult, given the enormity of the polar region, the adverse weather conditions, the thickness of the ice, and the simple fact that when using sonar a single human body beneath the water, truly living or otherwise, is very difficult to distinguish from a beluga or a narwhal.

From time to time, the scientists and Navy personnel got lucky. They found one, trapped in the ice about sixteen miles off the coast. Probably a woman, or had been once. Its head was caught, locked in the ice, or else it might have just chewed through its ankles or wrists to get free, like a fox in a trap. But the thing must have had some sort of temperature sensor, or else it was just that sensitive to heat, because as soon as they had chopped it free and dragged it into the station, it turned black and began to rot. Within five minutes, the corpse stopped twitching, and after that the meat turned to stinking paste.

While the scientists could be sure of nothing, there was a lot of speculation back in Washington. The Pentagon believed that Uncle Joe was at the top of it all, that Stalin himself had authorized the program. He was reputedly obsessed with the paranormal, and had built a psionic resonance parabola on Severnaya Zemiya. But President MacArthur swore it was Rasputin himself who oversaw the operation. He claimed that Rasputin had never been killed, or maybe had, but then turned himself into a zombie, possibly as early as 1922. MacArthur had been elected on a solid majority after he turned the strip along the Yalu River between North Korea and China into a radioactive wasteland, and anything he said carried a lot of weight, especially for a project like *Gooseflesh*.

But none of that mattered especially. Not now. At least Konrad's gauss rifle was real, he knew that much. It was his own, a bearing model with a harpoon slide, not some fake handed to him by the people who had infiltrated the program. But it couldn't blow through three feet of ice.

How had it happened? he wondered. *How had the Russians got in? Or had they always been in, skunking the project right from the start?*

Seventy-three seconds had passed since the hole in the ice was sealed up behind him. Those three breaths had long since bubbled out of his lungs, floated up to the flat sheet above him that blotted out the sunlight. Konrad had imagined all this before, in

the warmth of his bunk at the station. He'd imagined it and dreamed about dying beneath the ice.

Konrad had a light, fixed to the end of his gauss rifle. He shone it down into the depths, swung it in slow circles. His diving goggles were fogging over. He thought he spotted a dull white object, far below him, moving fast. And even though Konrad knew he ought to fear the undead creatures that he would soon encounter, his mind was elsewhere. He was thinking about the Inuit woman that he'd met on the ice few days earlier, and the way that her long black hair fell across her round face. He wanted to kiss her, even now.

Suddenly, a noise that was impossible to ignore, impossible, impossible to think at all. At first Konrad thought it might be an earpiece, a bug in his ear, but the noise was inside his head, and only there.

single-recipient-message---omnilang---prepare-to-encounter

Telepathy. The Pentagon didn't know about this. The undead creature swam near enough to give Konrad a clear view, a milky-soft white texture to its naked body. The flesh along its back was almost all gone, scraped away, or eaten by fish, perhaps. Ribs and vertebrae, yellow like ivory. The thing turned its face towards him, and Konrad saw that its lips and eyelids were in tatters, fluttering in the icy current.

single-recipient-message---omnilang---disable-weapon

Konrad struggled to stay focused, to keep his head. He had to stay near the hole in the ice, even if the Russians had closed it over with a steel lid. There was no other way out. He gripped the rifle, gave the trigger a quick squeeze. In the moment before the steel bearing connected with the thing's head, the noise came again.

multi-recipient-message---omnilang---target-aggressive-full-assault

After that, the creature's head burst, dissipated in a fine cloud of bone and colourless tissue, no blood. The diver's body

went completely limp and began drifting slowly downwards, into the deep.

But now Konrad heard them, their telepathic voices muted across the distance. They were coming from all directions. Faster now, swimming like snakes beneath the ice. He spun, waved the light in a broad arc. A white shape. He fired.

This time he only caught the thing in the chest, and while its ribcage was now splayed open, it swam on. Another round, another ball bearing, and this time the creature's head shattered, the body motionless.

Beneath him now, another one, shredded fingers grasping at his boots. But he brought the rifle down quickly, fired point-blank into the thing's skull, kicked away the pulpy mess. The noise, from all sides.

multi-recipient-message---omnilang---consume

Everywhere, and no air. Lungs burning, blood pounding in his throat, eyes going dark. They were everywhere. Ninety-seven seconds and no air. Two more rounds, two imploded heads, the water thick with floating particulate. Konrad felt himself beginning to black out.

He was fumbling with the harpoon now, trying to slide the bolt back, to set it in position. But his fingers were numb. The things were all around him now, circling, coming up under him, snatching and clawing. Their limbs, their faces, lurching beyond the shaft of light, spongy and dead.

Konrad's eyes were closing, the hands at his ankles, his wrists, no air. One hundred and fifteen seconds. The rifle was moving down now, the light falling away from him as it slipped from his hands into the unseen depths. But on his face, on his mask, fingers.

One hundred and eighteen seconds. A shaft of white that swallowed up the sea. The steel lid was pulled away and sunlight poured into the hole. Two, then three splashes, lifeless bodies falling into the water, but this time, blood. The phony GIs, with

their perfect Midwestern, Corn Belt accents. Konrad felt the lip of the icy hole, and strong arms grabbing him. He felt the slick touch of the things below, shredding the newly deceased. One hundred and twenty seconds.

On the ice now, steam rose from his body. Konrad drew the Arctic air into his lungs, burning him, making him bleed. There were boots on the snow, people around him now, living people, and he lifted his face towards the sky. The Inuit, the ones he'd met on the ice, and they carried ancient Lee-Enfields. And then Konrad saw that she was there, too. The one with crow-coloured hair and beautiful face that was round like the moon.

“Gooseflesh” originally appeared on the website staticmovement.com. And by “appeared,” Jack means in the Douglas Adams sense of the word: “It was on display in the bottom of a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying ‘Beware of the Leopard.’”

JACK FREY lives in Winnipeg, Canada with his wife and two young boys. He plans to walk across Asia on foot, but is still searching for the perfect pair of hiking boots. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Shelf Life Magazine, Rose & Thorn Journal, Fractured West, and the Last Man Anthology, among others. Like many of us, he is currently working on his first novel. jackfrey.wordpress.com

Nimrod!

Cliff Young

Mr. Worthington is hurling chunks of machinery at me from the third floor window of what was once the light bulb factory. He is weak with hunger, so he has very little chance of hitting me. Most of what he throws lands in the pond. A lathe handle makes a huge splash ten yards from the shore, which scares the geese, which pisses me off.

Mr. Worthington used to be my boss. He owned the light bulb factory; probably still does, technically, if anyone's keeping track, which they almost certainly are not.

