

# **JERSEY DEVIL PRESS**

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# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

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## Editor's Note: A More Civilized Age

For some of us, *Star Wars* was – and is – kind of a big deal. It was an integral part of our childhood, of who we are now. Friends could be discerned by whether they knew the bounty hunters' names, by a strange gear tattooed onto a bicep, and good friends could be singled out by which movie they believed was the best. (Personally, *Return of the Jedi* was the first movie I saw in a theater and it will always hold a special place in my heart. Yes, the Ewoks were a little too cute, but, come on, the rancor was *fucking awesome*.)

At some point, though, George Lucas decided to mess with perfection. He decided he was better than us. He laughed in our faces and changed our movies into something hideous and ugly – Darth Maul being the exception, of course – until we were left crying in dark rooms, convinced there was no longer anything good in this world. On some level, we knew what we had seen as children was still there, but it was hard to make it out through the noise and the pod races and Jar Jar fucking Binks.

But we had – have – faith, and that belief in our childhood, in our memories, though it differed from Mr. Lucas's increasingly inconsistent canon, from what he wanted us to believe, was enough. We have what we remember, and no amount of CGI can take that away.

Or, for the rest of you, they're just some pretty good movies.

In a wacky coincidence, we've got some stories tackling those very issues this month, though most of them don't dwell on the *Star Wars* part quite so heavily. Or, you know, at all.

First up is "Exposure," by Claire Joanne Huxham, followed by "The Toad and the Butterfly," by RCJ Graves. Next is "Pentecostal," by Lauren J. Barnhart. Then, finishing up the issue, is Mike Sweeney's magnum opus, "CPA of the Sith."

I'll give you three guesses which one's about *Star Wars*.

– Eirik Gumeny

## Exposure

Claire Joanne Huxham

Right back at the beginning Lucy used road-kill. Flattened squirrels, hedgehogs pasted onto the kerb, sometimes even a seagull or pigeon. It always amazed her when birds got hit. You'd think they'd be quicker. When she drove out into the countryside she found badgers and foxes exploded in heaps of fur and meat, red bright against the tarmac. Family pets still made her feel uncomfortable, although it was only cats she saw, never dogs.

The wait that summer till their final year of university had left them all cranky, listless. They slumped in the living room until the first glimpse of dawn and wasted the daylight that followed. Cigarette butts and ash piled up in saucers and empty Coke cans. Half drained cups of coffee sat on the window sill, furry circles bobbing just under the surface. Lucy's head constantly ached. She longed for fresh air. But one afternoon everything changed when Mike slapped a pile of photographs down on the table.

"Look," he said.

Lucy pulled herself across the carpet and began flicking through the set. She recognised shots of Wales, mostly landscape: mountains, a reservoir, some sheep, a petrol station, the back of a man walking down a road. She'd been with Mike when he took them last Easter. He'd been planning to use them for his uni project before he abandoned the idea in favour of a city shoot. But each photo in her hand had another strange, alien image ghosting its surface. In a deserted valley, she could see what looked like a mother and daughter smiling for the camera, giant-size. In a country lane, palm trees sprouted. She looked at Mike.

"Double exposed," he said. "Someone else's holiday. Mallorca by the looks of it. Or somewhere Spanish anyway."

"But how?"

"I buy expired film for cheap from that second hand Emporium down Richard Street. Must've got in there by mistake."

"Well maybe you should stop," she said. "These are ruined. Who would want to buy out of date film anyway?"

"Loads of us do. You should check eBay, loads of auctions are up. Besides, this double exposure thing? I think it's pretty cool. I mean, I know it's unexpected, but it's an added bonus. Be great for a project."

Lucy looked again at the prints. From the mother's clothes she guessed they were from the '90s; the woman was standing on a wall by the sea in one, her daughter caught mid twirl with a doll flying out from her hand. She pushed them back towards Mike across the table. A scene from that Harrison Ford movie her brother always obsessed over popped into her head, when he's being horrible to some android, telling her those Polaroids are fake memories.

"I think they're kinda creepy," she said.

But that's how it all started.

They began collecting images. It was all Mike's idea; he always said that great art creates a connection between artist and viewer, and other stuff like that. Lucy wasn't so sure herself. She was studying marketing because it was a sensible choice; one which would hopefully give her a good career, her dad said. But she liked the way Mike's eyes went wide when he talked about his art, she liked the way he looked at her when she helped him. So she borrowed one of his old manual cameras and bought new 35mm film. They wandered round the house and garden together, peered down side streets and in parks, looking for the perfect capture. But nothing was right. It all seemed boring and mundane somehow.

The next day Mike took her hand and pulled her out through the back gate. They threaded through the narrow lanes until they came out onto a busy road. A dead squirrel lay on the

kerb. Someone must have moved it from the road, or perhaps it just bounced off the car. She was surprised at how perfect it looked, how whole. Of course, not all of them look like that. And it was then that Mike said this was what they were looking for, that they owed it to themselves to really make it something, to explore the whole range of human emotions, whatever that meant. Part of her still thought it was all bullshit, but another part was hooked.

“So what do we do with the film when we finish?” she asked.

“We give it back. Shoot more. Donate them to charity shops, slip them into the tub at the Emporium. I suppose we could list them on eBay, but I’d rather stay anonymous. Perhaps take a few to other towns and cities? Then we sit back and wait... become part of something bigger. All those holiday snaps we’re going to shake up.”

“Like Russian roulette.”

“Yeah.” Mike smiled. “Just like Russian roulette.”

