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Editor: Eirik Gumeny

Assistant Editor: Monica Rodriguez

Sock Puppet: Stephen Schwegler

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Editor's Note:

Well, we're here in New Mexico and so is our stuff, so hooray for that. But, more importantly, we're a week late with this issue, so let's keep this short.

We've got five new stories this month and they're all terrific. We start with the great Gavin Broom's sock puppet parable, "Socko and Roy," followed by "A Discourse on the Impending Apocalypse," by the always awesome Aidan Ryan. Next is "Detachment" by the radiant and ravishing Rachel Cordasco, and then "Eli and the Empty Lot" from the amazing Alex Koplou. And we close with an epic love story for the ages, "Julia and Raul," by Jersey son Ben Nardolilli.

Now, if you'll excuse us, we've got to finish unpacking.

– Eirik Gumeny

Socko and Roy

Gavin Broom

Fate was a sock.

Roy often wondered what would've happened if fate had been something else or if that first audition had gone in a different direction. He knew he had a good act. It was funny. It just wasn't great. The producer told him he needed a hook if he wanted the gig and he needed to find one in thirty seconds otherwise the moment would be gone and he'd be back on that bus, heading home with more disappointment, more rejection.

In later interviews, he'd tell people the idea presented itself while he waited in line but in reality, it was more instinct than plan. He remembered standing centre-stage, thinking about all the auditions he'd flunked, all the good-but-not-quentes he'd amassed over the years, all the I-told-you-so stares he'd tried to avoid and how failing here and now would finally put an end to his dreams. In other words, it would be time to get a day job.

The next he knew, an independent force within him was removing his left shoe, peeling off a white sports sock and sliding it on to his right hand. In an unfamiliar voice, he delivered a brand new routine and this time the sock told the jokes and the sock took more risks, the sock was edgier, the sock got more laughs.

Roy and Socko got the gig.

That year, Charlie "Chuckles" Chucklington's summer show took pride of place on the Central Pier. Chuckles was at the height of his game so the public were literally fighting for tickets and the police prepared for a mini riot each day when the box office opened. An

unknown Roy and Socko provided the support act. No one queued for them.

On the opening night, after vomiting up a gutful of butterflies for an hour, Roy was on the verge of pulling out and catching that bus home after all. Despite waiting his whole life for this moment, it didn't feel right. Maybe he didn't have the nerve. The thought of those waiting I-told-you-so eyes kept him clinging to the porcelain and stopped him running for his life. With a determined puff of the cheeks, he got to his feet and slipped the sock on to his right hand. The cold sweats evaporated. The butterflies settled. His shoulders relaxed. He stood proud. He was ready to kick some ass.

"You got the world at your feet, kid," Chuckles told him over drinks in the private lounge after the show. "I've seen everything in this game a million times over but the chemistry you've got with that sock... I tells ya, that's something beautiful right there. Beautiful."

Before Roy could reply, a young girl approached them, armed with a book and pen, and thrust them at Roy. Chuckles, far from taking offence, gave him a knowing nod and wink.

When he was halfway through scratching his autograph on to a fresh page, Roy noticed he was still wearing the sock.

By the end of the summer, whispers of Roy and Socko's groundbreaking act were beginning to gain volume. That autumn, a single column feature appeared in Sidekicks Quarterly under the heading, The Most Dangerous Act In The Country. By the winter issue, they'd made it to the front cover. It seemed they were a breath of fresh air and the nation had taken this outrageous, foul-mouthed white sports sock into its heart.

There were photo-shoots, panel show appearances, a weekly newspaper column. It became necessary for Roy to buy an

apartment in the city, acquire an agent and a team of people to meet and have working lunches with other people's people. Then he needed a place in the country to get a minute away from all those noisy people now in his employ. It was madness.

A year after his first audition success and after working ninety-eight days out of the last hundred, Roy stood on the mezzanine level of his converted loft and felt his head stop spinning and the enormous thud of everything as it sank into place. If they were to go shopping right at that moment, they'd be mobbed. If they wanted to dine at the Ivy, they'd get a table immediately and during the meal, they'd attract more work, more job offers, more money, more fame. If there was a party, they'd be invited. They'd made it. Somewhat absently, he wondered when he'd started referring to himself as 'they'.

"I'd like to write a movie."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, a movie. Maybe star in it, too. Remember we spoke about it? The one about the aliens that's not really about the aliens."

"I dunno, Roy. Movies are a big step."

"I was also thinking about maybe doing some solo stuff."

"Solo stuff? What do you mean, solo stuff?"

"Well, exactly that. Solo. I've had ideas for documentaries I'd like to make. You know, about Nazis and sharks and whatever. And if I'm honest, one day, I'd like to do some solo stand-up. I mean, that's what I always dreamt about doing from the start and it's never felt like it's ever been just me."

"But you'd just be some shmuck standing on a stage telling jokes. Who the hell's going to pay money to see that?"

"With all due respect, you're somewhat biased."

"Of course, I'm biased. I'm also the voice of reason, pal. Perhaps you're forgetting what pays for the roof over your head and the organic tofu in your many fridges."

"I'm not forgetting, but is this it? Is this how things are going to be for the rest of my life?"

"Sorry, I didn't realise you were a slave."

"I'm not saying that, I'm just thinking that maybe at some point in the unspecified future, perhaps I might like to write my alien movie script or something."

"Okay, well why don't you try and write that movie script? You sit down and get yourself a compelling narrative, some memorable characters, give them a conflict to resolve, obstacles to overcome and you write that damned movie script. But I'll tell you now, I want nothing of it."

"Aw, come on."

"No, I want nothing of it, Roy, and you know what that means. If you're writing that stinking movie, you're going to have to take me off your hand first."

The movie idea never found itself on paper and the documentaries about Nazis and sharks were eventually made by other people. Night after night, while Socko went through his increasingly offensive repertoire, Roy stood bored and wondered what Socko's blood might look like or what would happen if he tugged on that loose thread at the heel.

Of course, it was Socko's idea to phone Charlie Chucklington and call him a decrepit old bastard and a paedophile on live on national TV. It would be a brilliant laugh, Socko insisted. A white cotton sports sock had never done crank phone calls before. This had cutting edge written all over it. This was the new direction Roy had been bitching about. What could possibly go wrong?

Charlie Chucklington had been in the business for longer than Roy had been alive. Charlie knew a lot of people. In turn, those people knew an astonishing number of people and not all of those people were friendly. If you were anybody whomsoever in the field of show business or organised crime, you'd either know Charlie, one of his people or you'd actually be one of those people.

Within seven minutes of hanging up, Charlie had made a phone call of his own. One phone call was all it took.

And as quickly as it came, so it went. The loft in the city, the Saturday night slot on BBC1, the offers, the newspaper columns, the nationwide tours, the voice-overs; they all dried up. Filling the void were recriminations, outrage, hatred, death threats, all fuelled by a media whose owners, at their most distant, were friends of a friend of Charlie Chucklington. And once that all died down, what came next was even worse. Apathy. Anonymity. What was the big deal in the first place, the public asked. And excuse me, but wasn't it just a swearsy bloke with a sock on his hand? Now you mention it, what was the guy's name again? Rodney, wasn't it? Oh, it doesn't matter. And anyway, didn't he die or something?

For weeks, Roy sat at his rusty old typewriter where he used to write sketches as a child and for weeks, he stared at the blank page. The ideas were still there but he couldn't find the first word, so he sat with his fingers hovering over the keys, never having the nerve to punch out a letter in anger. The muffled cries from the sock drawer wouldn't let him.