"My birds, you cocksucker!" he yells from the broken window. "Mine mine mine!"

He thinks he still owns everything on the island, but the truth is, nobody owns anything anymore. A flywheel bounces off a rock at my feet. If I thought it was worth the effort, I'd climb up there and ring his neck.

When the Canada Geese get scared off, they stay scared off, unlike the seagulls which come right back, as soon as you bring out some bait. I'm using a lizard femur attached to the end of a string. I toss it out into the pond, and when a gull swoops in, I stun it with a golf ball-sized rock. I dive into the water, and break its neck before it comes to.

In my former life, I was a Process Expediter at the light bulb factory, which occupied the building of the old Douglas Fir mill, on this island in the middle of Puget Sound. Of course, when I say the *middle of Puget Sound*, I mean that in the abstract sense, as in *the middle of nowhere*. I don't mean the geometric center, which, in a body the shape of Puget Sound would be next to impossible to calculate. I certainly wouldn't want to do it.

There is only one town on the island, consisting of about three hundred nearly identical wooden houses built in the 1890s for employees of the old mill, and more recently occupied by Ned Worthington's workforce. Of course now most of the houses are empty, and the town has become overgrown. Some of those who remain have kept their houses and yards up, but mostly you can't tell the abandoned houses from those still occupied.

I've got three lizards and two seagulls in my bag. People say the lizards taste like chicken, but it's been so long since I've had chicken, I couldn't say. It's been so long since anyone's had chicken, I don't see how anyone can say. I guess they're just trying to put a good face on it, and I can't blame them for that. There's so little meat on them anyway, there's not much point in saying what they taste like. If you get enough of them, though, they make a pretty good stew.

The seagulls definitely do not taste like chicken.

The thing seagulls have going for them, though, is that there seems to be an inexhaustible supply. Unlike the Canada Geese, which are almost all gone, and the ducks which went first. The ducks never had a chance. In my former life as a Process Expediter, I never knew the origin of the term, "sitting duck." Now I do.

I get home with my sack, and Viv is glorious. I want to take her right there, the returning hunter claiming what's his, but Max is there as well, which makes me tense. I go around back, light the fire, and prepare the lizards and gulls. Viv won't help, she'll stay inside with Max. I can hear them laughing as I skin and pluck.

The next morning I wake up next to Viv, and I slide close to her. I trace the contour of her hip with my right hand.

"Norman," she says, and brushes my hand away, so I leave.

On my way out, I wonder why I stay on the island. I've been going on the assumption that however bad it is here, it's worse on the mainland, but sometimes I think I'd like to see for

myself. I could build a boat, I could make it to the shore. Could it really be any worse? One of the last things I remember – from when we still had electricity – was images on television of nearly deserted cities and riots in the Food Camps. Anarchy and perdition on a truly terrifying scale. It looked as if food was just as scarce on the mainland, but with more hungry people fighting for it.

There has been no news in over a year, and no one who's left the island in that time has returned. For all anyone knows, they've been eaten by hungry mobs.

But what meaning is there to an existence which consists of hunting lizards and seagulls, hoping to impress a woman who's ass I'm no longer allowed to touch?

I spend the morning over by what used to be the diner, and catch five lizards, enough for a small stew. As a boy, I used to hunt these quick little reptiles with my friends. We'd catch them, hold them in our hands, turn them over and rub their blue bellies for luck. Catching something so wild and reptilian and holding it in your hand can make you feel that you are part wild yourself, and I remember finding a thrill in that.

As an adult, I would sometimes try to catch one of these things, just to see if I could still do it. I never could. I'd see one sunning itself on a rock by the side of the road, and I would recall the technique from my childhood. I'd sneak up as close as I dared, barely moving before I sprung. But before I made my move, as if it could sense what I was up to, the lizard would dart. It would happen like this every time. I had become too old or slow, or maybe it was something more primal, something I'd lost along with my childhood; the ability to move through the world as a wild thing, matching the natural rhythms of other wild things.

During the recent traumatic events, I had changed. Of necessity, I had become reacquainted with the rhythms of nature

which I had known as a child. I could hunt, I could survive, I could kill.

I eat a lizard for lunch, then head over to the pond to try again for a goose.

There is a pond in front of the old light bulb factory, and the remaining Canada Geese can sometimes be found there.

The pond is wide, and back before people stopped tending it, it was nice, with fountains and manicured lawns gently sloping to its rocky banks. Now, of course, it's reverted to a wild state, just like everything else. Long grass and leafy bushes choke its shoreline. If you look at it from the right angle, it could be a moat, and Ned Worthington could be the insane ghost of a long dead king, refusing to quit his abandoned castle.

I find three geese floating asleep off-shore a few yards, and I creep out from the trees. I find a rock the size of a rotweiler testicle, but as I'm about to throw, a barrage of ball bearings comes down from the third floor window. The ball bearings are not even close, but the geese scatter, back to Canada for all I know.

"Fuck you!" I yell up at the third floor, at the shadow behind the broken glass. All I hear is laughing.

Before The Collapse, I had hardly ever talked to him. Ned Worthington: owner and sole proprietor of Worthington Lightworks, the eighth largest light bulb manufacturer in the northwest. Not only did Ned Worthington own the factory, he owned the entire island. The mill had been closed for years when he bought the whole shebang, including the town and everything in it. He moved his father's light bulb factory into what was the old mill, and rented houses to his workers, who had no choice but to shop from the stores he owned. Far from any local government, and surrounded by navigable water, he found the island a perfect location for a factory.

Of course now that there's no electricity, light bulbs are useless, and Ned Worthington can go fuck himself.

I really wanted to get a goose, because it would impress Viv, and that's still important to me. It's the only way I can compete with Max, show them all who's wife she still is. I think the only reason she sticks with me in this new paradigm is that I keep bringing home seagulls and lizards, which are at least better than what everyone else has settled for. At least they still look like seagulls and lizards, unlike the fish, with their lumps and appendages and extra fins. There are clams, but they're disgusting. They ooze a sort of foamy bile, and anyone who has been desperate enough to eat one spends the next three days recovering. There are wild berries and mushrooms, but both are risky.

There were a small number of mammals on the island, but not for long. The last time I saw a squirrel, I ate it.

Eventually we turned on the dogs. They're so trusting, they broke your heart. When they look at you with those eyes, and you see the trust replaced by hurt and betrayal, you could die. But you've got to eat, so there you have it. The cats were quick to catch on. They're nervous to begin with, and most are one crisis away from a feral state on a good day. It was in the hunting of cats, driven by my own insane hunger, that I learned to survive in this new world.

Most people tend gardens. They grow the same things they grew before, mostly squashes and tomatoes, and there are still a few apple trees on the island. But crops are sporadic, and everybody is weak from lack of protein.

