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JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

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Editor's Note: So Long, and Thanks for all the Fish

Well, this is it. The first and only quarterly issue of Jersey Devil Press, and the twenty-fifth and final issue with me as editor. From here on out, the magazine is in the gnarled, twisted, possibly blood-soaked hands of Mike Sweeney. May God have mercy on us all.

Giving up the editorship of Jersey Devil Press was not something I took lightly. There were some personal reasons, some professional ones. But a big factor -- probably bigger than it should have been, given that this is an online magazine -- was that I didn't want to sever JDP's Jersey roots. I could have carried on, sure -- I am, and always will be, a Jersey son -- but it wouldn't have been right. You can't run a magazine from the middle of the desert and call yourself Jersey Devil Press. And renaming it Chupacabra Press was completely out of the question. No, Jersey Devil Press needed to stay in New Jersey, even if it was only a technicality.

Choosing Mike Sweeney was much more than a technicality, though. He has always been one of my favorite writers, and he embraces everything Jersey Devil Press is about. He's jumped into his new position feet first and guns blazing. Yes, that's kind of a mixed metaphor, but that's also exactly how awesome Mike is. And thankfully, he's not alone. Samuel Snoek-Brown and Laura Garrison are cannonballing in along with him, blades drawn. With a little luck, the three of them will make it well past issue fifty. And possibly star in a new action blockbuster.

These past two-plus years have been great, and the magazine's surpassed almost all my expectations. Thank you for helping with that, and for making Jersey Devil Press what it is today.

– Eirik Gumeny

Conversations with My Vestigial Tail

by Russell Bradbury-Carlin

I've always tried to ignore the fact that I walk around with a small tail. It's been difficult at times. But, because I am not a nudist and my tail does not stick out from my forehead, I've usually been able to pretend that there was nothing strange. This is made easier since it is rather smallish, kind of a nub really, more than an actual tail.

One might think that the most difficult situation I would have was with girlfriends. How and when does a guy introduce the fact that he has a small tail? Well, it really hasn't been a problem. This is because I haven't done much dating. I'm not sure whether I am shy because I have a tail or I'm just shy and I also happen to have a tail.

It's not like I haven't dated anyone. I've had a number of dates. In fact, I've been in a sexual relationship. We were together for two months. And the fact that I had a tail was not a problem. This is why I am sure I'm not chronically shy. I reached that level of comfort with at least one woman and we got along fine.

Helena Marshall and I met in our freshman year of college. She took to being away from her deeply Catholic family and to her newfound freedom with more than a bit of ferocity. What I mean to say is, she was very aggressive, sexually. At least from what friends have told me about their girlfriends and wives. I don't want to give a lot of details, but I think she found the evidence of my evolutionary link to the animal kingdom kind of erotic.

I guess, given that experience, I shouldn't have been surprised that my tail's first, second, and third words were "Ralph, where's Helena?" I was sitting on my ratty couch alone watching one of those afternoon court programs when I heard a husky voice from behind me utter those words.

Unfortunately for my vestigial tail, Helena and I had long ago broken up.

At first, I considered the possibility that I was insane. But I didn't feel insane (except for the fact that I heard my tail speak). Supposedly those who are crazy do not ask if they are crazy. I was relying on that one concept.

Over the following days, I began to wonder if I had really heard anything. After all, I didn't hear the voice say anything else. I soon brushed off the idea that I had a talking tail.

Then, a few weeks later on a hot summer afternoon, I was riding the mid-town bus. It was crammed with people. Suddenly my tail blurted out "Monkeys can't type Shakespeare!" as if it had been choking on the words. I gasped and turned around quickly -- wondering who on the bus had yelled. Then as I saw that everyone else was still in a dull-eyed commuter trance, I realized that it was my tail. I glanced down at my rear-end, then quickly looked out the window as those around me seemed a bit concerned.

I realized no one else could hear it. I also began to consider that my tail was not only talking, but that it also wanted to say something.

"I want... hmm, dum-ta-dum... it's a long road... one, two, three... D, E, F, G... hark, the herald angels sing..." my tail babbled.

The progression of my tail's linguistic abilities was not unlike a child's, only it didn't use babbling as a way to test the ability of its mouth to form words. My tail has no mouth. I have no idea how it creates words. I don't hear the voice in my head. I hear it as if its voice were coming through my ears. My tail's use of language followed a very steep learning curve. It began with two and four word sentences. Then it quickly leapt up to paragraphs, chapters, and novels of words. Even though I understood that my tail was trying to say something to me, I also think -- like a child -- it just enjoyed the process of talking. As time went on it just talked and

talked and talked. It was not unlike living in a busy nightclub on a perpetual Saturday night.