The lawn outside Roy's council house flashed red and blue while arcs of water battled pointlessly against the inferno.

"Anyone alive?" asked the chief fire-fighter.

His deputy wiped sweat and soot from his brow. "Too early to say," he said. "But if anyone was inside, they're coming out stuck to the bottom of our shoes."

"That's too bad," the chief said. "He used to be pretty famous. I liked his act. I stole a few of his gags for my turn at the mayor's ball, you might remember. Wasn't as good as the original, of course."

"Everyone remarked at how sparkling your routine was, sir."

"You're too kind."

The chief dismissed his deputy and had turned to leave when he spotted a single white sports sock at his feet on the grass. He removed his helmet and crouched down to pick it up. The sock, despite sitting on cool grass for at least thirty minutes, was warm. The chief smiled and when he was sure no one was looking, and even though the sock carried more than a hint of lighter fluid and sulphur, he couldn't resist slipping it on his hand.

GAVIN BROOM lives and writes in Scotland. He's had over fifty pieces of poetry and fiction published in print and online. He's still holding out for that house at the beach.

A Discourse on the Impending Apocalypse

Aidan Ryan

“Order! Order! We must have order!” The imposing figure banged heavily on the table and demanded silence from the babbling crowd.

“Now,” he said, still standing, “Please, take your seats, and we may begin the meeting.”

The assembled beings did as they were told, albeit reluctantly, and a few lingering grumbles of discontent could be heard over the squeaking and groaning of chairs, the soft ruffle of cushions being adjusted, and the ever so quiet rustle and creak of bamboo mats.

The figure at the head of the table looked down upon everyone gathered there. Truly, he, or she, was a marvelous sight to behold. Depending on who was looking, *it* appeared differently. At times it was a tan, four-headed, four-armed man, constantly reciting strange prayers and usually eating something with a spoon. To others, it appeared as a blue-grey-skinned, four-armed being. To some it was a three-eyed, four-armed, yellow-skinned figure with a snake coiled around its neck. To still others it appeared as a form even stranger than the rest, indescribable by any language known to man... or god.

“Would you stop all that shifting around?” piped up a man farther down the table. “I can’t concentrate and you’re giving me a headache.”

The changeling creature shifted one last time into a red-skinned, axe-wielding (again, four-armed) elephant-man-beast and folded his arms (all four) across his large, elephantine stomach.

“You know it’s not easy for me, Zeus.” He grumbled in a low, booming voice, “It’s involuntary, really.”

“Well, I’m sorry,” Zeus conceded, stroking his curly white beard. “Is anyone else feeling a bit of a draft in here?” he asked, changing the subject. He adjusted his toga against the cold. In truth, it was very cold on that desolate plain of extra-reality, an empty space in which the great table was situated, floating and yet stable, ethereal and yet existing in a way that was greater than mere reality. Below the table spun a spiral cloud, multi-colored and wonderful to behold, thread-like strands breaking off and then coming back to combine with others, forming thick ropes and weaving to create a repeating pattern. They were the threads of time.

“Yes, I’m feeling a bit cold,” said the man next to Zeus, another bearded, toga-wearing deity. A trident was resting against his shoulder.

Across the table a dark skinned man with the head of a falcon raised his arms above his head and conjured up a flaming ball of light which blinded all at the table.

“How’s this? Feeling warmer?” he asked in an alien, clacking voice. Up and down the table those gathered at the meeting threw up their hands to shield their eyes.

“Damn it, Ra, stop showing off!” shouted one man.

“It’s really not that impressive,” said another.

“Enough!” shouted the elephant in the room. “We must get down to business! The clock is ticking away, you know, and at this pace we’ll miss the deadline!”

“Alright, alright,” muttered the collected beings.

“What are we talking about again?” asked a strong, sharp featured man wearing a grandiose crown.

“Would you please pay attention, Ahura?” Zeus chided. “Just once, try to stay on task.”

“I won’t tolerate lip from you, young man!” Ahura’s face grew red with anger. “I created the universe, you know!”

“No, I did!” shouted a number of pagan gods in unison; they were a motley assortment of deities, ranging from a half-man, half-

tiger god to a golden, bearded, and highly decorated patriarch wearing the sun for a crown.

“Ridiculous!” shouted three identical men, also bearded (quite a popular trend in the divine realm) and clothed in cloth woven from the softest of clouds. “We did!” Realizing they had all spoken at once they immediately began to fight amongst themselves.

“Wait just a second!”

“I’m the eldest, so it only makes sense that I made the universe!”

“We’re triplets! You’re only older by a few thousand years.”

“Your worshipers are impure! They have strayed from the true faith!”

“Oh yeah? Well watch this!” With that one of the triplets began to glow with an intense light and at his right and left sides, respectively, appeared a middle-aged, brown-haired man dressed in simple cloth attire and a white dove that may or may not have been on fire. “How do you like *that* one?”

“You think you’re so –”

“I AM THE UNIVERSE!” shouted the elephant, now changing so quickly from form to form that he became a blur of flying limbs and random utensils.

“Please,” muttered a small man at the far end of the table, “stop this bickering. We must, as you, Brahman, have so judiciously pointed out, stay on task.” His quiet voice carried across the table and all the others gathered there fell silent and turned to look at this beautiful, diminutive figure. He sat cross-legged beneath a tree of some sort and was clad in an orange robe with gold trimmings. “We must decide what to do about the Apocalypse.”

“Yes, you are quite right, Siddhartha,” added a very old Asian man, practically swimming in an intricately patterned green robe. “I might add that –”

“Hold on a minute,” one of the triplets interrupted. All eyes in the room darted between him and the man who had just spoken. The tension was palpable. “Why are you here?” another of the triplets demanded.

The old man coughed and appeared quite disturbed.

“A meeting of the gods was called, was it not? And I have come, just as I should, to offer my insights into the matter at hand.”

“But you’re not a real god. You’re just an old man.”

The entire assembly gasped at once.

Across the table Thor leaned over to Odin and whispered, “I’ve been waiting for someone to break it to the old man for going on twenty-five hundred years. I never expected it would be Allah who finally told him.”

“Tell me about it,” Odin replied. “That reminds me, now I owe Loki a drink.”

Confucius – for the old man was indeed none other than the famous Chinese philosopher – stood up after a few painfully awkward seconds of gasping and making elaborate gestures.

“Well, I never... have been so insulted...”

Now another old Chinese man, this one wearing a red robe, rose and walked over to the babbling Confucius.

“Come on, we don’t need them.”

“Right, Laozi.” Together they turned their backs on the gods and walked away from the table, eventually disappearing into the dark void of existence.

The other members of the gathering breathed a collective sigh of relief.

“Well, that was awkward,” Brahman muttered. “Anyway, perhaps now we can get down to business. We all know the story. Itzamna had to go and give his worshippers a calendar and this whole ‘end of the world’ thing got started.”

At this, all of the gods gathered at the table turned to look disparagingly at the bird-like creature sitting at the far end, clacking its beak and squawking in indignation.

“Now hold on,” Brahman said, holding up all four of his arms for silence. “It’s not just his fault. Jesus, it just so happens that some of your followers got it into their heads that the world was going to end with all your talk of Judgment Day and the ‘Second Coming’, and, let me tell you, that hasn’t helped things at all. And Allah, Yahweh, you’ve done nothing but confuse the whole matter even more. If the three of you could just get your stories straight...” Brahman paused and shook his massive head. “I mean, you’re brothers! Why you can’t come up with a consistent theology is beyond me.