Those next days Lucy woke early and slipped out the house before everyone else. Or at least tried to – Mike usually beat her to it. She’d walk down the landing corridor and push his door as she passed, seeing the empty bed. She found herself walking farther into the city, looking for sights Mike wouldn’t have claimed. Her eyes were fixed to the ground always looking for death and she started to forget what the sky looked like. In the evenings they’d sit together on the floor, showing each other their route on the map, talking about what they’d seen and shot. Until one evening Mike wouldn’t talk about it. He stared at the muted TV, flicking ash in a saucer.

“It’s not enough,” he said.

And he got up and left, pulling the door shut behind him.

The next week, she pushed Mike’s door as she passed in the morning like usual. She noticed the smell straight away. It was sweet, almost too sweet. And then she saw the small wired cage and something brownish inside. Flies circled it languidly.

“It was weak anyway,” Mike said that evening. “Probably a runt.”

“You killed it?”

“Like I said, it was weak anyway.”

“How?”

He didn't reply. Mike was starting to look thin, like he hadn't eaten in days. He said he's lost his appetite. Lucy however, was hungry all the time. She'd started dreaming about burgers and steaks and venison and liver, always rare and pink.

She bought an old fashioned mousetrap from the hardware shop down the road and set it in the kitchen. For days it lay empty, until it offered up awful fruit. The mouse had already stiffened by the time she shot it, its pink paws curled pathetically against its grey chest. It was cool in her hand when she laid it in the garden. Mike seemed impressed when she told him. Of course they couldn't show each other their captures; they had to go on trust. Once they finished each film they wound the spool back and pulled out the end, just like you'd see on a new film. They lined each canister up on the mantel piece. They stood like strange monoliths and her eyes constantly traced their lines and curves. They seemed to absorb all light from the room.

Homeless people became her speciality. She scoured underpasses and condemned buildings, camera in one hand. At first she stood far away to take her photos, but she knew she could get better if she moved closer. She used food as a bargaining tool, although some asked for money. Only one crippled dark shape, barely a woman, refused to have her photo taken. Lucy took it anyway.

She was in the old warehouse off Grafton Street when she saw him. Her torch beam caught a greasy looking sleeping bag, pushed down to reveal a thin torso. He was twisted on his back, his head angled back and a mess of syringes and spoons by his unmoving hand. Dead. Lucy aimed the lens. The flash illuminated



the room and she almost cried out when she saw his hand twitch, noticed the shallow rising and falling of his chest.

It feels like it's all there is now. When she shuts her eyes she tries to remember a time before, but everything's blurred. It's been hot all summer and it won't break, and every day she wakes up gasping. She's developed some kind of ulcer on her leg and it itches and weeps constantly. She has to wear thick opaque tights to cover it up, despite the heat.

Mike comes home and can't stop shaking. He twists his hands and looks at her with too bright eyes. He looks older, his face is creased with new lines that Lucy is sure weren't there the week before. His skin looks powdery.

"I caught a crash," he says. "Car went straight into a cyclist."

"Oh my god – was he ok?"

"She. I don't know. I think so. Ambulance came and stretchered her away. There was so much blood."

Lucy starts hanging round the hospital. A&E is small though and she worries she'll get noticed by the receptionist. But she can walk right into any of the general wards and as long as she's in visiting hours, no one questions her. She carries a bunch of flowers just in case. In the cancer ward sunken faces stare out of hollowed pillows, stick bodies draw sharp lines under pale blue sheets. She shoots from the hip but no one seems to care, no one has the energy to say anything. Mostly they're sleeping and don't notice. Even the ones who're awake don't notice.

Summer limps on. There's a problem with the bin collection and rubbish heaps in gardens and on streets. Flies burst when they move the bags. Foxes rip them open and pull rotting food across pavements. News reports show a woman crying in an arid land, hands clenched and beating her breasts. In Manchester, a teenage girl discovers a severed foot along a canal. They take the canisters of film, little black time bombs, to second hand shops and leave quietly. There doesn't seem to be anything left to say.

And when they've taken everything they can, they look around with empty eyes. A roll of film lies fresh in the camera, waiting for shapes of light and dark to burn it and give it meaning. Lucy walks the streets in the early hours, searching, camera hanging like a useless limb. When she gets home she unscrews the light bulb in her bedroom and sits on the floor. What is left to take now? The grey of the ocean at midnight. This room with no light and the curtains drawn. A mirror with her own face in.

**CLAIRE JOANNE HUXHAM** lives in the UK and spends most of her time obsessing over *Buffy* and *Battlestar Galactica*. This probably makes her a bit of a geek, but she doesn't mind. She's also quite keen on sushi, UFOs, cats and cheese, but probably not in that order. Her fiction can be found or is forthcoming in *Monkeybicycle*, *The Molotov Cocktail* and *Metazen*.

# The Toad and the Butterfly

RCJ Graves

Conrad Toad was sunbathing by a little pond in Central Park, snacking on the occasional gnat, when an enormous blue and black butterfly fluttered by overhead. Conrad's eyes bulged. Magnificent, he thought, she's beautiful.

"Hullo, up there!" Conrad called.

Brittany Butterfly pointed her black antennae at Conrad. To her he was a massive, slimy, predatory blob with an enormous mouth. Fear shot to her wings, and she fluttered higher and further away.

"Don't be afraid," Conrad said. "I wouldn't hurt someone as beautiful as you."

Brittany pointed her antennae back to the heaving, beastly mouth and saw it had two big, honest eyes on top of its head, and she saw her reflection—fantastically, magically beautiful—in those eyes.

"You wouldn't?" she asked, as she batted her wings and dropped a little closer to Conrad.

"Oh, never," Conrad said. "I eat the ugly little things, the gnats and flies and mosquitoes, you know. You're way too pretty and too big too." Conrad blinked vacantly at the butterfly as he spoke.