I come home with four lizards and three seagulls. Viv has been in the garden. Her hair is up, but loose strands hang down around her face, which is flushed from work and sun. She is magnificent. She is what keeps me going. I show her the seagulls and lizards, and she is grateful, if not impressed.

Max walks in with an otter, holding it by the tail, its legs and head dangling. Now Viv is impressed.

Max is impressively large, even with the lack of food, and powerful. But I can't see him catching an otter. I suspect it washed ashore already dead. Viv looks at Max the way she should look at me, the way she *would* look at me if I'd bring home a goose. I wish Max would stick to fishing, bringing in the odd mutant salmon.

I try hard to remember why Viv married me. Physically, she's out of my league; statuesque, curvy, poised. But a Process Expediter is a catch, certainly more of a catch than a Furnace Boss, which is what Max was in his former life.

A Process Expediter oversees several Furnaces, so technically I was Max's superior, although that distinction was only ever on paper.

Every week I would go down to Max's Furnace on the factory floor. Max would give me his report for the previous week, and I would give him his agenda for the next. And every week, he would call me Nimrod in front of his crew.

I would routinely ignore this, and pretend I heard "Norman." But one week I confronted him.

"It's *Norman*."

"Yeah, *Norman*. That's what I said."

"You said *Nimrod*."

"Norman, Nimrod," he winked at his crew, who were all hiding smiles.

"Look," I said, "if you mean to insult me, you could do better. Do you even know what 'Nimrod' means?"

I waited for a response from Max, but he just kept smiling. So I continued.

"Nimrod was a great hunter from the Old Testament."

I had meant this to be a stinging rebuttal, but Max's crew seemed to think that this was even funnier.

"OK, boss," Max said, smiling his contempt. As I turned and walked away I could hear snickering, which grew to laughter as I climbed the stairs. The factory floor is open to the ceiling, with open offices ringing the second and third floors. I could hear them

laughing from my office. I kept my door open, to show that this did not bother me.

I guess Viv figured I was going places, places a Furnace Boss could never take her. But I always suspected that she had preferred a burly and handy guy like Max. She would visit Max on the floor during her breaks, and I could hear them laughing from my office. As she realized that I was not going places after all, she spent more time with Max, and not just at the factory.

After we married, she quit her job in payroll, and eventually things around my house started becoming mysteriously repaired. When our doorbell stopped working, I took it apart. It was more complex than I had expected, and I had planned to go to the hardware store the next day. But when I returned home from work, it was all put back together and working.

"Oh, Max stopped by," Viv said with a smile. "It was giving you so much trouble, I had him take a look at it."

Eventually, whenever something around the house needed fixing, Viv would wave me off, saying, "Leave it, dear, I'll have Max take a look at it. He's more, you know, *inclined*." And when I got home from work the next day, it would be fixed. On the evenings after Max fixed things around my house, Viv would smile absently and hum.

One night I ripped the cord out of the vacuum cleaner. The next day, I snuck away from the factory and hid around the side of the house. Max came by at a quarter past noon, and for half an hour I listened to Viv moan through the walls of my own house. When I returned that night, the vacuum was fixed.

There are no secrets in a factory town, and every day I had to work with people who knew what Max was doing with my wife. The island had one market, one diner, one bar. I could go nowhere to get away. And at home, there was Viv, in all her splendor, not giving me the time of day.

The next morning, when I set out, it's raining. I'm intent on impressing Viv, which means doing better than Max, which means I need to kill a goose.

The house at the end of the block is marked by large pyramids of pinecones in the front yard. David and Meg live there. David was a Mold Operator, and Meg was in filaments. Meg is gently stacking pinecones onto one of the larger pyramids, and David is slowly dismantling one of the smaller ones. When he takes a cone from the pyramid, he pulls it apart, removes the seeds, then tosses the rest onto a fire which crackles and spits smoke up into the falling rain.

David and Meg have convinced themselves that the world is in the process of ending. Since The Panics began, they have seen each event as a sign. As people left the island, Meg and David looked around at those remaining, with sadness. They referred to them as being "called home", even though it was obvious that people were leaving by boat. And as the island's population dwindled, they became anxious, like school kids on the playground as they realize they may be the last to be picked for a team. I've had my suspicions that Meg and David have not been too careful about which berries and mushrooms they eat.

As I pass the last house, onto the main road, I hear drumming. It's loud, inconsistent and amateurish, as if someone with no experience were banging on something hollow. Without warning, Edna from shipping comes spinning from behind a hedge. She's wearing absolutely no clothes and moving awkwardly to the rhythm of the drumming, and seems unaffected by the rain.

"Oh," she says when she sees me, and stops spinning.
"Hello."

"Hi," I say as I nod back to her. The drumming continues.

"I'm sorry, I didn't expect anyone would be out in this weather," she says, looking a little self-conscious, but not nearly as much as you'd expect, given the circumstances.

"Yes," I say nervously, unsure what else to say.

"We finally figured out how to make wine out of apples," she says, laughing. "We're celebrating our first batch."

"Congratulations," I say.

"Would you like to join us?"

She starts to move again to the drumming.

"Sorry," I say. I'm thinking of Viv. "I've got work to do."

When I arrive at the pond, it's empty of birds, not even a seagull. I search the bushes choking the shore for sleeping or sheltering birds, but I find none of any kind. The rain has been increasing steadily, and the pond roils with drops. I look up at the factory, its weathered planks taking in the rain as they have for a hundred years. There's no movement in the window, no silhouette, and no sound but the rain on the water.

I hear a clap of thunder, and I look up as the rain surges. I think about calling it a day, when I look across the pond and see a great swan. It's pure white, and easily larger than any goose I've ever seen. I have no idea where it came from, I figure it may have been blown here by the storm. I grab a rock from the shore, and I stand staring across at the bird. The rock itches in my hand, but the swan is out of range. It turns its neck and looks at me, then with a flurry of its wings, it bursts from the water and flies through the broken window on the third floor.

I walk around the pond to the factory entrance. It's not locked. I'm immediately confronted by the ruins of what was once so familiar. The factory looks like it's been turned upside down and shaken.

Other than the rain, the place is deathly quiet. I walk up the stairs, which is strewn with debris. Broken glass is everywhere, some of it ground so fine it's almost a powder.

I reach the second floor, and Ned Worthington is standing there with a conduit bender in his hand. A conduit bender is a substantial piece of steel, used for bending metal pipe. It's a medieval looking piece of equipment, mounted on the end of a three-foot handle, and he's holding it like a two-handed battle club.

"Get out," he says.

"Get out of my way, Ned."

"That's 'Mr. Worthington,'" he hisses.