I don't know why it didn't occur to me early on that I could possibly communicate back to my tail. It appeared to enjoy babbling on and on to itself, only occasionally making some reference or comment to something I was involved in. It didn't seem to be able to read my mind. Or at least when I repeated over and over in my head "shut up, shut up, shut up!" it didn't seem to respond. Perhaps it was just ignoring me.

Then, one morning, I was sitting at my kitchen table drinking my third cup of coffee and feeling that grainy drag on my eyelids from lack of sleep (apparently tails don't need to rest) when it occurred to me to talk back to it.

"...the simple biological-evolutionary answer," my tail rambled, "is that as embryos we are all structurally female first..."

"What do you want?" I asked out loud.

It paused. "You don't know?"

I jumped up from my seat in surprise. I hadn't really expected it to answer back. Hesitantly, I responded. "No. But clearly you've got something to say."

"Listen, all I know is that I've recently discovered that I can say things. Before that I listened to you all the time -- sometimes with interest, sometimes quite bored."

"I thought maybe you had something important to tell me. It isn't everyone that has a tail. And I am sure very few people have a tail that talks to them. Is there something you need to say to me?"

"Not that I can think of."

"Oh." I was a bit dumbfounded. Then what was this all about? I wasn't sure what to say, so I said the first thing that popped into my head. "Well then, I guess we're just going to have to figure out how to live together."

"More you with me. I've learned to suffer living with you."

“What? You’re the one that came out of nowhere. Maybe you should go back to being silent. Or at least keep quiet at night.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

That was it for a while. I lived my life. My tail lived its. It kept its ongoing chatter down to a manageable whisper -- enough so I could begin to ignore it.

My tail mostly babbled on about evolution and Charles Darwin. I had majored in Biology in college and, apparently, it had been listening more carefully than I had, since it seemed to be able to quote every book I had read and every lecture I had attended.

It also did me the courtesy of keeping quiet at night.

One day I was out on a date with Marie, a girl I had met through someone at work. It seemed to be going well. We were having dinner at a Vietnamese restaurant. It’s a quiet place, candlelit, with each table separated from the others by rice-paper screens. In other words, it was quite romantic.

Marie and I were in the middle of our second glasses of wine. I was admitting to my love of Jim Jarmusch films and she was astounded that I had even heard of him. Things were going well.

Then, we weren’t alone.

“He’s my all-time favorite director,” Marie gushed. “I still can’t believe you like him, too.”

My tail suddenly spoke up, “Hey. I’ve realized something.”

For a moment I froze. I considered responding out-loud to my tail, but I knew I would sound crazy. Instead, I tried to integrate the conversations, emphasizing certain words to my tail: “...I like to rent Jarmusch’s films then tell everyone to -- go away -- so I can watch it alone.”

“Which of his films is your favorite?” Marie asked.

My tail said, “I can’t wait. I need to tell you something now.”

I continued: “I really like *Down by Law* because I also love Tom Waits. Did Jarmusch ever do a movie called -- *We’ll Have to Talk Later?*”

"I, uh, don't think so," Marie looked perplexed.

My tail was persistent. "Either we talk now or I am going to repeat everything I know about Darwin, over and over."

I responded: "I think it was a short-film. It came out before *Don't You Dare*."

"What are you talking about?" Marie sat back in her chair.

"Darwin was born in..." my tail started.

I gave in. "I need to go the men's room. I'll be right back."

I stood up quickly and left the table. I could see in Marie's eyes that the tide was turning on this date.

When I reached the men's room I found it empty.

"What the hell do you want?"

"I think I do have something to tell you -- some wisdom to impart."

"Why now? Couldn't it have waited?"

"No. Listen. I've been thinking about the fact that I am a vestigial tail -- a remnant of your link to your evolutionary past. And, I've been thinking about the fact that I can talk, which I am pretty sure is not a quality that any kind of tail has had -- past or present. Then, it occurred to me why I am here. Once I realized this, I had to tell you right away."

"Okay, okay, but make it quick."

"I am actually an evolutionary jump forward. Not only that, but I am not a talking tail."

"What?"

"I am your conscience."