Brittany could detect neither deceit nor craftiness from Conrad, and butterflies' antennae are especially sensitive to such things, so she fluttered even closer to him in order to give him a better look at her.

She watched herself in his eyes as she came closer. "Yes, I am very beautiful," she agreed.

"We should be friends," Conrad said, his wet eyes bulging with pleasure at the sight of her.

Brittany laughed.

"Oh, no, no, no!" she exclaimed to Conrad's surprise. "We could never be friends. It wouldn't be right."

"Why sure it would," Conrad said, "being friends is fun."

Brittany laughed. "Oh, no, no, no! That would be wrong: I am the beautiful, glamorous Brittany Butterfly, and you are an ugly, bulgy-eyed, slimy, big-mouthed, moist blob of ugliness. You see, we just don't go together."

Conrad's eyes became even moister than usual, and then big tears rolled out.

"Why would you say I'm ugly?" he asked. "Aren't I nice?"

"Ugh, nice and ugly," Brittany answered.

"But no one else says I'm ugly," Conrad countered.

"I'll prove it to you then," Brittany said with confidence.

Conrad's wet eyes blinked up at her. "There's a human, a little girl, not far from here who's reading a book on a big round stone," Brittany continued. "We'll find her, we'll each get her attention, and then we'll see what see says about us."

Conrad just blinked up at Brittany not knowing what to do. But inside himself, he felt a warm little light glowing, and he knew that that light was not ugly, no matter what a butterfly or a little girl or anyone said.

"OK," he finally agreed. "Please lead the way, beautiful Brittany Butterfly." Brittany laughed and fluttered off, and Conrad hopped along behind.

The girl wasn't very far away. Her sneakers dangled just above a fragrant patch of red clover. Conrad plunged toward her, enveloped in the smell and softness of the clover. Then he leapt with all of the light and joy inside of him and bumped the little girl's foot, startling her.

The little girl snapped her book shut and looked down at Conrad. Conrad's big, wet eyes stared up at her.

“Oh, hello, Mr. Toad,” the girl said, “Aren’t you friendly?” Conrad’s heart burst with joy. He looked around for Brittany, but she was nowhere to be found.

Conrad wondered why she had left. He had proven he wasn’t ugly, so she should want to be his friend now. He hopped off through the clover to find her.

“Goodbye, Mr. Toad,” the little girl called after Conrad as she watched him disappear into a nearby flower bed. Then she opened her book and gasped. “Oh no, no, no!” the little girl said. “Poor butterfly!” And she used a napkin to wipe Brittany from the pages.

**RCJ GRAVES'** fiction and poetry is widely published in print and online. His work has recently appeared in *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Danse Macabre*, *Fear and Trembling Magazine*, *The New Flesh*, *Poetry Quarterly*, and *The Short Story Library*. He lives in Augusta, GA, where he teaches literature and rhetoric at Paine College.

## Pentecostal

Lauren J. Barnhart

My mother's entire social life was within the faith. Besides church on Sunday, she attended Wednesday night services, ran a Senior Citizen's Bible study the next morning, and went to Praise night at Mrs. McMaster's house the night after where she could play her tambourine during the worship. But her Women's Aglow meetings really took the cake. They would meet up once a month in various banquet halls and the only man I ever saw was a handsome African American pastor. Everyone was in love with him. At the time I was about six years old and he told me that he liked the dress my mother had forced me to wear. I felt ridiculous in frilly things with bows and petticoats. But the tights were an even worse torture. I couldn't stop scratching my legs.

At these meetings the energy would reach a frenzy, building to a climax until around twenty women would go up front. Amidst howling and shrieking and blubbering sobs, the pastor would shout, "By the power of Jesus' blood you are slain in the spirit!" Instantly they would all fall, flat on their backs. It was very funny to watch. It wasn't as though they would sit on their asses and then fall back. It was more of a complete backwards faint. A long row of over-weight women in potato sack dresses just lying there, some of them passed out, others speaking in tongues.

One time a woman came with a neck brace from a permanent injury. The pastor laid his hands on her, along with five women praying out loud in a din of nonsense. Eventually the woman couldn't take anymore and she just busted off her brace and started yelling that she'd been healed. Women's Aglow was always good for a show.

There were other meetings like this one. We went to see a traveling faith healer and two parents brought their screaming

three year-old. We were told he was possessed by a demon, but it seemed to me he was just tired or sick or maybe had a psychological problem. With his hand on the boy's head, the pastor started yelling, "Release him from this torture! In Jesus' name, set this boy free!"

The boy screamed even louder. I had to admit, it was eerie. And it went on and on, until finally the boy stopped crying, and they walked off the stage. Yes, the stage. Everything seemed staged. Like theater, like an over-abundance of emotions, like hypnotism through the way the pastors talked, that rhythm in their voices that they all used for the same reason.

"You are getting very sleepy," pause, "When I count to three you will close your eyes. One... two... three," pause, "I will use the Bible as mind control. And because of the all-knowing tone of my voice you will never question me. I will use the pulpit to be high above you, and the words that I say will be the words of God. And I will be like God to you. I will comfort you, but I will also fill you with fear. Because you would not want to falter in front of God, just as you will be your best for me. And you will give me your devotion, and your money, and your life, and your will. As a congregation you will grow, and feed my ego. And we will grow in strength. We will take over the world in our spiritual revival. We will spread to the far reaches. And I will be your leader. I will be your father. When I count to three you will be free from your own weakness, and will understand the strength in being my flock. One... two... three, wake up!"

Show me a pastor who doesn't feel this way, and I'll show you a church that isn't going anywhere. Because if people don't have a master to count on, there will be no unity. And the most charismatic, successful pastors are also the most deranged. They crave the attention, and that need to feel important. Everything else is a façade.