“Odin, Thor,” he continued, spinning to face the two armor-clad Norse gods, “your tall tales of a glorious and bloody Ragnarok have also contributed to the problem.” Brahman turned to look back at the assembly. “When you get down to it, we’re all, every last one of us, complicit in the whole affair. It turns out that every religion on Earth has some inkling of an end of time, and now we’ve got to decide what to do about it.”

At once there was a great clamor, as all the gods raised their voices to offer their opinions above everyone else’s.

“QUIET!” demanded Brahman, and after a few muted grumbles the gods resumed their seats in silence. “Now, there are two sides to this debate, each with credibility and valid arguments. On one hand, we could ignore the prophecies completely. Just pretend like they never happened. The years will pass and, with the exception of a few nutjobs down there, the people of Earth will forget all about Doomsday. Of course, there are some problems with this. First of all, by ignoring our own revelations, we lose credibility. People may turn away from religion completely. Also, we have to deal with our counterparts down below.”

At this, a sort of low rumble of displeasure echoed through the void. Gods left and right turned to their peers and shook their heads knowingly and in disgust.

“Yes,” continued Brahman, “Hades and Loki and Satan and the Antichrist and even Harold are all getting restless down there,

not to mention all the nasty beasts and things they've conjured up. We could have a real problem on our hands if they up and decide to end the world on their own."

Again, murmurs of "yea" and "nay" rippled across the table.

"Now, on the other hand, we could go ahead with it and wipe out humanity." Brahman paused, and at once the crowd fell into fierce debate, with much name-calling and finger-pointing.

"I know," Brahman said, holding up his arms, "there are conflicting views on how exactly this is to be done. We have to balance catastrophic natural disasters and man-made suffering with both an epic battle of gods and men and the coming of a New Jerusalem."

"So, what?" Isis interrupted. "Is humanity supposed to be wiped out or just relocated?"

"Well, that's all part of the problem," Brahman admitted. "We just can't seem to get our stories straight. Not to mention the conflicting views on the afterlife. If there's an end of the world, my whole religion's shot to hell, literally. So much for reincarnation. And if we don't allow reincarnation, heaven will just be too full of people. Seven billion, flooding the pearly gates all at once. Peter isn't going to be too happy. And what about Satan, Hades and Osiris? They're going to want a share too.

"Not to mention, with the Earth gone we'd lose our only source of entertainment. Would we start over again from scratch? Maybe give the dinosaurs a fighting chance this time?"

Everyone turned to Ahura Mazda. It had been his idea to kill off the dinosaurs in the first place.

"What?" he asked. "They had a few million years, more than the humans have had. And they weren't very interesting to watch."

"Well, yeah," Mercury muttered.

"I suppose you're right," Allah agreed.

"Can't argue with that," Athena admitted.

“So, anyway,” said Brahman, retaking control of the discussion, “now we must decide what to do: destroy the Earth, or forget the whole damn thing.”

“Well, do we have to choose?” Allah asked, with an innocent shrug. “Maybe we could just kill off the infidels.”

“Goddamnit, Allah, you know there’s no such thing as infidels! We’re all here, aren’t we?” his older brother chided.

“Yeah, sorry. I guess you’re right. I just can’t help but blame the infidels.”

“But what about the atheists? We could just kill all the atheists,” Jesus suggested.

“Well, I suppose...” Brahman mused.

“Yeah!” Poseidon exclaimed.

“I don’t see why not,” Ahura said.

This new idea seemed to electrify the table with new energy. The gods began to stand up and stretch, flex their muscles and demonstrate their powers in vibrant displays of noise and light.

“Those atheists think they’re so damn smart!”

“To see the looks on their faces...”

“No! We must forgo all violence!” shouted a naked Indian man.

The table fell silent. Siddhartha had spoken up again. The soft-skinned, elegant man said very little, but when he did speak up everyone knew that it was wise to listen.

“Perhaps there is another option we have overlooked.”

At this the gods muttered amongst themselves – “What could we have overlooked? What did we miss?” – but quieted down almost immediately when the man held up his hand for silence.

“There is a path that could allow us to forestall Doomsday and avoid a mass departure from religion.”

The void was so quiet, one could have heard a pin drop, if, that is, there had been anything to drop it on. The thin, cross-legged

man gazed slowly around the table, fixing each of his esteemed colleagues in the eyes.

“We could show them the aliens.”

All at once the table erupted into violent commotion. Cries of joy, outrage and amazement burst forth from a multitude of mouths.

“Please,” resumed Siddhartha, raising his voice just slightly, “hear me out. They are coming close to finding them anyway.” Now the din slowly faded, the gods fully realizing that what Buddha said was true. The humans were coming dangerously close to finding the aliens on their own. “It is only a matter of time. I suggest we help them. Drop some clues, fix a broken satellite here and there. The aliens have developed roughly the same religions as those practiced on Earth, so that would solve the problem of the irreligious, and it would reverse the trend of slowly declining faith in all of our people.”

“But what about Hell?” asked Brahman, a bit peeved at Buddha always stealing his thunder. “We still have to deal with *them*.”

Siddhartha folded his arms, hiding his hands away in his flowing silk sleeves.

“We will have to face our enemies below no matter what choice we make today. This much is true. The end of the world will not happen on our reckoning, and it will, when it comes, resemble all that we have mentioned: catastrophic acts of nature, man-made destruction, and a battle of gods and men, side by side. The only variable is the outcome. If we win, a new age will dawn. Utopia for mankind will be achieved and Heaven and Earth will be united. If we loose, mankind will be destroyed and demons will inhabit the burnt-out shell of Earth. We have but one option. We must prepare for war.”

The gods nodded to each other in grim silence. Suddenly, the ethereal plane of existence seemed a little colder, a little darker. What Buddha said was true. There was only one choice.

"All in favor of Buddha's proposition, say *aye*," commanded Brahman from the head of the table.

"Aye!" said Brahman.

"Aye!" said Eric Clapton.

"AYE!" cried the rest in unison.

"Then it is decided," Brahman said, and sat back down. "We have a good two thousand years or so before any of this happens. Spirits, bring out the cigars and brandy!"

Dutifully, hazy white, possibly winged little things floated out of the emptiness carrying a humidior, decanter, and several stout glasses. Gods are gods, after all, and they'll live like gods too.

AIDAN RYAN is a seventeen year old high school student from Buffalo, New York. He is convinced he will one day be portrayed by Johnny Depp in the biopic of his life.

Detachment

Rachel S. Cordasco

When I got up from my chair in Cossie's, after finishing a particularly tasty grilled chicken Caesar salad sandwich (they really outdid themselves that time), I felt that something was missing. I looked down and saw it. My arm. It had fallen off *again*.

This was really getting ridiculous. When my mother said (nearly every day) that if my limbs weren't attached to me I'd leave them behind wherever I went, she didn't know how right she was.

It's a form of absent-mindedness, I tell myself, but that doesn't help when you get into the car, start the engine, and then realize that you can't buckle your belt because you're missing a hand. Or when you get up from a chair and keel right over, like a fool, because your leg has decided to stay behind.

These were usually minor embarrassments, since I always realized that I was missing something before I was too far away. Nonetheless, I was getting nervous, worrying that one day I would leave something really important behind and someone would steal it, either as a joke or out of some twisted sense of revenge.

Naturally suspicious though I am, I finally decided to see Dr. Elliott, a therapist recommended to me by my friend Martha. Dr. Elliott, she said, was *fantastic*, absolutely *fantastic*. With a recommendation like that, how could I say no? Martha said that he had cured her obsession with mocha double-fudge brownies and could help me understand why I kept leaving my limbs behind. Maybe I had some sort of subconscious death-wish, she offered. Or I subconsciously wanted to get a full body makeover. Martha was always inspiring like that.