"My what?"

"It dawned on me when I was recalling all of the time I just sat and listened to you: you did not seem to have a conscience. Or, if you did, you've done a good job of ignoring it. Evolution gave humans an inner-voice to help you navigate your moral world -- to help you survive. Somehow that little voice in your particular head has been silenced. So, apparently, evolution has dipped into its past

to leap forward. A talking tail certainly grabs your attention doesn't it? It's brilliant."

I had difficulty understanding what my tail was saying at first, mostly because I was focused on leaving Marie alone for too long. But I did try to consider if my tail was right. I thought I had a conscience. Didn't I?

I was standing in the middle of the men's room staring at the black-and-white tiled floor considering all of this when a tall guy in a tux came in. I coughed, and then bent over to tie my shoe so he'd think he had walked in just as I realized it was untied -- and not that he walked in while I was talking to my rear.

My tail continued, "Don't say anything. Think about it. In the meantime, go back out there with Marie. Pick up where you were before I interrupted and finish your date. And, if she seems interested, give her a kiss goodnight. Tell her you had a great time and that you will call her tomorrow. But do not sleep with her tonight. As your conscience, I think that is the best course of action."

Sleep with her? I hadn't even considered that that would happen on this first date. I wanted to protest, but the tall guy was standing right beside me at a urinal. So, I finished re-tying my shoe and went back with Marie.

It took me a while to recover as I kept thinking about what my tail had said. Things seemed to be going well with Marie by the time we finished dessert.

And, I did what my tail told me. I didn't sleep with her. I called her the next day.

In the end, though, Marie dumped me. Or at least we didn't get to a second date. I think she sensed something was off with me. How could she not, with my tail interrupting my already weakened dating skills.

I was pissed. I was confused: a ripe moment to manipulate me.

"Okay, here's what you need to do." my tail offered one day.

I was throwing a pile of my black socks into the washing machine in the basement of the apartment complex I live in. I was alone, kind of.

"Fuck off," I answered.

"You don't mean that."

"I don't know if I've meant anything more than those two words right now."

"Whatever. You'll get over it. Listen, what you need to do is call all of your past girlfriends and apologize to them."

"I take back my previous statement. I mean this more than I've ever meant anything: Fuck off." I slammed the washing machine door shut. It echoed off the concrete walls.

"As your conscience, I'll have you apologize to me later. In the meantime, I am going to insist you apologize to every woman you've slept with or intended to sleep with."

"Or what?"

"I've got some tracts about the history of evolution theory from a class you mostly slept through. I intend to scream them until you pick up the phone."

"And if I agree to this ludicrous idea, what am I apologizing to them about?" I slipped four quarters into the slots of the machine's coin drawer.

"For dating them only to sleep with them, when they thought otherwise."

"What are you talking about?" Sure, don't most men want to have sex with the women they date? But I had assumed that I wanted more than that, too. Or did I tell myself that because I didn't have a conscience?

"Let's start with the only woman you've actually slept with."

I shoved in the coin drawer, heard the water start to rush into the washer, and went back to my apartment.

It took me a few weeks to find Helena's phone number.

Apparently, she had moved to Vermont, married some guy and taken his last name — Golder.

The phone rang about ten times. I was feeling relieved that there was no answering machine and apparently no one home when someone picked up and said “Hello.” It was a female voice that immediately brought Helena’s face back to my memory.

I paused.

“Do it,” my tail demanded.

“Helena?”

“Yes.”

“This is Ralph. Remember? We dated in college.”

“Ralph? Yes. Why are you calling me?” I thought I heard the high-pitched squeal of a child in the background.

“I’m not sure...”

“I’ll help you this time,” my tail interjected. “Helena, I want to apologize.”

“Helena, I want to apologize.”

“For what?”

My tail said, “I want to apologize for dating you with the sole goal of sleeping with you.”

I repeated the statement.

“We never slept together,” Helena countered. I heard her moving around, the child’s squeals fading, then the sound of a door shutting.

“Excuse me?”

“I said we never slept together.”

“Well, I beg to differ -- yes we did.”

Helena’s voice became very stilted — even more than it had been already.

“Listen, Ralph. I am a different person than you knew in college. I have cleansed myself of all of my past sins, including you. As far as having sexual relations with you — in regards to Jesus and me -- it never happened. I am married. I have two children. And, up until two minutes ago, you didn’t exist. Now, I’d like it if you

would return to non-existence.”