My mother wouldn't question the pastor, or the Republican president, because she was told their words were the word of God.

And this makes me angry, as though my entire upbringing was a big lie. I wanted to please my parents, and it was upsetting to know that a part of me would always let them down.

Throughout childhood there was an inner battle that no one else could see. At church singing hymns, I was only four and thought it would be funny if I sang in potty talk instead. No one could hear me. But I felt liberated from all the staunch repression. Free as I could be in my pee-pees and poo-poops and on and on in my own personal mantra. The boredom of the following sermon never mattered after that. I had created my first act of rebellion against being made to sing words I did not feel. Always, I knew that this person I was being raised to be was not who I was at all. An inner divide took over, a parallel that took too many years to escape.

I was sixteen and my mother and sister took me on a women's retreat. Maybe I could finally prove that I wasn't a failure at being a Christian. They asked if anyone would like to come up for prayer. I went up and asked to receive my prayer language. Three women laid hands on me and I closed my eyes hard in concentration, desperately wanting to feel something. Their touch sent a chill down my back. I looked over to the right and could see my mother through the crowd, prostrate on the ground. Turning back, I zeroed in on my attempt to feel the presence of God. But there was nothing. Only my own mind telling me that now would be a good time to begin speaking gibberish.

When I opened my eyes the women around me were smiling with tears in their eyes. Of all the words I could speak, it was nonsense that made them happy. This was their religion.

**LAUREN J. BARNHART's** poetry was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2004, and featured in various literary journals. As a singer and songwriter, her music was selected for the Love/No Love compilation album released by Levee Breaking.



# CPA of the Sith

Mike Sweeney

## Episode I

Mora takes the Mead notebook from her desk and begins to draw on the cover, thick block letters with her silver Sharpie.

Downstairs she can hear the squeak and rattle of the cap on the Jameson bottle and it sounds like relief to her. It's all a question of potency: whiskey numbs him with sufficient speed that there's little time for much else other than sleep. Beer takes too long, gives him the stamina to express his anger. In Mora's head, the equation has always been: Jameson > Budweiser.

She checks her Sankyo clock, the ancient digital device her older brother left her. It reads "9:17." By the time it reaches "11:00," she'll be able to safely go down and put a blanket over her dad.

A little over an hour and a half to write, but first she wants to get the cover just so. Is it one "l" or two?

Mora turns to the small shelf above her night stand, the one made for a little boy and covered with cartoon etchings of baseball and football players. She considers it the place she keeps her most treasured items: a Polaroid snap of her mom, the Sankyo clock, and her paperbacks.

The latter are divided into three stacks. On the far right are the trio of Han Solo books by Brian Daley. On the far left are the canon: the original novelizations of the *Star Wars* trilogy ghost written for George Lucas by Alan Dean Foster. In the center are Foster's novelizations of *The Thing* and *Alien* and his own original *Star Wars* novel, *The Splinter of the Mind's Eye*.

Mora has many other books, enough for two bookcases, but these paperbacks are special. The words in them mean a great deal to Mora, but so does their physical presence. They are talismans

against bad things. It's why she will never part with them, why she loves them infinitely more than the beautiful new set of *Harry Potter* hard backs she got for Christmas or the glossy collection of *Twilight* novels she reluctantly bought at Barnes & Noble's so she'd have something to talk about at lunch.

The purchase of the paperbacks was one of the few acts of defiance committed by her mother against Mora's stepfather.

Those were the Dark Times: no Internet and no movies or TV shows that didn't conform to his standards, all under the guise of unflagging devotion to a different set of books. Against that, nine tattered paperbacks from a county fair were all Mora had, until her mother's one absolute act of defiance.

Mora carefully slips the yellowed copy of *Star Wars* from the bottom of the stack on the left and runs her fingers over the words, "From the Adventures of Luke Skywalker" on the cover. She opens to the prologue and sees that "Whills" does indeed have two "l's." She notes this in her mind, replaces the book in its correct spot, and let's her fingers linger on the paperbacks above it. Downstairs, the Jameson cap is squeaking again.

Mora estimates that she is among the one-hundredth of one percent of the world's population who were introduced to *Star Wars* via the written word rather than the screen. She eventually saw the movies when she moved back to Jersey and fell deeply in love with them too. But there are times she prefers those early days when the Battle of Yavin existed only in her head, when Darth Vader's eyes glowed red, the way Foster described them.

Mora looks out her window at the clear night sky, at the full moon, and at the water tower looming over the neighbor's house. She hopes this will be one of those nights when it miraculously transforms into an All Terrain Attack Transport.

## Episode II

Mark Everson can't stop sweating. He sits in the office of his supervisor, Bert Newcomb, waiting for Bert to get off the phone.

Mark's hand is balled into a fist in the right front pocket of his suit pants. His car keys are laced through his fingers and he jams them into the flesh of his thigh trying to force himself to be calm.

Mark is certain why he's here. New Year's Day, when he came in to catch up on his accounts, he spent two hours on the "clear computer" in the break room. No one's supposed to spend more than five minutes on it a day – just long enough to check messages.

It's not so much the reprimand that Mark fears as the details.

It was a free trial of *Star Wars Galaxies*. He should've just waited till he got home. Instead he logged on to an external server from inside the Department of Justice and spent two hours roaming the Dantooine countryside as "Darth Laser." It was the name Mark used when he played *Star Wars* as a kid and now it was going to be officially entered into his record. For the rest of his life co-workers everywhere would laugh about it.