Dr. Elliott's office was on the fifth floor of a ramshackle brown building in a shady part of the city. The rent, he later told me, was cheap and his neighbors were always polite and never

tried to burn down their businesses. This, he explained while lowering his voice, was a step up from the last place he had used for his practice. There... well, that's a story for another time, he said, winking. I winked back, not sure why we were winking at each other.

When I sat down on the couch and Dr. Elliott sat down across from me in a wicker chair, he leaned forward and scanned my face. I assumed that this was how he began all of his sessions. But then he said, "Where's your left eyelid?"

I stared at him for a few seconds, felt my left eye, and whispered, "Damn!" We went out to the waiting room and looked around under furniture and on the chairs before we found it. I slapped it back on my face and Dr. Elliott said, "You really *do* have a detachment problem." Thanks for stating the obvious, brilliant doctor man.

The skinny secretary with neon carrot-red hair stared at us with her jaw on her desk as we went back in to Dr. Elliott's office. I was so used to that stare from strangers that it didn't bother me anymore. I sat back down on the couch, Dr. Elliott settled back into his squeaky wicker chair, and we stared at each other for a while.

I started clearing my throat to say something inane and break the ice when he asked, "By what method did your mother give birth to you?"

Now *that* was a question I had never been asked before.

"What do you mean?" I stammered out.

"Did your mother give birth to you naturally or by cesarean section?"

"Oh," I said, trying to think. "I do remember her saying something about a C-section. It might have been my brother, but it could just as easily have been me."

"Hmm..." said Dr. Elliott, chewing on the ends of his long brown mustache and resting his nose on the canopy he made with his fingers.

He stayed that way for a while, so I started looking around the dim office, trying to find something interesting to muse on. There were several abstract paintings on the walls – you know, the kind with one red dot in the middle of an otherwise blank canvas, or a series of squiggles that look like something a two-year-old might have done in a fit of artistic inspiration.

I was wondering how much he had paid for that crap when my eye was caught by sunlight glinting off a gold statuette sitting on the edge of his desk. It was vaguely Chinese, with two dragon heads facing away from one another and a series of dragon tentacles curling around the base, which looked like the bottom of a squat vase. I found this dragon intriguing for some reason, and squinted for a better look. Suddenly, it was blue, made out of porcelain, and the dragon had ten heads. I blinked, and the dragon was gold again. I was about to ask Dr. Elliott what was the matter with his bric-a-brac when he started to speak.

“I believe you have detachment syndrome,” he said, stroking the ends of his mustache like they were two cats. “This is a very rare syndrome, only diagnosed in one hundred people – er –” (here he coughed) “individuals around the world, but it’s definitely real.”

“I know it’s real, doctor,” I said. “My eyelid fell off today. What will be next?”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I can help you.”

I should have felt comforted.

Dr. Elliott got up and started rummaging through a closet in the corner of the room. I saw a stuffed unicorn, a live lizard and a beach ball, among other things, bounce across the floor as he tossed them one by one out of his way. I wondered what was coming and actually wasn’t very surprised when he sat down again across from me with what looked like a metal mesh helmet that emitted little blue sparks.

“Here,” he said, holding it out to me, “put this on your head.”

“Why?” I asked, squinting at him out of the corners of my eyes.

“Just do it. I have another patient coming in ten minutes. Do you want help or not?”

So I put it on. That thing was heavy, and it was then that I noticed Dr. Elliott holding a small box, whose wire was attached to the helmet I was wearing. He pressed a button, and I must have jumped ten feet.

“Damn!” I said, reaching up to take the helmet off. “What the hell was *that* for?”

“Don’t take it off!” Dr. Elliott cried, jumping up with his hand stretched out to me. “You need to keep it on for three minutes.”

“But what’s it doing to me?” I whined, already plotting my revenge on Martha.

“I’m resynching your neural pathways.”

“My who?”

Another few shocks, and I woke up on the floor, sans helmet, with Dr. Elliott leaning over me, his mustache defying gravity like cats in zero-g.

“Whaaa...” I murmured.

Dr. Elliott helped me up and seated me back down in the chair.

He looked at me gravely.

“What’s your diagnosis, doctor?” I asked lightly, trying to hold off on what was obviously going to be a bad diagnosis.

“I had to be sure. Lora, you need to know that you were *constructed*, not born.”

“Um, *what*?” That was the best I could do.

He sighed. “It’s always hard to break the news. You’re made out of the same stuff as a mannequin, only you have neural circuits and nerves. But your model was never fully stabilized. The shocks I just gave you resynched your neural pathways.”

I sat there, like a statue – or, rather, like a mannequin – staring.

Dr. Elliott let the information sink in.

“Well,” I said at last, trying to find the bright side, “at least I’m not a robot.”

“True, true,” Dr. Elliott said, stroking his mustache.

He led me out of the office, telling me to make a series of appointments over the next few months for a few more “resets,” as he called them.

“So this will cure my detachment problems, doctor?” I asked before I left.

“Yes,” he said. “Oh, and you might want to get some super glue, too, just in case.”

RACHEL CORDASCO lives in Madison, Wisconsin, and enjoys reading, knitting, traveling with her husband, and going to the opera.

Eli and the Empty Lot

Alex Koplou

On the first day of the climb Eli Jessup couldn't make it higher than the evergreen's lowest clump of branches. The stones were too heavy. He had swallowed too many stones.

Stuck in the large pine a few streets away from his parents' new house, Eli was swelling, slowly boiling in the summer's smog. The number of rocks inside him was forgotten. They came from the stream Eli passed when he walked home from school. Squatting in the ditch of the creek, he combed through the Virginia red clay in search of the stones.

The clearer the rock, the easier he imagined it was to swallow, and on the first day Eli found five toothy, nearly translucent pebbles. He stuffed the rocks in the pocket of his jeans with his inhaler and hurried home.

Locked in his bedroom after dinner, Eli emptied most of a bottle of water into his mouth and pushed the glassy stones past his braces one at a time. The rocks were little nothings, Eli told himself, pirate restaurant popcorn shrimp.

After the first week of taking five a day, he could swallow the pill-sized pebbles with barely a grimace. So he hunted for the skippable stones embedded in the middle of the stream to reopen the pain. Those were the sacred ones that added quick chunks of weight.

But the rocks had plugged him up. The water wasn't leaving, splashing against his stomach's bloated walls. He grew lopsided, constantly tilting forward like he was trying to smell something. Once school finished for summer, he could hide his immobility from his parents by staying in his room, but Eli knew the climb would be slow. He'd have to wait until his mom was out of town for business. She'd be furious that he wasn't responding to

her texts, but it would still be at least a day before his dad worried about where he was.

By the time he was ready to begin the climb, Eli had gotten good enough and drinking was painful enough that he could swallow most of the rocks without water. Like muffling a thick burp, he placed a stone on the back of his tongue and forced it inside of him.

The big pine where Eli crouched had barely missed becoming part of the cul-de-sac when the neighborhood was built a year earlier. It capped the bottom of the perfectly straight, thermometer dead end. He chose that tree because half of the branches slanted over the street. From the spot where he wanted to land, there was a clear path through the thick needles to the tree's top.

Fifteen feet off the ground with the one o'clock clouds feigning relief, Eli scanned the street that connected around to his house. The sidewalks were strewn with squirrels and purebred housecats looking for extra food. The gravely pavement below him warped from the heat. Eli hid his sweaty, attic-black hair under his hood.