"You're lucky it's still 'Ned,'" I say, and I move forward as if he's not there.

I can feel Ned coming at me before he even moves. I step aside, and the conduit bender whips past my head and crashes into the floor. Before Ned can recover, I'm on him. The rock that was meant for the swan is still in my hand, and I crash it into his temple. I know before he hits the ground that he's dead.

I look down at him. How sad, I think. He had so much in his previous life, that when the world changed, he could not let go. He had clung to his factory as if it still gave him the power it once had. What a waste. He could have spent this new existence building a new life, rather than repeating the old life into meaninglessness.

I climb the stairs to the third floor, the rock still in my hand, dark with Ned's blood. The swan is in Ned's office, sitting on the sill of the broken window, overlooking the pond. It looks at me as though it has been waiting for me to arrive. It knows what I'm thinking, but it doesn't move. We stare at each other across Ned's office, well within range of my rock.

As I'm staring at the swan, I realize what I have to do.

As I walk back to town, the rain comes down harder. I hear drumming as I turn off the main road and into the neighborhood, but now the single drum has been joined by several others, all

combining with the rhythm of the rain, which beats loudly on everything it hits.

I walk past David and Meg's house, their pyramids of pinecones smoldering unattended in the rain, smoke rising and dancing with the wind.

I turn down a side street, and walk to the end. Max's house is empty. I walk out back, underneath a wooden overhang which provides shelter from the rain. Beneath the overhang are concrete paving stones, set into the earth, as a patio. Weeds grow about knee-high between them. I find a shovel in Max's garage, and as I wait for Max I dig. I dig up the concrete stones, and I set them aside. In the center of what used to be Max's patio, I dig a pit.

By midnight the rain has stopped, and the pit is eight feet long and four feet deep. I line it with patio stones, and I tear down the overhang. By sunrise, I've reduced the timbers to firewood, and I've built a roaring fire in the pit.

Max returns in the middle of the next day. I'm sitting next to the fire, which spews smoke up past where Max's overhang used to be. Max looks at me, furious. I return his look calmly. I know where he's been.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Norman?" he yells.

"It's Nimrod," I say, standing.

Max is in a rage, almost unable to think. He crosses his dug-up patio, and I hurl the rock, still stained with Ned's blood. It hits Max in the neck. He staggers, unable to breath. I'm on him before he can react.

By midday, the sun is out and the fire has burned down to coals. I use the shovel to spread the coals around the pit, and I add another layer of stones. I throw Max in, then another layer of stones.

It's dark when I return home. Viv is startled when I walk in the door, but even though I've been gone for two days, she doesn't ask me where I've been. I light a fire, and I feed her.

CLIFF YOUNG attended college at The University of California at Santa Barbara where he studied economics. Since then he has made his living (legally) as a waiter, ditch digger, cartographer, and software engineer, and (illegally) as an undocumented laborer in England. Cliff now lives with his wife, two children, a dog and a cat, in a house with a picket fence in Berkeley, California. Cliff's stories have appeared in *Tickled by Thunder* and *Bartleby Snopes*. His favorite food is fried chicken.

Devil in the Details

Nicholas Rasche

It was a slow day in my office, which was about typical. Lately, they'd all been slow days. In order to pass the time, I'd started to ascribe them personalities. Monday was friendly, but a little pushy. Tuesday was surly, Wednesday dull and Thursday and Friday had formed a tightly-knitted clique and tended to be a bit standoffish. When I found myself abbreviating their names to Joe, Beth, Sally, Steve and Mark, I knew that I was in serious need of a distraction. It wasn't too long after that that the Lord provided one. But then, in His infinite wisdom, He usually does.

My name is Father Francis Blake, MBA, and I'm a Corporate Exorcist.

The client was a ferrety-looking HR rep from the insurance industry. Name of Hollis, or so he said. Hey, it wasn't for me to judge. That was for our all-knowing and compassionate God to do. I lit a cigarette and gestured to the empty chair sitting across from my desk. My attempt to suggest by my nonchalant attitude that I was a highly sought after consultant with more clients than there were hours in Steve was slightly undermined by the inch-thick layer of dust on the chair, desk, calendar, filing cabinet and phone. Still, I think he appreciated the effort.

"What's the problem, Hollis?"

"Well, I don't know quite how to begin, I mean, it all sounds so implausible, really, and I hate to..."

He stammered off into silence. Luckily, I'd seen this sort of thing before. I reached underneath the desk and pulled out my portable screen. Placing it between us, I gave him a quick blast of the old Latin.

"... In nomine patris. Amen."

"Amen," he echoed automatically.

“OK, my son. Let me have it.”

That old-school confessional charm worked its magic, and he spilled. Seemed that the Financial Operations Department had been having troubles for months. The usual signs – low morale, missing office supplies, the discovery of the decapitated body of a mail clerk in the copy room – but the alarm bells had really been raised at last week’s team meeting. HR had been able to obtain a copy of the minutes. Hollis passed them through the grill. I examined them.

- Minutes of previous meeting read. Chair asked if minutes were accepted.

- Minutes accepted (unanimous)

- Business arising from minutes of previous meeting:

(1) Need to formulate clear policy re: tea room cleaning roster. Referred to committee.

*(2) **Conquest of earthly realms for the glory of our Dark Lord.***

(3) Information packs for display at W.A.F.P. conference arrived. Volunteers requested to man booth.

“W.A.F.P.?”

Hollis looked up, startled.

“Uhh... Worldwide Association of Financial Professionals, Father. It’s an industry body.”

“That’s all?”

He looked confused. I prompted him.

“We Appreciate Fiery Perdition?”

No reaction.

“The secret password of the Ancient Order of Satanic Comptrollers? Who from since the dawn of time have plotted to— Oh, forget it. Go on.”

No-one appreciates traditional wisdom anymore.

Hollis coughed and continued.

Soon after the meeting in question, things had taken a serious turn for the worse in Financial Operations. The receptionist had begun greeting all visitors with a painful and often disfiguring volley of staple-gun fire, incoming calls had been diverted to a mysterious voicemail message that, played backwards, directed the caller to investigate the services offered by the website www.yourmothersucks****inhell.org, and the Internal Audits Team had arrived unannounced at midnight at the Chief Financial Officer's house and asked some extremely personal questions about his children's virginity before departing with his youngest daughter muttering darkly about the need to "sacrifice for the good of the company."

"We also think the Accounting Department has been turned into zombies... but of course, it's difficult to tell," Hollis concluded, his face a mask of despair that was illuminated by the faintest ray of hope as he raised his head and looked me in the eye.

"So, Father... Do you think you can help us?"