Mark thinks seriously about selling out one of his colleagues. There's Stan Worthington who has those videos on his secure computer, the compilations of famous actresses' nude scenes. He's showed everyone the Natalie Portman one and that's got to be against the sexual harassment policy, if nothing else. Then there's Toby with his Blackberry and his incessant tweets. Smartphones are only for the outer office but Toby sneaks his inside so he can tell all twenty-six of his Twitter followers that he switched the family over from the Scott-brand napkins to the ones by Bounty and he's really happy with the results.

Mark is sure he's close to drawing blood from his leg.

Bert hangs up the phone and looks at the paper in front of him. He smiles and hands it to Mark.

Mark is sufficiently relieved that it doesn't contain the words "Darth" or "Laser" that he ignores the fact that his own last name is misspelled.

Bert clears his throat and uses his official voice: "The Department of Justice thanks you for your hard work and dedication under extreme circumstances."

Mark slowly begins to recognize that he's holding a certificate of commendation from the Attorney General.

Bert is still speaking. "And I'd personally like to add it took a hell of a lot of courage volunteering to go over to Iraq."

Mark wants to say that it was after most of the violence against US forces had stopped. He wants to say that he never left the FOB, that for eleven days he never went outside, just shuffled down the hall from his quarters to the air-conditioned sub-basement where he looked for discrepancies in the accounting practices of the fast food companies that supplied the base. He wants to say that he didn't find any but that he hoped the time in Iraq would qualify him to work on one of the terrorism projects.

Mark says none of this.

Bert is still smiling. He has wonderful teeth.

Finally, Mark summons his courage. "Sir, I... I was wondering about the electronic transfers project. I think I could be a lot of help. And terrorism is – "

" – is important, but so is our everyday security here in this facility. We can't plug other people's holes if our own ship is sinking, right?"

Bert stares at Mark until Mark nods his agreement.

Bert continues: "Mark, you're the best I've got and you know we're cutting back on SIPRNET reliance, going back to old fashioned pen and paper. That means I need my best auditor now more than ever. Right?"

Bert stares at Mark until he smiles, which he finally does.

Mark relaxes the hand in his pocket. At least no one's mentioned Darth Laser.

“Alright then,” Bert says, which is his way of ending all conversations.

Mark slips out of his chair, certain that he’s bleeding through his pant leg.

As he leaves Bert’s office, Mark thinks again about applying to the CIA’s forensic accounting division but knows that would mean he’d have to take a polygraph. There’s no way around the issue of the escort. He’d have to admit to it. The Agency probably wouldn’t care but it would get out, get around the office. They’d look at him as an even bigger loser.

Mark coughs twice as his breath catches. A secretary looks up from her cubicle and he waves her off as he tries not to hyperventilate. He quickens his pace through the outer office, towards the men’s room. As he walks, he hears Stan Worthington and some of the others laughing in the break room. They’re not laughing about Darth Laser or about the physics grad student he pays to sleep with him, but Mark feels like they are. The laughter echoes down the corridor as Mark walks faster and his breath begins to shudder.

His chest feels tight and hot and if this hadn’t happened to him dozens of times before he would be sure he was taking a heart attack. Mark rams his shoulder into the men’s room door and begins checking to make sure no one else is using the bathroom. He finally sits in the last stall and places his palms flat against the metal door. The coolness relaxes him. He stares at his feet and prepares to say the only thing that ever makes him feel better.

As his breathing slows, Mark forces his voice into a deep rumble and growls, “If they only knew the power of the Dark Side.”

### **Episode III**

“Huh. So it’s like a castle?”

“Almost exactly like a castle. In fact, I think you can safely say a castle and a citadel are pretty darn close from an architectural standpoint.”

The young man on the customer side of the counter considers this as he checks over his application one more time. He corrects the spelling of his home address with the stubby pencil and asks, “So why don’t they just call it, ‘Cheese Castle’?”

A.J. weighs the question for a moment before deciding to answer honestly. “Probably because of White Castle. There’s some legal thing.”

“But they make burgers.”

“We make burgers too.”

“But the cheese – “

“ – is our difference maker. You see, the idea behind *Cheese Citadel* is that you can get a burger – the meat end of it, that is – anywhere. Our value added, our special secret, is the cheese.”

“Right. Sixty flavors?”

“Sixteen. And we prefer to say, ‘wheels’ instead of ‘flavors.’ Probably because of Baskin Robbins.”

“The ice cream guys?”

“Yeah.” A.J. rubs his chin, looks left and then right. He leans across the counter towards Sam. “Say, you wanna know what I call this place?”

Sam nods.

“The Coruscant of Cheddar.” A.J. grins expectantly.

Sam considers A.J.’s words for several seconds. Then: “Is a coruscant like a citadel?”

“No it’s... um... nevermind. May I?”

A.J. takes the application from Sam. His eyes immediately move to the questions about arrest and incarceration and seeing that both boxes are checked “no” decides he has a new hire.

A.J. pretends to read the other information for several seconds, nodding as he does. When he thinks a respectable amount

of time has passed, he ends with a final, definitive bob of his head. He extends a hand to Sam.

"I like your experience. And your attitude. I think we could use you on the Citadel team."

Sam shrugs and takes A.J.'s hand. "And the thing about Wednesday's is cool?"

"Not a problem." A.J. looks intently at the counter and clears his throat. He hates this next part. "There's, uh, there's this one other thing."

Sam is still smiling.

A.J. continues: "The new guy... you see, at night we need someone to mop out the restrooms and, you know, um, clean the toilets and so, for a while anyway, that would primarily be you. After a few months, though..."

A.J. doesn't finish. Sam is backing away. He looks more hurt than angry. He continues edging towards the exit. When he reaches the glass door, Sam pushes it hard enough that it rattles.

A.J. puts his back to the rest of the restaurant and stares down at a stack of plastic cups adorned with a cartoon cat who loves brie. They wanted to use a mouse but there was that legal thing with Chuck-E-Cheese.