"What are you doing?"

Eli snapped his head down, shattering pain through his stomach, and saw an older girl looking up at him through the pine needles. Her stubby fingers pinned a cigarette to her lips.

"Huh? Nothing. Just climbing up here."

"Yeah? What the hell for?"

Eli cradled his stomach, holding the reason.

"I, uh, just wanted to sit up here."

The girl spat out smoke. Blinking at the glare of the sun, he looked down past his untied shoelace and could see nothing but a large mole on her plump left breast.

It was the type of mole normally wedged between an oily nose and fat cheek. Underneath the tree, coated with sweat and light cigarette smoke, the brown mole kept slipping out from her too small tank top.

"You've been up there all day."

"How do you know?"

"I saw the tree moving a while ago, and I was like 'what the hell's that?' I thought you might have been a bear or something. I saw you out the window in my house. I'm staying with my grandma in that house over there."

Eli shrunk from her stare. He was afraid he was caught.

"If you thought I was a bear," he wiped sap on his jeans, "then why did you come out here?"

"Because God, it couldn't get any worse than being in that house. My grandma's sick, so my mom brought me and her boyfriend down here. Mom's going crazy, trying to hand out the right pills at the right time and everything. She keeps freaking out when I smoke in the house, even though I know my grandma is hiding packs of her own in the bathroom."

"Your grandma is sick?"

"Cancer. She's not even that bad, so I dunno why my mom was so annoying about coming down here. Now she's trying to make me stay here the whole summer."

Ten feet below Eli, she paced, waddling between the tree and the curb. She pinched the cigarette from her lips and tapped the ashes into the grass.

"It sucks, you know, I just wanted to stay in Chicago this summer and get ready for college."

"Is that where you're from?"

"Yep. Well, Glen Ellyn. It's like just outside, but my boyfriend just got an apartment in the city, so I coulda been downtown every night. It's the best city in the world. I can't wait to move there."

With her back against the tree, she watched the sun set behind her grandmother's house. Eli stared between his thighs at the penny-sized mole she had forgotten.

"Nice to meet you, bear boy, but I'm outta cigs."

"My name is Eli."

"I'm Tera. Enjoy your tree. I gotta get back to getting screamed at."

She flicked the butt into the street and wiped her hands above the back pockets of her shorts. In her white khakis, Tera had the too wide ass of a flight attendant.

The wind flapped the REDUCED placard against the white FOR SALE sign in the yard below Eli. The fanned out rectangle of unmowed grass slowly vibrated. Frenzied chunks of bumble bees hovered, dipping and dancing on the white-tipped clover. Past the trees and the dying honeysuckle, over the rock-bearing stream was a small Korean church with a familiar bell.

Gongy and automated, the bells chimed every fifteen minutes. Eli anticipated the caressing rhythm until it was all he could focus on. At the end of every measured hour a hovering eight note melody rang out, and Eli droned the chant he made about the day.

Bells, Bees, Grass, Trees.

Mole, Rock, Girl, Talk.

His head bounced with each word. The streetlamps buzzed on and painted overlapping shadows on the street, hiding the spot where Eli focused.

A patch of fresh asphalt, close to the manhole cover, that's where he wanted to land. He envisioned an Eli-shaped slab of pavement that he'd hit after jumping off one of the branches above him. He gazed at the spot with dreamy eagerness.

He thought he might die when he landed. But Eli still had a video game sense of death. Respawned was easy, and your effects were still felt. All he really wanted was a disruption, some sort of

legacy. He wanted to create the first pothole that new road would ever know.

Ramming his shoulders against the bark, imagining the beds in the new houses around him, he tried to turn the tree's trunk into a pillow. Tired and dry, Eli wondered if there was a time when the bells stopped telling time.

After hours of clutching his bulging stomach, cradling the pain and exhaustion, something pulled him into a quick sleep.

The second day of the climb, the highest Eli would get, began with several failed attempts at standing. His rigid sleep tricked him into thinking he had enough energy to climb right up to the next set of limbs. The remonstrative pain when he raised his leg made him collapse against the branch, buckled and broken.

Hours later Eli managed to stretch his hands up to a warm, sticky branch above him. Fully extended, he let himself dead hang until he swung against the solid trunk, clawing at the bark with his new tennis shoes.

Scraping up the tree with borrowed strength, Eli reached a basket of limbs nearly thirty feet above the wavy pavement. Panting, he wondered if his dad would be proud. He'd never been able to climb the knotted rope hanging off the deck as part of the backyard gym. Eli's dad was convinced he could exercise the illness out of his son. But Eli never had the energy.

At that height the tree split like a cactus into two thin pillars of trunk. Underneath a blanket of brown needles was a bottle of water and two Ziploc bags from the same jumbo box his mom used to pack his lunches for school. Weeks earlier he hid those provisions up there when he wasn't so tired. One bag had a thin sandwich. The other bag was rocks. Flat, shimmering stones he'd saved for the climb. A month's worth of pain-clouded anticipation spiked inside of him.

Eli dreaded the water. Every drop from the past month was still puddled inside of him, stagnating and drowning his insides. He swirled a quick gulp around his mouth, soaking every white spot. Forcing it down, Eli howled as it pierced his chest and clapped against the old water.

The lettuce from his sandwich had bled through the bread. The green was everywhere. Eli separated the top of the bag, and the rotted humidity smacked him. The bag slipped from his hand. Eli halted his labored blinking to watch the bag fall, studying the way it twisted before bellyflopping against the pavement.

“What the hell, man!”

“I’m sorry. I’m... I didn’t see you down there.”

The words coughed through his zippered throat. Eli maintained his crouch while staring at Tera, struggling to process something other than the tree. She had another cigarette and another shirt, one that covered her breasts and the raisiny mole.

“Whatever. Back up in that tree, huh, bear boy?”

“No, what? I never –”

“Have you seen a cat running by here?”

“No.”

“My grandma can’t find her cat. She’s having one of her angry, senile days. It’s hilarious. She’s storming around the house, ramming her oxygen tank into the cabinets and knocking over the piles of laundry my mom’s folded. She keeps screaming, ‘Spaghetti!’ That’s the cat’s name. But my mom’s boyfriend thinks she’s hungry, so he keeps boiling water. Man, it’s better than normal in there today.”

“What kind of cat is it?”

“Spaghetti? I dunno. It’s small and white. Red collar.”

“Sorry, I haven’t seen any cats.”

Tera inched the toe of her dirty sandal toward the moldy bag that almost hit her. She kicked it into the storm drain and tossed her cigarette in after. Steeped in boredom, she stared up at Eli with removed disgust, like he was the ugliest goat at a petting zoo.

“Well, if you see a white cat from your perch up there, will you just come and let me know?”

“Um, ok.”

“Aren’t you sweating like crazy? It’s like Iraq out here.”

Studying her choreographed impatience, Eli got the urge to show someone else what he’d been doing. He took the smallest rock from the bag and popped it into his mouth. He nearly burst from overstimulation as he flicked the rock around his mouth, rattling it against his braces. Watching the large circles of her bug eyed sunglasses, Eli swallowed the rock, doubling his Adam’s apple.

The fabric in Tera’s fat armpit grew dark. She squinted and scratched at the heat. He was furious that she didn’t respond to his display.

“You don’t need to come back out, OK? I’ll look for your stupid cat.”