I reached into the left-hand desk drawer for my flask. After sucking back a hit of non-vintage communion wine I offered it to Hollis. He declined.

"Hollis," I said, "I won't lie to you. Your company has been deeply infiltrated by the Prince of Lies. Even now, the infection is working its way through your org chart. It may have even reached the Board, or—" Instinctively, Hollis crossed himself. "—Yes, even the CEO himself."

"Herself," he timidly ventured.

I shuddered. "Then may God have mercy on us all."

"But will you take the case?"

He was persistent. The rent on the office was three months overdue. And, after all, I had a vocation.

"I'll need a spare conference room, an overhead projector, six candles and a leather-bound copy of your Mission Statement. And you'd better give me half an hour to brief Security. This could get ugly."

“Now, what makes a team effective? Any ideas?”

Amid the muttering and the sound of shuffling feet, a guttural voice rasped out.

“Fool! Your pitiful God is dead!”

I gave them an authoritative glare to mask my nervousness. There’s nothing like being the only thing standing between the exit and a dozen demonically possessed accountants, systems engineers, actuaries and assorted administrative personnel to make you reflect on the difficulties of the consultant’s life.

I nodded to Hollis, who stood at the back of the room shaking. A lucky shot from one of the guys from tech support had sprayed his suit coat with rather lurid-coloured vomit, and he was apparently feeling worse for the experience. He managed to change the slide.

A wail broke out from the assembled mob.

“Now,” I continued, “as you can see, the Vatican Consulting Group identifies four key points constituting the Crucifix of Empowerment. Buy-in... Pro-activity... Continuous improvement... and, most important of all...” I grabbed the receptionist by the hair and pressed the Mission Statement against her forehead. “Have fun!”

She gave a high pitched squeal. I felt the sweat beading on my brow. I was getting too old for this game. Still, it was too late to stop now.

“Have fun! Have fun! The power of Christ compels you!”

She slumped to the floor. The security guards approached and dragged her out of the conference room.

Eleven more to go. It was going to be a closely-run thing. I only had ten slides left. Perhaps it was time for a change of approach.

“All right,” I said, lighting the censer and letting them have a dose of incense. “Time for a little role-playing exercise. You,” I said, peering at the nearest employee’s nametag, “Azphodel the Vile, would you mind getting up here?”

Shooting me an angry glance from his glowing red eyes, Azphodel — otherwise known, as I later found out, as Daryl from Accounts Receivable — got to his feet to a thin smattering of applause.

“OK. Now for this exercise, I’m going to be a customer with a problem and I want you to try and achieve a resolution that satisfies all parties. I’ll give you a minute or two to prepare.”

I left him steaming — quite literally, as an acrid vapour was rising from his body and slowly filling the room with an almost unbearable rankness — and whispered my instructions to the security guards.

“All right. Ready?”

He let loose a string of Etruscan obscenities, but I could tell his heart wasn’t really in it.

“Here we go then.” I took a deep breath and began weaving the censer around him.

“I took out a home and contents policy a month ago *in spiritu sancti* with coverage for fire *in excelcis deo* theft *gloria mundi gloria domine* and flood *in nomine patria*. With a total assessed value not less than \$100,000 *in nomine Jesus* but not greater than \$500,000 *ave Maria* am I entitled to claim depreciated premium deductions for the previous financial year without affecting my entitlement to claim in event of accident occurring during the designated 90 day cooling off period *gloria in excelcis deo?*”

Smothered in incense and battered with Latin, the confused Azphodel the Vile / Daryl from A.R. did exactly as I expected and sought guidance from his master, casting his imploring gaze on —

“Hollis?”

The mild-mannered HR rep smiled impishly and unfurled his vast, batlike wings. His voice boomed like thunder and dripped like honey.

“Yes, my fine meddlesome priest. You’ve bedevilled — if you’ll excuse the phrase — me for the last time. Welcome to your deathbed! Minions! To work! A tasty virgin’s soul to the first one that brings me his head!”

A little overdone, I thought, but the Dark One’s predictable propensity for hyperbolic grandstanding had won me valuable time. I smashed the censer over Azphodel’s head, breaking it open and sending plumes of thick smoke spiralling to the ceiling, where it combined with the demon’s own foul vapours to bring about a downpour.

God’s own pure, cleansing rain. Or, at least, a sprinkler system I had secretly arranged to have filled with holy water earlier in the afternoon. It never pays to show all your cards too early.

The shrieking and howling of the Financial Operations Department rose to an ear-piercing crescendo and suddenly ceased as eleven bodies simultaneously hit the tastefully-carpeted floor, leaving me and the Beast that called itself Hollis locking gazes across the mist-filled atmosphere of Conference Room B.

I won’t say that the old heart didn’t race. But the rush of pure adrenaline that comes from staring the embodiment of wickedness in the eye is what got me into this game in the first place. I had the Lord on my side. Plus two heavily-armed security guards named Flaherty and O’Shaunnesy. I pulled out my Mace of Righteousness.

“OK, boys,” I cheerfully urged the products of four hundred years of ruthlessly dogmatic Catholic education. “Let’s get him.”

I was right, of course. It got ugly.

Standing outside the corporate offices of Grossman, Gaynes, Mammon & Son, watching the ambulance pull away with Flaherty safely, if obliviously, stored in back, the faithful O'Shaunessy by his side, I puffed on my cigarette meditatively. True, the Lord of Lies had been routed, in at least his most recent manifestation — the Hollis-thing was now a rapidly melting pile of pitch-black goo that was probably going to pose all kinds of problems for the night cleaning shift — but the struggle of Good versus Evil is eternal. Even in the hour of our triumph, we —

“Excuse me. Are you an employee?”

I turned around. Staring at me with an attitude so glacial as to be under severe threat from the encroaches of global warming was a painfully well-dressed young couple. The woman had spoken. I exhaled a thin plume of smoke in her direction.

“Not any more, my daughter.”

“Oh. Well, anyway, you can't smoke here.”

Her companion smirked and snorted simultaneously, a difficult feat to accomplish but one which did nothing to raise him in my estimation.

“Just call Security, Fiona,” he said.

“I will.”

To spare them the inconvenience of a long wait, I dropped the cigarette and ground it beneath my feet.

“You'd better not leave that butt there, either. It's illegal. And disgusting.”

Patience, I bent down, picked up what had until recently been a perfectly good three-quarters of a cigarette and tossed it into a nearby bin.

“That's better.”

“Come on, Fiona. Before he asks us for some money. Besides, we've got a meeting with Jeremy in five.”

With one last withering glance, they turned, locked step, and strolled into the building.

The fight against evil is ever-present and never-ending. All victories are ultimately Pyrrhic, fewer and further between for an old warhorse like myself, and hot on their heels inevitably comes the letdown of life as we know it. In the end, there's nothing you can do but accept the facts, and move on.