He can hear Molly in the back saying the fondue dispenser is jammed again. For the third time in as many days, A.J. is afraid he will publicly burst into tears.

From behind him, a flat, cold voice says, "Your powers are weak, old man."

"What?"

"I said, 'Can I speak to the manager?'"

A.J. pivots and is confronted by a woman in her fifties. She stands with one hand balled into a fist on her hip; in the other, she holds a half-eaten cheese burger that seems to accuse A.J. of some wrong.

She drops the burger onto the counter and scowls. A.J. picks it up gently and respectfully considers what's left of the bun and

meat patty before returning his focus to its owner. "Is there a problem?"

"Problem? I'll say. This is gouda. Not muenster."

## Episode IV

It's Friday and that means trash day. From her window seat in the second-floor classroom, Mora watches the front-loader sanitation truck pick up the rusted dumpsters. She thinks of a Sand Crawler and rubs her neck.

Her dad would never hit her, but he's a big man and sometimes he doesn't realize how tightly he grips Mora's shoulder when she helps him up the stairs. There wasn't a bruise when she woke, but she pulls her hoody tighter all the same. She doesn't need to have that discussion with a teacher again.

Mrs. Haley is lecturing almost verbatim from the textbook and Mora tunes her out even though she enjoys Sherlock Holmes. She likes the part where he seemingly comes back from the dead after the fight at Reichenbach Falls. Holmes is more forgiving of those who have been wronged when he returns, more willing to overlook minor sins committed to atone for larger ones. "Christ-like," the textbook describes him as. Mora is fond of the Sherlock-Jesus; he sounds much nicer than the one her stepfather worshipped.

Mrs. Haley has ten more paragraphs to recite before reaching the end of the section and calling for discussion. Mora knows she has at least four minutes before she needs to pay attention.

She turns to the words Ronnie Miller left for her Monday. Ronnie occupies Mora's desk during the preceding period and the two had been having a running conversation. After an initial period of light flirtation, Ronnie has grown frustrated with Mora's lack of



genuine interest. In dark angry letters, he's etched "Mora eats pussy."

Mora has stared at the three words each of the past four days, consciously noticing how anger and embarrassment have given way to amusement. She's now tempted to append the words "very well" at the end, but she prefers not to make statements she can't back up with facts.

Mora catches Molly staring at her from the seat in front of her. Molly's hair is cut into a tightly-cropped crew cut. She wears boy's overalls with men's Timberland boots. Her laptop is plastered with stickers for bands with names like, "Bull Dyke Rodeo." Molly flicks her pierced tongue down her chin.

Mora likes Molly but she tries too hard.

Still, Molly is one of a handful of students Mora considers to be something like friends. It's Mora's second year of high school and things are finally starting to feel okay. Most days she no longer brings her paperback copy of *The Thing* or *Alien* with her. They're always good to touch, but she's usually not nervous enough to need them now.

Mora's eyes leave Molly's stare and drift to the right where Charisma is doing her best to follow Mrs. Haley, taking notes on the exact same words that are already in the textbook. Charisma is a year behind Molly and Mora, but her body has skipped several grades. There's a pep rally today and Charisma wears her cheer outfit to class. Mora's eyes fix on the part of the wooden seat that digs into Charisma's bare thigh.

Mrs. Haley is almost done. She's on the part about the correlation between Holmes' inactivity and his addiction. Mora thinks of her dad, how much better he is when he's on a job: her father, the consulting electrician.

Mora allows herself a happy thought. She holds a green light saber atop a desert skiff. Charisma is standing next to her and the wind is just about to blow back the crimson skirt hanging from her metal bikini. They're definitely not siblings.

## Episode V

Mark used to find the drive up I-95 relaxing. Now, it's just tedious. He still makes it every Friday night, even though the house has been empty for two years.

Inside, he examines the carpet in the living room and thinks again that it needs to be replaced. There are multiple stains in various hues, final testament to where his father lived his last few days.

Most of the furniture is gone, his sister's way of slowly easing Mark into the concept of letting the house go. Only the kitchen table, a couch, and one bed remain.

The blinds of the picture window are open and Mark looks at the pristine, snow-covered backyard, glowing amber under the flood light. Somewhere out there under eighteen inches of snow and another foot of dirt lays the molted skeleton of Chewbacca the Goldfish.

The yard is clear, just snow and a fence. When Mark was a kid, it held an above-ground pool, three trees, a swing set, and a picnic table. It seems smaller in its emptiness.

Mark moves through the foyer and catches his image in the hallway mirror: he's gained more weight. In his black trench coat, he is a solid mass of darkness.

Through the open doorway, he sees the lights on at the Tarlick house across the street. It's been years since he spoke to Atticus.

Mark thinks about the changes that take place between ages 11 and 13. One minute you're best friends sitting next to each other at the Middletown movies for the premier of *The Empire Strikes Back*. A couple years later you don't even speak.

Mark would spend summers in Atticus' basement. The Tarlicks were one of the first families to get HBO and Mark and

Atticus watched *Airplane!* and *Caddyshack* incessantly. Cindy Morgan's bare breasts never got boring.

It was the summer of 1983. Atticus' parents had gone to the beach and Mark was coming over to watch *Blade Runner*. It was rated R and neither of them had been allowed to see it in the theater.

It was incredibly hot, the type of day that produces a special brand of humidity that can only be found in Jersey during the late summer.

Mark was like a second child to the Tarlicks. There was no need to knock. He patted Radagast, the family dog, and descended into the basement.

The lights were dimmed, the TV off. Janey Pennington from their class was there, kneeling. She licked Atticus' exposed penis like a popsicle as he moaned.