She hung up.

“That went well...” I said.

“Don’t you feel better?” my tail said. “A good first step.”

I called some of my other past girlfriends. I was pretty resentful of it.

Some of them hung up on me. Some seemed indifferent to my call. Some forgot who I was. None thanked me for apologizing.

It was about two weeks into this process when my tail decided to update the plan. This time I was in a grocery store, tossing a bag of nacho chips into a cart.

“You need to drive up and apologize to Helena in person.”

I looked around -- no one was nearby. I kept my voice low, just in case.

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Listen, Ralph, I am putting you through a process of cleansing your improprieties. Believe me, as your conscience, if we don’t do it now, you’ll be wishing you had on your death-bed -- where you’ll be lying all alone, facing eternity with a load of guilt on your shoulders.”

“But why do we have to apologize to Helena in person? I thought it was enough to say it, regardless if the person accepted it or not.”

“Sure, that’s true. But it all started with Helena, really. It is important that you clean away the roots. If you don’t, all of this stuff will come back to haunt you.”

“Either that or you will sing *On the Origin of Species* to me?”

“That could be arranged.”

That is how I found myself sitting in my tiny black Toyota on the side of a snow-covered road in the middle of rural Vermont. It is also how I found myself spying -- no, stalking -- my ex-girlfriend

Helena.

Her house was a powder blue cape. A red SUV sat in the driveway. There was another set of tire tracks in the snow-cover that led up to an empty space beside it. Since it was around two in the afternoon on a Tuesday, I assumed her husband was at work.

“So, how will I do this?”

“Let’s make sure she is home alone first. Then you go up to the front door, knock, and apologize. I’ll walk you through it.”

I saw shadows pass back and forth behind sheer white curtains in the downstairs windows.

We watched for a few minutes to be sure she was alone.

I considered the absurdity of my situation.

I had driven hundreds of miles, much of it in the snow, which I hate. I was now prepared to apologize, again, to a distant ex-girlfriend with the aid of a Cyrano de Bergerac-like talking tail.

I tried not to think about it too much, because it made me reconsider my sanity again.

I thought about the story of Cyrano de Bergerac though. His ability to romance women with words. His unattractive face. How Cyrano helps another man woo the woman Cyrano loves.

Helena suddenly appeared in an upstairs window with the curtains pulled back. She carried a load of laundry, which she dropped onto a bed and began to fold.

“There she is,” I whispered.

Helena looked more matronly than she did in college. Her face seemed to have widened a bit, as had her body in general. But even from across the street, over a yard and through a window, I could make out her thick dark hair and her long eye-lashed eyes. She was still beautiful. She was still alluring.

“Go. Go for it. I’ll tell you what to do,” my tail sputtered.

Then it occurred to me: Cyrano. My tail’s plan. Helena. How could I have been so stupid?

“You want me to get back with Helena, don’t you?”

“What are you talking about? Go over there. Now’s your

chance to apologize to her.”

“No. No. You’ve brought me here so I -- we, can sleep with her again.”

“I am your conscience. You must do what I say.”

It all made sense. My tail had constructed this whole situation so we could be with Helena. I had been duped. I had been manipulated -- and all for the carnal pleasure of a vestigial tail.

I wasn’t going to have it.

I started the car and drove away.

“What are you doing?” My tail sounded a bit worried. “Come on. Let’s go back. So what if you know what I was doing. You know you want to have sex with her, too.”

I said nothing. I kept driving.

“All right, all right. Listen, if you don’t turn around now and go back, I am going to start singing *On the Origin of Species* just like you said.”

My plan was to drive straight home, only stop for gas, and not talk to my tail again. Let it wonder what I was thinking. It was about time.

“Fine, then. Here I go: ‘When we compare the individuals...’”

We drove for about an hour and half when I realized that I couldn’t take it anymore. My tail was clearly not going to stop singing. I could not take that husky voice warbling off-key in my ears for much longer. One of us had to stop this. And I certainly wasn’t going to give-in to my tail.

I changed my plan a bit.

The axe only cost me three bucks. It was cheap, but new. I didn’t need to get an expensive one since I didn’t really care if it stayed sharp for a long time.

I was only going to use it for one chop.

We were still in Vermont on an empty road cutting through the

mountains.

“You aren’t serious.” There was clear panic in its voice.

I didn’t respond. I pulled the car down a snowy dirt road into the woods.