On the other hand, I still had the mace.

I turned around and followed them to the lift.

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One-Fourth

Walter Campbell

“What the hell are you doing?” Kelly asks.

I don’t respond right away, even though she has all the right in the world to ask me what the hell I’m doing crouched behind the copier with a huge kitchen knife.

What I’m doing is waiting to ambush Ryan Miller, but I can’t tell her that because she’ll just discourage me.

“Oh my God, don’t do it, he has super strength,” or, “Butm Will, he’s got guns built into his shoulders,” or, “Be careful because he can control wooden objects with his mind.”

But sometimes you just gotta be like, “Listen I’m going to kill this monster of a coworker because someone’s got to or he’ll keep ruining the lives of his employees until the end of the world, or at least until this failing sports drink company files for bankruptcy, and we’ll never get a chance to date.”

I first met Ryan Miller three months ago at the interview for my current position as a sales rep.

“Why,” Ryan asked me, leaning over the large table between us like a leopard leaning out of a tree, “would I want you on my team? What are you going to bring to this job that no one else can?”

“Determination. Dedication. And dead serious attention to detail,” I spat back. I felt so full of shit.

“Goddamnit, I like that answer. That answer gives me an erection!”

Ryan jumped up and swept his 115 pound, 5'5" body across the room. I took his hand firmly in mine, and shook it, looking down at the elated little man before me.

"You've got the damn job, you definitely do. Now, I want you here tomorrow morning at 6 a.m. We start early because we sell sports drinks, and do you know the one quality that doesn't sleep in?"

"No, I don't."

"Athleticism. There are athletes out there right now, and they need some Goddamn sports drinks, don't they?"

I wanted to shrug, and say something like, "Maybe, but they could also just have water and a snack, right?" But knowing that an answer like that would get me fired only minutes after I'd been hired, I told him that hell yeah they needed sports drinks.

Ryan ushered me out, telling me multiple times not to hit my head on the doorframe, even though I'm only 5'10".

"You're a tall son of a bitch, you know that?"

"I guess I am. I never really thought of myself as that tall."

"No, trust me, you're tall. Like the Jolly Green giant, except there's no way I'm letting you peddle vegetables. High fructose corn syrup and caffeine are as close as we come to vegetables, and really what's better for an athlete: vegetables or sports drinks?"

"Well..."

"Exactly, sports drinks. Glad you're on board with our company mission. See you at six."

When I showed up at 6 a.m., Ryan wasn't at his desk. Instead, I was blessed with quite possibly the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. She glowed like a fake tan, except that she didn't have a fake tan; what I mean is that she metaphorically glowed as though she were covered in spray-on tanning product. Looking at her made me feel like I was drunk on tequila shots, and this rap song with a totally excellent bass was playing in the background, and I was staring at a lake coated with a layer of dusk sun. Or something.

"Hi, I'm Will. Ryan told me to be here at six. I'm new," I said nervously, extending my hand. She didn't shake it.

"I know," she sighed. "I'm Kelly. Will put me in charge of getting you set up this morning, so it's because of you that I had to wake up two hours early."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know he was going to make you come in early for me," I stumbled, still too stunned by her tequila-spray-ontan-like beauty to come up with anything better.

"Forget it," she said, groggily rising from her seat. "It's Ryan's fault, not yours."

"What's Ryan's fault?" an older man, somewhere in his fifties, asked from the doorway.

"Nothing, Dave. Just complaining about the time of day," Kelly said.

"6 a.m., time to sell sports drinks. That's what I always tell Ryan. Good employee that one; soaks up my lessons like a vampire soaking up blood, or paper towels soaking up my spilled whiskey before my wife gets home and yells at me for being an alcoholic, you know what I mean Wilbert?" Dave said, extending his hand.

"Actually, it's William," I said, shaking it.

"Sorry about that. Ryan told me it was Wilbert. I think. Regardless, welcome aboard. You ready to sell some sports drinks, Bill?"

"You bet I am, sir. And actually, I go by Will. Full name's William, and I go by Will."

Dave winked.

"I hear you, Willy."

"Thanks, and actually it isn't Willy, it's—"

"Sure, Warren," Dave said, and then turned to Kelly. "Now, Kerry, I'll be in my office if you need me, but I'll be really drunk, so I'd prefer if you only interrupted if there's an emergency."

"Of course, Dave," Kelly said softly.

“Great!” Dave reached into his pocket and pulled out a flask. “Now you two sell those drinks, and when Ryan gets in, tell him to bring that beer hat he promised right over.”

“Of course, Dave.”

Dave fumbled his way to the door

“Also, Kitty, make sure they tap the keg when they deliver it today. Ryan didn’t ask them to last time, and I had to saw it open.”

“Of course, Dave.”

Once Dave disappeared, Kelly told me who to call, what to say, how many calls to make, and how no matter what I did, I’d never sell a single drink because the drinks tasted awful, didn’t rejuvenate athletes, and in a few instances, mysteriously caused hepatitis infections.

“But in spite of all this, you still need to try. This business and large quantities of booze are all that Dave has left.”

“Gotcha.”

“Also, if you don’t make any calls, Ryan will torture you with the sound of a thousand children dying.”

I’d heard some weird shit up to that point, but none of it had made me actually question my hearing until that. I was relieved. She couldn’t have possibly said what I thought she said, and so all the other weird shit that Ryan and Dave had said must have been products of bad hearing as well.

“I’m sorry, I think I misheard you.”

“Did you hear me say that Ryan would torture you with the sound of a thousand children dying?”

“Did you say a thousand children dying?”

She nodded, and then nodded again at my very confused expression.

“Quick, before he gets here, let’s go through a little Ryan lesson. Ryan’s a demonic creature born in the fiery layers of earth’s core. One of his parents was half-demon, half-human, and the other was full human, so Ryan’s only a quarter demon, but he makes up for the three quarters of his humanity by doing a whole

lot of awful things. Among them is perfectly reproducing the sound of a child dying from an infinitely painful death – think machetes, or fires, or being forced to eat broccoli – and then he amplifies that sound a thousand times. It'll make you cry for at least a week, but it'll also motivate you to work harder, and that's what Ryan's all about. Ryan really, truly believes we can turn this company around."

"You're fucking right I do," Ryan said. "Thanks for helping out, Kelly. I was slaughtering goats for the monthly sacrifice. Totally forgot about it yesterday when I told you to come in early, Will, and Kelly here was kind enough to cover for me."