Then Mark said the words that would haunt him for the next four years and, really, most of his life: "What are you doing to him?"

They both laughed so hard.

Mark never found out if it was Atticus or Janey who spread the story, but it spread. Just in time for high school, too.

Mark considers that it might have been all downhill from that moment. It was three months after *Return of the Jedi* came out.

Mark closes the front door and walks into the kitchen. He affixes his certificate of commendation to the refrigerator with little magnets.

To the empty house, he says, "CPA of the Sith."

## Episode VI

"How was the Coruscant of Cheddar?"

"No one gets that," A.J. says.

"What?"

“Nothing.”

A.J. smells like bleach. He’s given up on assigning bathroom duty; it’s just easier to do it himself.

Annie’s pupils are dilated and the basement door’s closed tight. A.J. eyes the cupboard where they keep their stash. He knows he can’t have any. He again ponders the injustice of the Cheese Citadel’s drug policy. Not only should he be allowed to get high as a manager, it should be required.

“Sorry,” Annie says and she sounds like she genuinely means it.

A.J. takes his jacket off and sits across from Annie at the kitchen table. He looks at her and she looks beyond him. Their pauses are longer than ever.

Annie rubs her hair, hoping that maybe he’ll notice the new shade of strawberry she’s trying. It’s almost identical to the color she had when they first met.

A.J. tries to wish he didn’t hate her.

Annie reaches down and holds up an old flashlight.

“I found this in the basement,” she says. “I thought you might want to keep it when we throw the other stuff out.”

She reads the plastic label glued around the rim of the casing: “An elegant weapon for a more civilized age.”

Annie smiles. “Property of Rice-a-Roni Kenobi?”

A.J. almost smiles himself but just nods. He speaks softly. “He, uh, he was Obi-wan’s brother.”

Annie’s eyes light up. “Hey, maybe I could dress up for you again. What was her name? Lara Raid?”

“Mara Jade,” A.J. whispers. Something in his head has started to pound. He wants to picture Annie in costume on his thirty-seventh birthday, but can’t.

It’s Annie’s turn to whisper: “Of course, then we would actually have to do it.”

“Did you dress up for him?”

“Goddammit, I never – ”

Annie stops, shuts her eyes, shakes her head.

She throws the flashlight at A.J. It bounces off his chest and ricochets around the kitchen.

It's only when she stands that A.J. realizes she's wearing cut-offs and a white t-shirt in the middle of January. It's the outfit he used to love to see her in down the shore.

"Red, white, and blue," he would say then.

"We can't go back in time," he says now.

Annie has the basement door half open. Her back is to A.J. and her voice is level.

"Atty, maybe if you didn't hate your own life so much, you wouldn't blame – "

A.J. doesn't let her finish. He covers the distance between the two of them in a lunge and slaps the door out of her hand, slamming it.

She turns on him and for a second his hand flinches. The movement is miniscule but it registers in his mind as surely as the shadow that falls over Annie's face.

## Episode VII

Dinner didn't go well and Mora doesn't expect the rest of the night to be any better. The union still has nothing for her dad.

Downstairs, there's a rumble as something falls over. It's definitely a beer night. *Han Solo at Stars' End* is at her elbow, just in case she needs to touch it. Mora doesn't plan to leave her room unless absolutely necessary.

Even though the winter has been brutal, she keeps her window open. With the wind in her face, it feels like she's flying as she writes.

On the street below her, she sees A.J. Tarlick sitting on an iced-over snow pile in front of the Everson house, smoking. He's Molly's manager at the Cheese Citadel and she always says how

cool he is. Tonight, though, there's something fundamentally wrong in his posture. He holds himself like he's in pain. Mora thinks he's speaking but isn't close enough to understand him.

The words Mora can't hear are the same seven repeated by A.J. over and over again: "For knowledge and defense, never for attack."

He chants them continuously, mantra-like as he chain smokes the pack of Pall Malls he liberated from Annie's Jeep. He holds the cigarettes in his left hand as he continuously flexes his right, the one that flinched.

"Atticus?"

A.J. stops chanting but doesn't respond.

"Atticus? You okay?" Mark repeats.

A.J. focuses and says, "That's a name I've not heard in a long time."

Mark hasn't belted his trench coat and the wind whips at it, billowing it behind him.

"Yeah," A.J. adds flatly. "I'm just great."

Neither man seems sure how to proceed. Mark kicks at the caked rock salt on the sidewalk. A.J. stubs out the last of his cigarette.

Mark looks up and down the sidewalk, neatly cleared by the man he pays to take care of the lawn. The snow is piled four-feet high on either side of the walk forming a trench.

"Like Hoth," he says.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Mark... um... sorry about your dad."

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Hey, I, uh, heard you were over in Iraq."

"Yep. Kicking in doors in Fallujah. That's me."

A.J. looks back at his own house.

"Well, cool. I just needed a moment alone, you know?"

"Uh-huh. You sure you're okay?"

“Fine, man. Hey, you should stop over some time. We’ll hang out. Like old times, right?”

Mark doesn’t know why he says what he next does. There are people in the world more worthy of his immediate ire. Nonetheless, the words come out: “So you can tell more people I don’t know what a blow job is?”

“What?”

Mark shakes his head, his cheeks flushing a deep shade of crimson. “The reason we’re not friends, Atty. Janey? You told everyone I didn’t know what she was doing to you. I was a laughingstock for all of high school.”

A.J. tilts his head, as if not hearing correctly.

“Are you kidding me? My marriage, my life is disintegrating and you’re pissed about something that happened over a quarter century ago? Fuck you, Mark.”

“Fuck me?”

“Yeah. Fuck you.”