The pine needles blocked his embarrassed nodding. As she shrugged him off and retreated through her grandmother’s front yard, Eli could hear the meaty smack of her sandals separating from her feet. With Tera gone, Eli quickly scanned the unsold lot for cats until he heard the church bell.

Bells, Bees, Grass, Trees.

Mole, Rock, Girl, Talk.

He selected a smooth rock from the bag and was desperate to add its weight. About as wide as a cell phone, he placed the stone on his outstretched tongue. The warm, dull taste reminded him of duct tape. He wouldn’t use water for the last ones. He cherished the gags and clunks of manually pushing the rocks down. Entranced by the pain, he kept imagining the bells, until there was nothing on his tongue but the stone’s salty leftovers.

He refilled his mouth, two rocks that time, rejecting his stomach’s throbbing plea. The agony wasn’t from the rocks. It wasn’t even the water, Eli grew to decide. It was the chalky, grey drink the doctors made him take before entering the tube for the

scans. That liquid Eeyore that was supposed to show what was wrong and where it was spreading. The machines were burning the drink into his lungs. Eli knew it was keeping him sick. It had been more than two years, since he was eleven, that they'd been pumping him full of the grey stuff. How much longer he'd have to do it, how much longer he'd be alive, he didn't know. He just needed to leave behind more than the stacks of flat, grey scans.

Bells, Bees, Grass, Trees.

Mole, Rock, Girl, Talk.

He pulled an Africa-shaped rock from his mouth in order to acknowledge the bells and do his chant. He returned the rock to his tongue and stumbled through swallowing it. The bag was finally empty, all the stones packed inside of him like ammunition. Eli thought he needed one more day to climb to the top of the tree. He'd need the bells to know when it was the next day.

Pale and fevered, his eyes grasped for something they could process. The tree bulged. The big branch hovering over the pavement was another eight feet above him and getting higher. His panic swirled, and he ripped handfuls of pine needles off the closest branch.

Craning his neck to find where to go, the next branch felt more than fifteen feet away. The distance made him whimper and tuck himself around the gourd of his stomach. Standing, moving, falling, all felt impossible. The grey inside of him was becoming cement. The entire climb would fail, Eli was sure. He'd disappear forever into that wiry tree.

But then the bells came. The end of the hour. Eli could sing his song and count the time. The bells brought him the sunset and the reassurance that tomorrow would come. The noxious pain abated. Eli dug his cracked finger into his nose and played with his pale snot.

Looking through the tree's growing skeleton, Eli tried to connect the hazy stars. The grey clouds quickly spread across the horizon, turning the whole sky into spent charcoal. The

constellations, the dots, all the structures were hidden. For Eli the night was indecipherable.

Cowering from glowing clouds, he needed the bells to ring one more time. It had been hours since a chime, he thought. He grew certain that another one wouldn't come. With the moon and stars pulsing like the blinking lights of a modem, he knew he had to trick the bells into ringing.

Bells, Bark, Bees, Trees.

Bells, Girl, Cat, Bells.

Humming the words twisted his face into a grin. Midnight's bargain bin humidity pushed its bland heat at Eli. He turned sideways and spread his torso across three uneven limbs. Coiled with pain, he spent the night staring past the streetlight's orange noise at Tera's swaying house.

It was more than an hour after he woke up the next morning before Eli realized he had pissed himself. He touched the wet diamond around his crotch, leaving his hand there as he tried to figure out when it happened. Time had grown silent.

The clouds retreated behind the trees, exposing the early morning sun. The FOR SALE sign and its red REDUCED tag sat dead in the hushed air. The stillness of the grass reminded Eli of a song. He mumbled all he could remember.

Bells, Bells, Bells.

Where are the bells?

Sunburned and smelling of dried piss, Eli tried to get to his feet. He inched his legs out to support his growing weight, but he couldn't get off his knees and collapsed into the tree's narrow center. A woolen dryness swarmed inside his mouth. He bit into his tongue, chewing it like worn out gum.

A Sunday breeze floated towards Eli and the empty lot. The wind brushed his face and made him blink. His teeth dropped his tongue, and all around him the pine needles shook.

Low to the pavement, in the middle of the street, a bit of white slowly stuttered toward him. He realized, he remembered, that it must be Tera's cat, that Spaghetti cat she had asked about. Eli found a thin channel of attention to focus on the scattered movement. Blind to the rest of the street, Eli called the cat's name. It moved to the side, slinking toward the gutter, but it wouldn't look up. Minutes later it moved again, jumping into the air and twisting backwards.

The wind led the cat straight to the tree, reviving Eli. The white spot spun below him. Was it even a cat, he wondered. Eli swung around, his head near the center of the tree and his legs splayed out on two bending branches behind him. When the wind stopped, Eli hollered again.

But still no acknowledgment from Spaghetti. Eli banged against the limbs to get the cat to come up in the tree. There was a slight stirring, like the cat was floating. He removed his hands from their wet shield around his stomach and reached to save the cat.

Eli was unaware that he was falling until he was more than halfway to the ground.

Unhinged from the tree, he was suddenly overwhelmed with flexibility, balleting with his split feet leading the way. In the tree Eli had dreamed of a cannonball jump led by his swollen stomach. The biggest stones were supposed to be the first things to smash into the pavement.

But it was his left leg, instantly snapping, that first hit the street. The ground didn't crack. Blood puddled on the manhole cover. Clouds idled on the horizon, waiting to unfurl. The bees attacked the clover. Wrinkled but rigid, a white carryout bag with its red lettering from Wendy's flopped against the curb from the wind, no longer enticing the delirious boy.

Lumped on the asphalt, emptying wretched water, Eli heard the bells ring three times. Then two ambulances came. The cops had been searching since the day before when Eli's dad reported him missing. The EMTs separated Eli from the ground and sirened him to the hospital. A group of surgeons operated on his leg, reconstructing it with metal. The next day they discovered the rocks and carefully extracted every single one. Nurses placed them on a small table next to Eli's opened stomach and then dumped them into a white trash bag.

The following evening a summer storm washed most of what was left into the sewer drains. The blood, the cigarettes, and the trash floated far away from the cul-de-sac. Quickly the story popped up between neighbors all over the development, down every dead end.

Eli's fall went the other way, through the bees and over the stream. It headed down the street from the Korean church and its measured bells. It grew around town at office buildings, grocery stores, and baseball games. Months later the story was overdramatized in Glen Ellyn, never making it to Chicago. Eli returned to the doctors, taking scans and pills, filling his pockets with inhalers, and hobbling on crutches. Spaghetti disappeared.

ALEX KOPLOW is a writer from Virginia. Recently his fiction has appeared in *Thieves Jargon*, *The Georgetown Voice*, *Thunderclap! Press*, and *Short, Fast, and Deadly*.

Julia and Raul

Ben Nardolilli

Julia was a pencil sharpener. She was attached to the cinderblock wall of Mrs. Karfunkel's third grade classroom. All of the students had to use her at least once a week. There was no coffee pot or water cooler, so Julia became the place where the students would meet, putting a pencil inside one of her many holes and then exchanging silly stories and knock-knock jokes. Julia was also located in the back of the room, the farthest anyone could get from the teacher without going into the cubby room that was fully hidden from her view.

Julia was made of stainless steel and wore a coat of nickel plating that made her shine across the room. Four screws held her in place. She was completely mechanical. An Amish person could use her, or the students whenever there was a blackout. Julia was a simple, sentient machine. She never got tired of the pencils. She enjoyed the feel of the wood sliding between her teeth, the taste of the paint she slowly chipped away, and the sound the shavings made when they landed in the trash can under her. It was like listening to snow falling.