“I don’t believe you would actually do it. The pain would be too intense.”

I stopped the car and got out. I grabbed the axe and walked a few feet into the stark forest. The crunch of ice-covered snow under my shoes was the only sound -- besides the increasingly panicked voice of my tail.

“Okay. Maybe I went too far. We can forget Helena. I swear.”

I stopped and undid my belt, then the button of my pants.

“What if you get an infection? You’re no surgeon. You don’t even know where the nearest hospital is. And what would you tell them anyway.”

I dropped my pants and my boxers. The chill of winter air wafted around my legs.

“Stop. I am serious. Whatever you want me to do, I’ll do it. I swear.”

I turned around and pulled the axe up. It was awkward to be twisted around as I was. But I thought with one swift stroke I could do it -- quickly -- one brief shock of pain. Then it would be over.

“Please?”

I clenched the handle of the axe and squinted.

There was silence.

I waited, axe held high.

Nothing.

I dropped my arm and let the axe lay by my side.

“Are you there?” I asked.

There was only the sound of a light breeze and the occasional crunch of snow falling from a tree limb.

My plan seemed to have worked.

I pulled up my pants, grabbed the axe and returned to my car.

The drive home took me six hours. I heard nothing. I began to feel that I was alone. I wasn't sure at first because it was something I hadn't felt in a long time. It was an odd mixture of emptiness and comfort. After a while though, I became so uneasy with the silence that I turned on the radio and listened to any station that had a talk-show. I didn't care what the subject was.

I never heard from my tail again.

I don't know if it's lying in wait or if its voice returned to wherever it came from. It took me awhile to let go of the feeling that it was going to suddenly chime in -- especially when I started dating again.

Now I've been dating a woman named Katherine for five months -- a record for me. She asks me, occasionally, about my vestigial tail. Harmless questions such as "What was it like growing up with it?" and "How did other lovers react to it?" I choose not to tell her much -- even as we are lying in bed arm-in-arm after making love, which is when I am most tempted to tell her everything. I don't follow on the temptation, though. I am afraid my tail might take it as an invitation to speak up. Perhaps it remains silent because I am with someone and so it is, too -- but I tend to think it was Helena, in particular, that it desired.

I tell Katherine that it has been weird having a tail and that I'll tell her all about it someday.

What I won't tell her, however, is that the axe in the trunk of my car is there for a specific reason. She thinks I keep it there for emergencies, like a tree blocking a road if we are ever out for a drive in the country.

The real reason I keep it there is for another type of emergency, one that I actually state out-loud while driving alone -- just in case my tail is still aware, listening.

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Bones

by Joseph Alan Hasinger

We used to take the bones that Aldan Jr. found and haul them back through the woods and up the hills to our house in paper sacks. We lived pretty close to the river, and at night I'd sit on my bed with my back against the wall, cleaning my rifle, maybe, or reading a comic book, and watch him glue things back together, the breeze and the smell of the mud coming off the water and through the open window.

He'd sit on our bedroom floor with the bones scattered before him like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, staring and thinking and scratching his head. Most times he'd make things just the way God had; a bird was a bird, a squirrel, a squirrel. But some nights, if he was in a mood, or either missing enough parts, he'd start in on his own kind of creation, putting bones of one thing with bones of another, or two others, or three, till he had something altogether new. Something all his own: a blue jay with two skulls and the long skeleton-tail of a river rat.

These nights seemed to please him most.

I kept waiting for Mama or Daddy to object, for Mama to demand that these filthy animals' bones be exhumed from her clean carpet — no matter, of course, how unclean the pre-bones carpet, in fact, probably was — but they did not, *she* did not, and they instead actually encouraged it. Mama saying "What a little scientist!" and Daddy saying "A hot-shit doctor!" and they allowed Aldan Jr.'s artistry to continue.

And I think that's how Aldan Jr. saw it — he was an artist.

He cleaned out Daddy's old work shed, which Daddy didn't use or need since his back had gone bad and he and Mama had taken to

sitting most days on the couch and drinking beer and watching old TV programs and not working and living instead off the check that came once per month on account of Daddy having originally hurt his back on the job.

A streak of luck, Daddy called that.