Kelly walked back to her desk without the slightest acknowledgment of Ryan, and sat down across from Cindy who glowed like a spray-on tan. Cindy actually (not metaphorically) glowed like a spray-on tan because she actually had a spray-on tan. She also never wore underwear, always wore skirts, and never crossed her legs, and at that very moment, Cindy flashed her cooch in Ryan's direction, and Ryan, being a demon with no heart and soul, look at it ravenously, before forcibly tearing his head away, and shaking it rapidly at the speed of sound.

"Will, it's time for you to make phone calls," Ryan said, patting me on the back. "And Cindy, it's time for you and I to chit-chat. Isn't it, Cindy?"

Cindy would have blushed red if she weren't already spray-on-tan orange.

I walked to my desk, and started calling people, all of whom either hung up on me or asked me if I thought hepatitis was a Goddamn joke. But every hour, Kelly walked by to fill her cup at the water cooler, graceful like a swan floating through autumn leaves on a pond, so I kept calling.

Following that first day, I was allowed to arrive at 8:00 a.m. and each day I'd get to the door at the same time as Kelly. We'd say cordial things like, "Hi, how was your weekend?" "Is Dave still

drinking himself into oblivion?" and "Does Ryan crack his third or his fourth spinal cord when he stretches after sitting too long?"

A few days later, after overhearing Ryan ask Cindy if she'd allow his hell spawn to gestate in her womb until the Day of Judgment, I decided I was not only going to talk to Kelly at the door, but I was also going to synchronize my water breaks with her.

The first two times I was late. All I got was a quick whiff of her flower-scented perfume as she walked back to her desk. Kelly was a fast water refiller, and I was a slow stalker. The third time, though, I waited for the flapping of her sandals from four doors down, and when I heard them, long before I could smell flowers, I made my move, reaching the water cooler just before she did.

"Hey, Kelly, how's it going?"

"It's good, Will. Thanks," she said with a sigh.

"You sure?" I asked, hoping I wasn't overstepping any bounds by inquiring into her sigh.

"Yeah, it's just... Will, have you messed anything up yet?"

"Nothing I know of," I truthfully told her. She didn't respond right away, so I filled in the silence. "But I bet I have. I just haven't been caught, you know?"

She nodded.

"Well, when you are caught, let's just say Ryan comes down on you hard."

She cringed a little like she'd just tried the sports drink, and started to move away from the water cooler, but I spoke before she could go, and not just because I thought she was super hot and super cool, but also because I needed to hear more about Ryan.

"What do you mean? What does he do? Are you talking about the thousand dying children thing? Because I overheard Kyle getting the thousand dying children treatment the other day, so I have an idea of how bad that is."

I looked down the hallway at Kyle who was still sprawled on the floor just outside of his office door, foaming at the mouth,

grinding his teeth, and staring unblinkingly at the ceiling. He'd wet and soiled himself a few times, but Ryan had been kind enough to burn his urine and feces away with hellfire, so none of us had to smell it.

"Poor Kyle," she sighed with a look of super hot sympathy that made me extremely horny. I crossed my legs and leaned back a little bit to hide the forming boner. "But no, not the thousand dying children thing. Worse than that."

"How so?"

"I'd rather not talk about it, if that's okay."

"Not okay at all, Kali," Dave slurred, falling towards the water cooler, filling a glass, taking a swig, and spitting it out violently. "What the hell is this crap?"

"It's water, Dave," Kelly told him.

"No wonder. Disgusting. When did this thing stop dispensing vodka?"

"I don't think it ever dispensed vodka," Kelly told him.

"Really? Who's running this mess of an office? No vodka in the vodka cooler? I'm going to have to leave Ryan a note on his desk."

"Or you could just write him an email."

"We have email? Well, I'll be damned, Katie. Now what was it that you didn't want to tell Wilfred?"

"Nothing, Dave, nothing."

"Oh, don't give me any of that. What was it? We don't keep secrets in this office, and it's important that Warner learns that, so set a good example and fill us in."

Kelly once more looked like she'd had a sip of the sports drink, but she exhaled and began.

"I was on the phone with that middle school in San Jose—"

"Our best clients ever!" Dave yelled.

"And they told me that they no longer wanted to purchase our drinks—"

"Worst clients we have!"

“Because half their school now has hepatitis and a new strain of polio.”

“That’s all a bunch of lies.”

“Well, even still, I felt bad for them, so I let them cancel their account with us. But really, I think they would have cancelled it no matter what; they sounded pretty upset. But Ryan found out, and he was furious.”

“I bet he was. Damn good employee, that Ryan.”

“He... Dave, he marked all of the middle schools administrators for Hell. Then he took control of their minds, and not only made them reinstate their account with us, but also made them add a middle school course on torture and mutilation.”

“That’s disturbing,” Dave said, pulling a beer from his back pocket and shotgunning it sheepishly. “But that Ryan sure knows how to sell sports drinks.” Dave burped.

“I guess. If you call that ‘selling.’”

“I call anything that keeps this company afloat ‘selling.’ Now, was that all that you didn’t want to tell Wilbur?”

“Not quite. There’s also the way Ryan punished me for losing the account. First, he submerged me into a virtual reality in which my family was being flogged with whips made of acid. I was restrained and watching from a distance, and each time I tried to break free from my restraints, extra acid was added to the whips. Then, once he brought me out of that, he charred my skin with the heat of a million suns.”

Her delicate skin looked perfectly soft, smooth, sexy, and uncharred. “And then, once I’d fully experienced that pain in all of its unimaginable agony, he reversed the damage, a process that was just as painful, but left me clear of burn marks so that I’d bear no evidence of his torture.”

A few tears slid free.

Dave reached into his other pocket and produced five mini bottles of tequila, downed each, tossed the empty containers in the trash, and said, “He’s a damn good motivator, that Ryan. His

methods might be unorthodox, but boy does he keep you guys working hard.”

With that Dave stumbled to his office to sample the mojitos he’d asked Cindy to make.

This time, Kelly didn’t make a move for the hallway. She held her cup of water so loosely that I worried it was going to slip out of her grasp at any second.

“I’m sorry, Kelly.”

She seemed to awaken a little, and her grip tightened just enough that I stopped worrying about the cup.

“It’s okay. It’s done now, and no permanent damage, right?”

“Right. But that’s awful. That’s terrible”

“That’s Ryan.”

I nodded. I had this weird urge I’d never really felt before: a rush of anger like an eighteen-wheeler that just lost control on black ice and was spinning out at full speed. It must be how Ryan felt all the time.

“Fuck Ryan. He’s such a demonic asshole,” I said, and Kelly laughed. Just a little laugh, but a laugh.

“Yeah,” she said, “fuck Ryan. He’s a demonic douchebag.”

She laughed a little more.