Sometimes she got very hot because of all the work she did. When there was a test, all the students in the class would get up and sharpen their pencils in her. Some of the students put them in the wrong setting and Julia would have to work extra hard to keep the pencil in place. Occasionally a student would bring a pencil that was new and she had to gnaw on the flat sides of it until it was sharp. Whenever the class bully, Tommy Paterson, had to sharpen his pencil, she made sure that it never got too sharp. One time she had made the mistake of doing her best to make the point of his pencil as sharp as a needle, which Tommy then used to poke the girls in the class. If Tommy kept shoving his writing implement

into Julia's mouth and turned her crank in frustration, then she would sometimes bite the end off altogether and send Tommy back to his seat to complete his test in crayon.

The work was enjoyable for her because she got to see the wonderful things the students did with the pencils she sharpened. Their assignments and creative endeavors were often hung on a bulletin board that was made of soft cork, right next to Julia. Sometimes she was able to take pleasure in the simple curves that the students used to imitate the black letters that wrapped around the top of the classroom. Or she could enjoy the high scoring multiplication tests that Mrs. Karfunkel pinned up with gold stars attached to them. The best thing to look at were the drawings the students made of what they were learning, of Pilgrims and Indians, Egyptians and pyramids, or knights and castles. None of it was possible without her and she was happy to be of service.

One day a freckled girl with auburn colored pigtails came over to Julia with a pencil that needed to be sharpened. It was a new one that had been given to her by her grandmother as part of a plethora of school supplies the elderly woman gave her for her birthday. The pigtailed girl was happy to receive them, but wished that the present had included a toy or something edible.

The pencil was different from the others that Julia was used to. Its body was green instead of the bright yellow that matched the color of the school buses that Julia could sometimes see going by in the window. It was flat on the top and had no eraser. Whoever used it could make no mistakes. Julia waited as the pigtailed girl tried to figure out which of the settings was right for the pencil to go through and she felt the cold glossy skin of the pencil between the spinning blades of her throat. The girl's small fingers turned Julia's crank and the pencil ground inside her.

Soon the friction wore away the top and brought the wood out, with a charcoal colored top that was pointed and ready to make letters, lines, and numbers. Julia was ready to let the pencil out but the girl reached for a nearby box of tissues to blow her

nose, keeping the sharpened stick inside her. Julia sighed and looked at the pencil inside her. She could only see its green body. She could feel the sharpened parts, but they were hidden from her view.

"Hello."

Julia looked around.

"Hello," the same voice said again. It rumbled and echoed inside her, and she knew then that it was the pencil.

"Hi."

"I'm Raul."

"Oh. I'm Julia."

"Nice to meet you. Thanks for sharpening me."

"No problem."

"All the other pencils were laughing at me. The pens too, but they're always such jerks."

"I never meet many of them."

"I guess you don't. I've heard that being inside one of you guys is like hell, but you were actually very gentle and soft, I barely felt anything."

"You're welcome."

"I bet lots of pencils say that to you."

"No, actually none of them ever talk to me. They just get sharpened and leave."

"They don't ever tell you how smooth the grooves inside you are, or how quiet your gears turn?"

"Nope."

"Well I guess I am pleased to be the first."

"Good."

"It's getting hot in here. You're not moving, right? I mean, that's not friction."

"Oh, I don't know."

"You're not blushing... are you?"

The girl was done blowing her nose and she removed Raul from the slot inside. Julia looked at him. His owner was holding

him up upright, with the sharpened point up in the air. She had never seen a lovelier pencil. He was thin, tall, and his sharp graphite coil was the cleanest and shiniest she had ever seen. Raul took a bow towards Julia in the girl's hands. Julia had never felt so hot after sharpening a pencil before.

The next week, Raul was back. Julia received him gleefully, but spun her gears a little slower so that her metal teeth could run over Raul's body just a little longer. Julia talked to him while he was being sharpened.

"That feels good, Julia."

"What does?"

"When you go slower. I mean I like fast too, and normal, I like all of your settings, but slow is really good. I think it is my favorite."

"You're welcome."

"Julia, is there anything I could do for you?"

"I don't think so."

"Nothing to make it easier on you?"

"No, no, I enjoy the work."

"What if I spin against your little blades?"

"What?"

"Let me try it."

With that, Raul spun himself against the turn of the gears and wheels with riffled edges that were inside Julia. She loved it. It was the most wonderful feeling she had ever had. No pencil, regular or colored, had ever made the insides of her tingle. The pigtailed girl had to stop because it was getting to tiresome to keep spinning the pencil and the sharpener simultaneously. Her wrist and fingers were getting sore. She decided to pull Raul out. She grabbed his body with a pinch and with her other hand tried to get some leverage out of Julia. Once her hand touched the nickel plating, she gave a slight yelp.

Mrs. Karfunkel turned around from the chalkboard at the head of the classroom. "What is it, Jane?"

“Oh, nothing. The pencil sharpener is really hot.” She waved her hand to cool it off.

“Well, I think you’ve been using it for too long, why don’t you take a seat?”

Jane obeyed and walked to her desk. Raul was in her hand during the trip and he waved his body at Julia to let her know he was thinking of her and regretted having their meeting disturbed.

While she cooled down, she looked out across the classroom at Jane. She saw her holding Raul and she was angry with her. Her hands often rubbed her nose and then touched Raul’s otherwise immaculate green body. She held him as if he was a weapon, a blunt object that she would use to hammer out her letters. She put so much pressure on him that Julia was afraid his top would snap right off or, worse, that he would break in half.

But Raul took his sufferings and his scratching as best as he good. He leaned and squeezed himself within Jane’s hand so that he would not make squeaking or screeching sounds, which he was sure Julia found irritating. She appreciated the effort, but still she was sad. She wanted Raul to be near her, inside her if possible. There was something about him which made being apart almost unbearable. It was a form of torture she had never experienced in all her years in Mrs. Karfunkel’s class. She suffered, but never enough that it would completely overwhelm her. She still had the pleasure of thinking of him, and this was enough to let her carry on to the next moment. Her heart felt like it was breaking when in reality it was only her gears growing dusty, longing for him.

The pencil continued through the rest of the day making drawings for Jane and when the teacher was not looking, doodles. Raul wrote a love note for her to give to Tommy Paterson, but was so disgusted with the thought of anyone having a crush on such a bully, that Raul snapped his writing top off deliberately. The sound shocked Jane and she dropped Raul. He rolled until he landed in front of Tommy’s worn shoes. Tommy picked him up

and smiled at Jane, who blushed as she took the pencil from him. The teacher told both of her students to face forward and they continued to learn about long division.

Raul was put inside the desk with the other pencils. They disliked the attention he had been getting and that he had hurt himself rather than be an instrument for his owner. This was something pencils were not supposed to do. If they had known about him and Julia, they would have been even angrier with him and tempted to cover him in glue if he continued to be troublesome.

Raul hated being in the desk. It was dark and he had no idea what was going on in the rest of the world. It smelled like old rubber and banana peels. Jane had taken another pencil and Raul could hear him writing whatever she wanted. The point ran above him like the dull blade on a pair of ice skates. He could not see it, but he knew it was there being drawn over a piece of paper, line after line.

There was nothing Raul could do except sit and wait. But his pigtailed owner would never pick him because he had made himself blunt and could make no useful marks for her. The bell rang and the knees and thighs of the pigtailed girl that had been so close to him now were gone altogether. The class was going to lunch and then recess. A pair of heels left along with everyone else. There were no human eyes left in the room. Raul decided he had to act.