“No, Atty, fuck you. Fuck you twice!”

Mark has no experience with actual violence. His lunge towards A.J. is awkward. He tries to throw a punch but plants on the wrong foot, his right arm flailing forward as if throwing a dart.

A.J. sidesteps him easily, shoving Mark into a snow bank as he does. Mark rights himself and charges again. A.J. delivers a hard punch to Mark’s abdomen, dropping him to his knees.

A.J. knows he should walk away but today has just been too much. He grabs a handful of Mark’s thinning hair and rams his fist into his old friend’s face.

The pain is instantaneous. A.J. pulls back his bloodied knuckles. His wrist feels like it’s broken. Instead of flesh, he’s just punched metal.

From the ground, the black visage of Darth Laser pulls itself to full height. The Sith Lord’s eyes glow red and he ignites his light saber. Through his breathing apparatus, his voice booms, “You should not have come back!”

## Episode VIII

Rice-a-Roni Kenobi removes his light saber from his belt. The low hum of the device immediately joins that of his opponent.

In his mind, Kenobi assesses the precise amount of time the Rebel transports will need to clear the hangar. Darth Laser wasn't supposed to be here on Hoth, but intelligence is seldom perfect. Kenobi will hold him off as long as needed.

For his part, Darth Laser can't believe his good fortune. The Emperor dispatched him to the ice planet to finish the Rebellion once and for all. Now he has the added pleasure of ending Kenobi. He'll make the Emperor a present of the Jedi's head.

"The circle is complete," booms the Sith Lord. "When I left you, I was but the learner. Now I am the master."

"Only a master of evil, Darth." Kenobi draws his blade up in the classic warrior-ready pose.

The Sith Lord wastes no time. With surprising swiftness for a being of such bulk, he pirouettes and swings to Kenobi's mid-section, a move that is simultaneously controlled and vicious.

Kenobi is ready, parrying the blow as the two warriors' light sabers crackle and screech against one another. Laser's strength is immense and Kenobi's wrist still aches from their initial confrontation. He retreats two steps but immediately regrets it, as Laser plunges after him his light saber whirring in a series of slashes.

Up and down the sidewalk, the old foes parry and riposte.

His frustration mounting, Laser's attacks become more violent, the swings of his saber more wild. Kenobi knows he can't hold the Sith Lord off forever, his raw power too great for the confined space of the Rebel base.



Kenobi backflips off the sidewalk onto one of the surrounding snow piles. For the moment, he has the high ground and a temporary respite.

Laser's eyes glow a vibrant red and he lowers his blade. He extends his hand.

Purple electricity leaps from it!

Kenobi only has milliseconds to curl into a ball and dodge left. He feels the ion dancing on his skin as the deadly energy zaps past him and vaporizes the snowman on the neighboring lawn.

Atticus stares down at Mark. "You... you can do Sith lightning now?"

Darth Laser clenches his black glove into a balled fist. He savors every syllable: "If you only knew the power of the Dark Side!"

Laser unleashes another volley of the sinister energy but Kenobi focuses intently, drawing the lightning into his light saber, neutralizing it.

Overhead he hears the last of the Y-Wing fighters screeching to safety, but he also knows the Imperial ground forces are closing. He can sense the snow troopers. They're not far from the garage now.

Darth Laser punches at the air with his fist and two recycling cans fly at Kenobi. He ducks the first and slashes the second in half.

Kenobi rolls to the right and comes up on one knee, force-pushing a frozen garden gnome at Laser as he does so. The Sith Lord is unprepared and the ceramic figure shatters against his battle armor.

It's the distraction Kenobi is waiting for. He takes two steps and dives into the night air, somersaulting over Darth Laser's light saber and striking home with his own blade. He lands the saber into the middle of Laser's breast plate, the metal hissing as the blade slides home, impaling the Dark Lord.

Laser drops to his knees.

The Sith Lord gasps, his respirator a sickly wheeze of electronics. "If you only... knew... the..."

Laser falls flat on the sidewalk.

Kenobi deactivates his light saber and reattaches it to his belt, assuming Laser is finished.

It is Kenobi's last mistake.

Darth Laser rears up one last time. Mark summons every joke that's ever been made at his expense, every laugh he's ever heard directed at him, every humiliation he's ever endured, and funnels it into a final, hellish burst of Sith lightning.

He engulfs himself and his ancient enemy, Rice-a-Roni Kenobi, in a cocoon of purple energy that incinerates them both, whisking away their very existence into the night sky.

## Episode IX

In the morning, Phil Woodman walks outside for his paper and wonders what in the hell happened to his snowman.

"Damn kids," he says to no one in particular.

Across the street, in his basement, with the circumspection most men reserve for viewing pornography, Atticus stares at the Google homepage. He rubs his wrist. He must have slept on it wrong. Otherwise, he feels better than he has in years. He's already bookmarked the Americorps application. Now he types, "divorce lawyers nj" into the search box and hits the return key. Inside, he feels a new sense of hope. They both deserve so much better.

In his father's house, at his kitchen table, Mark knows that nothing concrete has changed. His father is still dead, the house still empty. Mark's job still drains him to the point of despair. He's forty and alone. Despite all of that, Mark feels something he hasn't felt since childhood. As he eats his cheerios, a determined smile builds on his face. His eyes glow red.

Down the block, in her room, Mora estimates she has about an hour more to write before her dad wakes up. She's been up since dawn furiously scribbling in the Mead notebook, the one with "Journal of the Whills" written on the cover in silver. Her latest entry has flowed effortlessly.

Last night, Mora became the first human being to witness an actual light saber duel.

Electric crimson clashed with lambent topaz as Sith battled Jedi.

Really, what else can she do, but write it down?

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