And Aldan Jr. set up in the newly empty shed a kind of museum for his art — the animals he'd resurrected, created — and over time the museum got plum-full of the little beasts and word got out and people from around and up in town, mostly cousins but others as well, heard about Aldan Jr.'s work and would drop by and ask to have a look inside the shed. When most anyone walked in that shed and saw what Aldan Jr. had been up to, they were completely thrilled with it all, tickled pink, and for the life of me I at times just could not understand it. I mean, as much as anyone I held a soft spot for my brother, the time and skill that he'd put into his work, and I was often amazed by the absolute, uncanny knowledge of skeletal anatomy that he seemed to have simply earned with birth. But to me, with all those bones, that old shed was just like a graveyard turned inside-out and I could not for my own life fathom why anyone would want to spend a second in there, let alone Aldan Jr., four years younger than I.

Over time, as Aldan Jr.'s collection kept on growing, all the attention it stirred started, I believe, to go to my little brother's head. The *sculptures* — he'd learned that word at school and that's what he called them now — became both more frequently constructed and, more often than not, larger in their undertaking. One of his most-proud moments, I remember, was the unveiling of his six-legged coyote — he claimed coyote, but I was fairly certain it was just a regular old dog — to our family. Us all standing in the open doorway of the shed with the evening sun coming down and spilling over us, the coyote was almost aglow as if the bones had been heated by fire or, more likely, the thing had just crawled out from the burning depths of hell.

But Mama covered her mouth with her hand, not as if she was scared like I was but more like she was touched by it. "Oh, Aldan," is all she said and then she started to twitch a little like she was about to start to cry or something. And Daddy put his arm around Mama and pulled her in close to him, and he took a swig from his beer can and shook his head, and said, proud as could be, "Junior, you've outdone yourself." Then Daddy grinned down at me and he asked, "How fast you think a coyote runs with *six* legs?" and I just stared at him like he was an insane person and I did not say a word.

A few days after the coyote, me and Aldan Jr. were out in the woods again, me hunting squirrels with my .22 and him, as usual, searching out materials for his next big project. Since Aldan Jr. had been so busy as of late he'd more or less picked the woods clean around our house as far as carrion's concerned, and so he convinced me to do my squirreling a few miles on up river, farther north than we'd ever gone on our own.

We stayed close to the water, figuring that was the clearest bet to keep from getting lost. The river was different up there, the shores a little rockier and the water running quick against the stones, and the river itself widened up a bit. The day was nice as ever, still warm for November, the wind and the birds in the tops of the pine trees, and after a while I told Aldan Jr., who was following along the water's edge with his eyes set on the earth and his hands in his pockets, that I would stay close, and he nodded, and I wandered into the thick of the woods to hunt.

I walked the woods for a half-hour or so, and no sooner had I come upon a pair of gray squirrels playing chase around a pine trunk, had raised and sighted my rifle, than Aldan Jr.'s footsteps crunched up behind us and startled them away. And no sooner had I turned to glare my anger toward him than *he* turned with a waving of his hand and said, "Come on, come see," and took off

back the way he came, crunching loud through the twigs and leaves of the forest floor, scaring off every damn squirrel, I was sure, for miles around.

I followed him, having to nearly run to keep up, to the bank of the river, maybe a quarter-mile north of where I'd left him shortly ago. When I arrived he stood already at the crest of the slight hill that ran to the water. He was looking down, a hand on either hip.

"What is it?" I said. I edged beside him, catching my breath. "What's dead now?"

And then I saw.

Down the riverbank, a body — a woman's body, and without a stitch of clothes — lay a good while dead, her bottom half in the water and the other tangled up in the wire and weeds of the brush. Her skin blue and fish-belly white. Cheeks all puffed out.

I started to back away, naturally, fearing I might get sick. But Aldan Jr. squatted low, peered down at the body in the river. I reached out blindly for his shoulder but he didn't seem to notice. His eyes were fixed, studying her. He did not turn away.

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Infested

by Bob McHugh

Camilla's father kissed me on both cheeks and said something that I didn't understand. I speak passable Italian, so I assumed it was Sardinian, but it could have been slang. It was at least marginally insulting. I could tell from the look of his amused laughter as I beamed back a dumb, wide smile. I didn't know what else to do except hold that grin of a friendly idiot, so I walked around the large picnic table and greeted the rest of her extended family.

When I got back to my seat alongside Camilla, she whispered at my ear, "You don't have to eat it. No one will notice." I was glad she thought my nerves were about the *casu marzu*. We met just two weeks prior. I didn't know her favorite movie, her greatest fear, her snack of choice when she's full of self-loathing. We never had that moment where one of us shares something despicable we had done only to have the other confess to the same sin. We had slept together on two occasions. Yet the relationship progressed, unwanted and unexpected, like someone going to the bar for just one beer and ending up on the street at 3 a.m. naked and obliterated.