"Hey, Percy!"

"What?"

"Do you think you could do me a favor?"

"No."

"I want you to come down here so I can try and get up there."

"Why?"

"I just want to."

"No. I'm not going anywhere. You're a bad pencil."

Raul rolled through the plastic surface of the desk and found his friend, Yolanda, who was an eraser. She was shaped like a parallelogram and was bright pink and lived in the desk. They were friends. Yolanda helped to clean up all the marks that Raul left behind. They helped to make each other useful.

“Yolanda?”

“Yes, Raul?”

“I need your help, I want to get on top of the desk.”

“Why?”

“Because I... I want to be held by Jane.”

“I thought I was the only one for you,” she jokingly said.

“Well she is just so... comfortable and powerful.”

“You pencils are all alike, you fall for anything big. You guys have to stand up for yourselves.”

“I know, I know, but the revolution will have to wait. I need to get up there and knock Percy out.”

“Percy is up there?”

“Yes.”

“Percy, Mr. I-Have-My-Own-Eraser-And-Don’t-Need-You-Or-Anyone-Else?”

“Yes. I believe that is his maiden name.”

“Okay, I’ll help you.”

The other pencils had gone into the neon orange box that was wide and narrow enough for them to fit in. It was their own private club. Percy was left all alone on top of the desk. Yolanda moved a ruler with Raul’s help and they drew it out like a plank to the top of the chair that Jane had slid right next to the desk. Soon the ruler was touching the inside of the desk as well as the top of the chair and Yolanda gave a big push to Raul, who rolled up the ruler and then held himself from going over and falling to the floor.

“Alright, Yolanda, press hard and downward on your end of the ruler so that it will fall and send me flying to the desk.” He had gotten the idea from pictures of catapults and trebuchets in Jane’s history textbook.

Yolanda followed the instructions and the ruler fell, propelling Raul forward. He landed on the desk and rolled over the faux wood finish. There was nothing to stop him until he got to Percy, who was taking a nap. When he woke up, it was too late. Raul's green skin bumped up against his yellow one and Percy absorbed all of Raul's movement. He began to roll as Raul came to a stop, heading all the way to the edge of the desk and falling off.

When recess was over, Jane had gotten to the head of the line through some pushing and shoving that the teacher did not see, her eyes distracted by the gardener's firm arms planting marigolds outside. Jane ran ahead of the rest of the students and saw that her desk was a mess. She had no memory of leaving Raul the green pencil out, but she figured it was a trick and that it was best to put everything back the way it was before anyone saw the ruler and Percy on the floor.

But Raul was still blunt and would have to be sharpened again. Jane picked him up and went over to Julia who was looking brighter than she had ever seen her. Jane figured that the janitor must have come and given her a nice shine. She knew that he sometimes came when no one else was around to make things nice. He must have knocked over her things when he was leaving. Jane slid Raul into the proper hole and began to grind the wheels inside Julia in order to sharpen him.

Julia was ecstatic, she wanted this moment between them to last forever. Raul wanted it too. They held on and spun in opposite directions from one another once more. Julia was starting to heat up. The handle on her crank was plastic, so Jane could not feel it. But the pencil shavings that were still inside her from Raul and those who had come before him, yet had left nothing else behind, started to smoke a bit. Luckily they fell out before they could start a fire. The air was dense between the two lovers and Raul continued to go deeper and deeper into Julia, even as his shiny rear end began to come closer to his tip.

Jane realized that the sharpener was eating up her pencil and decided she had to get it out or else it would soon disappear inside her. She decided not to touch Julia because she did not want to burn her hand again. Julia felt her gear stop and knew that Jane was done.

“My love...”

“Don’t worry, I will continue to spin into you, until I vanish. I cannot go back to her.”

“Raul...”

He was about to begin spinning on his own, but Jane grabbed him and started to pull him out. He shook and did his best to stop, banging from side to side. Jane pulled harder. When Raul had jammed himself into Julia by leaning to one side, Jane just changed direction and continued to drag him. She thought it was like playing a game of pull the tail off the donkey.

“Come out! Come out!”

“Jane, what’s the matter?”

“The stupid sharpener. My pencil is stuck.”

“Please do it quietly or don’t do it at all, Jane.”

She calmed down and let go of the pencil that was now hanging out of Julia at an angle.

“I think she’s gone, Julia, I think we’re alone now.”

But Jane gave the green end of the pencil one final tug. Raul came flying out of the sharpener and out of Jane’s hands. The pencil looked back at Julia with the fluorescent light overhead giving a nice gleam to his sharpened head. Jane’s auburn pigtailed fluttered and her pale hand reached out to try and grab him but he was too fast for her. Raul wanted to take another pencil hostage and draw a smile on his face. He was happy.

Raul left a mark on the whitewashed cinderblocks right across from the pencil sharpener. He actually left two because the force of impact had split him in half. They were very faint marks, but could be seen by anyone who paused for a moment in front of that particular space and stared. Jane was angry. No part of Raul

was usable. The top half had a fissure down the middle and the bottom part was too jagged to be held in place long enough to be sharpened.

She tossed him in the garbage can beneath the sharpener. Raul regained some consciousness and realized that his body was broken. His sharpened top was sitting upward as he surveyed what was around him. This was the end for him. There was no one to help him, no one to save him. The remains of fellow pencils were all around him; they had been sharpened down so far that they were no longer useful. But mostly he was surrounded by the shavings that Julia let out from under her.

“My love, my love...”

Julia looked down and saw Raul struggling to see her. She tried to bend quietly so that no one would notice, but it was hard. She moved a little more than she was used to and was surprised. The screws had become loose because of all the extra heat she had given off and the tugging that Jane and all the students before her had put them through. She pressed further and, though she was held back, the restraints were weaker than ever before. Raul was in the trash can still, and neither had a good view of the other. Julia looked over and saw the class was busy having story time. She continued to bend herself.

One screw was gone, it fell out and it landed in the trash can with Raul. Julia did not see where it landed but hoped it did not hit him on the head. Soon she shook another screw loose, and then one more. There was a single screw left and it was the most firm in its place. Julia now hung under it, dangling in the air over the trash can and trying to call out to Raul to let him know she was coming.

Julia kept swinging and even though any of the students or the teacher would have seen her tracing wide arcs in the air, nobody noticed because they were engrossed in the story about a boy who was trying to find a dragon that had belonged to his father. Julia could feel the edge of the screw going thin and friction finally eating its way through it. Her weight was starting to sink

her closer and closer to the trash can. Julia took a deep breath and took in all the air she could. She blew out hard and went backward, spinning the whole way around the screw in a full circle. When she came down to where she had started, she had cut herself off from the small metal holder and gravity could now do its work to bring the two lovers together.

Julia sailed through the air and when she landed in the trash can, the sound went ignored by the class. She heard only laughter from them and while they were busy, she looked down, Raul was nowhere to be found. She called out for him but there was no response. Then he started laughing and the vibrations from it filled her insides. She saw a green tip sticking out from the hole in her front. There was never a more perfect fall.

BEN NARDOLILLI is a twenty five year old writer currently living in Montclair, New Jersey. His work has appeared in the Houston Literary Review, Perigee Magazine, Red Fez, Baker's Dozen, The Puritan, Quail Bell Magazine, Elimae, amphibi.us, Gold Dust, Scythe, Anemone Sidecar, The Delmarva Review, Contemporary American Voices, Gloom Cupboard, Black Words on White Paper, and Cantaraville. In addition he maintains a blog at mirrorsponge.blogspot.com and is looking to publish his first novel.