“Hey, boys and girls,” Ryan said, coming down the hallway, “hey, hey, hey, you guys. Looks like you tools aren’t working. Lame! You know what that does? That gives me an anti-erection. You guys are going to need to work twice as fast, or I won’t be able to reach full mast, and you’ll have to pay for my managerial Viagra,” Ryan said, joyfully slapping us both on the back. Kelly cringed again, and this time, I did too.

The next day, I synchronized my water break again.

“Hey, Kelly?”

“Yeah, Will?”

"Kelly, do you want to go to dinner with me tonight?
There's an Italian place nearby."

"Oh, Will, I'd love to."

"Great!" I tried not to sound too much like a boy peeing himself in ecstasy on Christmas morning, but I sort of failed.

"But I can't."

"Why not?" I tried not to sound too much like a boy shitting himself in fear as a B52 bomber strafes the living room where all his Christmas presents are. Before answering, she looked left, right, and behind.

"I can't because of Ryan," she whispered.

"You're dating Ryan?" I tried not to sound too much like a boy who just found out the B52 was circling back to bomb him directly.

"No! Definitely not," she said, looking like I'd just accused her of bombing me on Christmas morning. "But he has... possession of me. He's claimed me."

"Claimed you?"

"Yeah, but not just me. Every woman in this office has been claimed as candidates to carry his demonic seed, and when a demon puts you under possession—even a quarter demon—it's impossible to have a romantic or physical relationship with another man."

She explained it as though it were a recipe for banana bread or instructions for changing oil. No big deal, just your standard demon pregnancy possession.

I tried to respond nonchalantly so that she wouldn't feel weird about the whole thing.

"That sucks."

"It does," she said.

"So, like, there's nothing you can do about it?"

"Not unless Ryan dies. Ryan's death would set me free, and set all the other women in the office free, too."

"Ryan can be killed? A demon can be killed?"

“Killed isn’t the right word. Banished back to his infernal pit deep within the earth’s core? That’s probably more accurate.”

Again, banana bread and oil changes.

“Do you happen to know how exactly one banishes a demon like Ryan?”

“Actually, yeah, I do. One time at a happy hour, Ryan got completely hammered after sixty Jägerbombs, and started hitting on Beth. Beth’s no longer here because Ryan lit her house on fire with the fire of ten thousand fires because she broke up with him to date Todd, who also lost his house in a fire. Beth survived the fire, but decided that was the last straw, and she quit. Ryan’s since marked her for eternal damnation. Anyways, that night was before they started dating, and he was hitting on her, and she wasn’t feeling it then, so she continued to snub him, and finally he screamed ‘Why don’t you just carve out my heart with a knife, and banish me to a permanently hellish existence!’ Very melodramatic when he’s drunk.”

Her sadness crept through as she spoke. She was gorgeous in spite of it, and I had this irresistible urge to pull her lips into mine, bringing her body as close as possible as though if I drew her close enough, we’d meld.

“Will, what the hell are you doing?”

I stand up slowly, raising my hands to show the butcher knife.

“Oh, Will, no. He’s got guns built into his shoulders. They’re buried beneath his scapula. He’ll kill you before you can even get the first stab in.”

“No, he won’t.”

Kelly spins around to see Dave wobbling into the room.

“He won’t use his built-in shoulder guns,” continues Dave. “He’ll throw you against the wall with the force of a hundred elephants, and then he’ll ruin your life.”

“How do you know that?” I ask.

“Wilbur, five years ago when I wanted to have an affair with Cindy – beautiful, tan Cindy – I tried the same thing you’re trying now. Cut his heart out to free Cindy from his demonic possession, right?”

I nod.

“Didn’t go so well. Not only did I break three ribs when he threw me into the wall, but he also branded my wife for demonic possession. Plus, I never got to have an affair with Cindy.”

Neither Kelly nor I have a response.

“Point is, don’t do it, William Carlos Williams. At a bare minimum, you’ll break a few bones, and in all likelihood, the rest of your life will be ruined. Forget Kelly, and go meet some nice non-possessed girl at a bar or a café or a strip club. No offense, Kelly.”

“None taken,” she says, seeming to have taken a little. “I’d love to date you, Will. I really would, but Dave’s right. It’s not worth whatever he’ll do to you when you try to kill him.”

“Try to kill who?” Ryan seethes.

“Oh, Jesus, I need a shot,” Dave says, stumbling past Ryan.

“It’s nothing, Ryan. Really nothing,” Kelly says.

“Is that true, Will?”

He’s giving me an out, a chance to tell him that I wasn’t trying to eternally damn him, and to walk away unscathed, all forgotten. I’m about to take it, I really am, but then Kelly looks at me.

Her overriding expression implores me to take the out. “We can be friends,” it says. “Who needs to date when there’s a hellish monster between us, right?”

But the expression beneath that, which she’s doing her very best to hide, says, “Oh, Will, I can’t do this anymore. Please free

me, and we can get lattes together and talk about how substandard many politicians are and the shallowness of celebrity role models.”

I do a little hiding of expressions, too, and nod at Ryan.

“It is true,” I say, and he smiles. He turns his head, and in that instant when he’s looking away but still facing my direction, I leap like a tiger, pouncing to the top of the copier, jumping over Kelly, flying onto Ryan, and plunging the knife into his chest.

He wails the wail of a million warriors, and with the force of a hundred elephants, he launches me, and as he does, my knife wrenches back inside him and grabs his heart like a lever. I, with my weak human strength, would never have been able to operate that lever, but aided by the strength of a hundred elephants, the lever rockets Ryan’s heart through his chest. I hit the cabinets with a thud, and so does his heart.

There’s a moment – as he screams the scream of a hundred dying deer – when every woman in the office, most notably Kelly, glows with a radiance that’s well beyond spray-on tans.

“Thanks,” Kelly says after Ryan vanishes, screeching a slew of Latin as he goes. I nod, but I start to feel a bit nauseous, and notice that I’m having severe abdominal pain.

“Your eyes are a little yellow,” she tells me nervously.

“What was the last word Ryan said? Did you hear it?”

I gulp nervously, hoping it wasn’t what I think it was.

“I did,” she says, cringing. “‘Hepatitis.’ He said, ‘hepatitis.’”

I feel a wave of exhaustion and dizziness, and it must show, because she hurriedly starts talking again.

“Don’t worry, I have hepatitis too! He cursed me with it last year when I refused to sleep with him!”

She glows like a fake tan again, and my abdominal pain subsides a little. I think I’ll kiss her now.

WALTER CAMPBELL lives and works in Philadelphia. Recently, his work has been published in Dog Oil Press, Six Sentences, Dogzplot, Weirdear, Toasted Cheese, Vestal Review, Eclectic Flash, and Flashshot.