When she called me last week, I was surprised to hear from her. When she asked me if I would come meet her family for an enormous feast that Sunday, I was so stunned I had glazed over her talk of the *casu marzu*, *the maggot cheese*.

Casu marzu, she told me, is both a family and Sardinian tradition. The cheese, intentionally infested with live maggots for flavor, was an outlawed delicacy in Sardinia. Her father, who made it and sold it on the black market, had invited me to eat it with her family. Why did he know of me? Why did I agree to go?

The *casu marzu* stood alone on the table. A feast would follow,

but this block of rotting cheese was clearly the guest of honor and commanded the attention and respect of the diners. The little girl next to me licked her lips. An old man, probably a great-uncle, rubbed his hands together in a disturbingly sensual fashion. I stared at it. Camilla's mother, with eyes so big they threatened to tip over her head, passed out the bread. Her father doled out chunks of cheese to all the guests.

Camilla's grandmother, an extra in this Olive Garden commercial of the damned, noticed me gazing at the cheese and said, "Afrodisiaco!" I offered a vacant smile to match hers and tried to avoid any more eye contact.

Noticing my inactivity, Camilla took the *casu marzu* and spread it on my bread. The larvae wiggled. Camilla told me earlier that this was a good sign. Dead maggots meant the Pecorino was dangerous to eat, even more so than live maggots were dangerous to eat. Dead maggots meant the cheese was too toxic to support their lives. Larvae could survive in anything; even humans. Dead maggots meant a truly deadly cheese. Live maggots meant a potentially deadly cheese. Lucky me.

In the manner most mistakes are made, I dug into my meal quick enough to avoid turning back. I took a bite. Putrid. The little girl on my side begged to differ and tore into hers liked an escaped zoo animal coming out for flesh. Despite what I knew from direct evidence to the contrary, my fellow diners made it look appealing. I took another bite. It didn't taste like food; it was flaming poison. My tongue couldn't process why I was doing this to it and went numb. A gulp of red wine and a couple of bites later and my plate was empty except for two maggots writhing in the center.

I thought I gulped it down but everyone else had already finished. Like a cult inducting its newest member, they all smiled at me. Camilla, most pleased of all, gave me an uncomfortably long kiss at the table. Her breath stunk; mine too. Everyone remained smiling.

That night, I stayed awake thinking of the maggots laying eggs inside of me, making plans for future generations, moving furniture around in my stomach. I pictured a maggot teen coming home from a party in my left kidney wearing a short skirt and a heavy layer of makeup, her mother yelling at her. They both turn to the father for support, but he gives a blank look. He didn't even know how his life had arrived here.

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Me and Gatsby

by Kat Lewin

In the summer, it was always Gatsby and me, tossing around a busted badminton birdie in the backyard – *topping throw, old girl*, in his fake Oxford accent – him so careful not to crease his soft soft shirts, my elasticized flub buoying up a cushion of humidity between my saggy clothes and the parts of my body nobody else would touch. He was from a movie my mother loved, and all the other actors looked at him like he was a dish of unmelted ice cream on top of the radiator. He fell in love and had a mansion, too, but I didn't mind that.

Everyone would play with me and Gatsby at first. Kickball, softball, foursquare, you name it. Gatsby was the captain of every team. He'd strip down to his funny old shirtsleeves like everybody's harmless uncle. After the games, he'd hang back a few paces while we plunged our legs in the pool, searching for the first dark hints of hair on our splayed buglegs.

Someone would run inside for the cordless phone and dial the German exchange student's number from memory, then we'd drop the receiver giggling, silently scramble for the end-call button. Gatsby would clap all our backs in turn. "Good show," he'd murmur and the other girls would snort into their cherry sodas.

"You're doing nicely," he'd say to me, special. "You're going to be MVP." My mother had started pointedly setting out Diet Coke for me when my friends came over; it tasted like aluminum. I'd breathe in Gatsby's sunbaked linen as I drank so the bubbles burned less.

In the spring, our last big dance before high school, Gatsby hung behind me in the mirror, helped me cinch in my sash until the welts were angry red eels ready to squirm out of my skin. The song that spring was the one about bathing with someone in a mountain,

that slow one, and every boy I looked at squirmed to the bathrooms while I swayed alone toward the dixie cups full of pretzels.

“You doing okay?” my science teacher asked, loosening his double-helix tie. “You having fun?” A thin cement of white pretzel dust pushed through the gaps in my teeth. The reflection in his eyes was Gatsby’s face.

“You’re my favorite, old sport.” I tried to work my tongue around the pincushion of pretzels; he finally took off the tie; all around me, couples mashed their hips in dizzy whorls, nobody leaving any room between them for the holy ghost, and for a moment I thought—but Mr. Bennes’s arms were just moving down to put his tie on the table and then he was off to laugh with the PE teacher and Gatsby and I were alone again. His voice came this time from the reflection of the punch bowl. “I’m going to make you co-captain someday.”

We unpacked our lockers at the end of the school years, strolled home to drip cherry popsicle on our yearbooks, slicking the stains into quick hearts in the margins by the best-looking boys. Gatsby suggested matches of marco polo, but fewer and fewer girls heard him. We played outside, we lay supine around the lips of the mall fountain, we picked through the glossiest offerings of Tiger Beat until convenience store managers cawed us away. All summer, the down above our lips glistened with popsicle blood, unmolested until we swiped it away with sweaty forearms.

The summer the very latest of the bloomers sprouted their breasts, I had Gatsby all to myself. In the mall, the girls still draped themselves over the fountain ledge, their bodies newly tensed to launch at passing boys. They’d come back hours later, their lips melted down the sides of their faces, slipping halfway down their necks into bruise-purple pools. My body was too thick to launch itself at anyone. No one would catch me. At home, Gatsby and I would toss around the pigskin in my empty backyard.

“Throw it as hard as you can,” I’d tell him, angling my neck as

broad as a barn door. "Hit me with it good." Purple pools. Purple pools.

"There'll be time for all that," Gatsby would tell me, volleying from closer and closer as the shadows drew long.

The October I turned sixteen, Gatsby crept into my bedroom. "It's you and me, old sport. We need to get serious." The kickball field was empty. The rest of the girls had taken to sitting in boys' parents' cars late at night, laughing at jokes that weren't funny. Everybody else had crossed themselves off Gatsby's roster. He and I took up racquetball. It's a serious game.

"You're co-captain now," Gatsby told me. But it was just the two of us, and we were playing on different sides.

Late phone call Thanksgiving night, after people's parents had given up on pinning them to couches in the den. A friend of a friend picked me up in his parents' Oldsmobile. Tall and meaty, with pimples like tender little cherry blossoms kissing up out of his collar. Out in the middle of the desert, there were two other cars waiting. There were six guys; all the real girls had been trapped at home, feeding leftover pie to maiden aunts. There was some booze, there was lots of talk about a bonfire but nobody had a lighter. Gatsby had stayed home. Crawled in through the window at sunrise reeking of Jack Daniels and John-Paul Gaultier Classique – everything smells like it now – and Gatsby got into bed with me for the first time.

"Capital," he told me. "Aces." My grandmother had died the month before and I was in the habit of wearing long Victorian bedthings, my own strange mourning. "I'll show you something, old sport," Gatsby said and the hair at the back of my neck soaked with sweat, drew a canopy of whiskey perfume around us.

He lifted the covers but not the dress (Gatsby's like that) and reached a hand into the bottom of my rib cage, the other into my unruly pubic nest, and pulled out a long tense spring. When it broke through my surface, it thrummed like a guitar string, one of the thick ones.

“You’re wired up all wrong,” Gatsby told me. His voice smells like money. “It’s not your fault, darling. I can fix it.”

He unlatched the spring at my ribs and twisted it the wrong way, resetting the spring’s coils, turning so fast I couldn’t see his hand and my hair was wet and my shoulders were wet and the sheets clung to a layer of sweat as shallow as my breaths while the velvet blanket of perfume folded us inside and inside. When he was done he relatched it, quick, cool as ever, and lay down beside me on top of the covers while the desert breeze from the open window freeze-dried my damp skin.

The pressure was incredible. Everything was wrong. I could have frog-kicked into the sky, landed straight on top of the meaty acne boy, kissed the tiny white crests of all his pimples then bitten straight into his neck like an apple. I didn’t. The next week, I pushed my new reverse-coil hips into him at a party and he felt their vibrato through all my padding – “Come find me,” I breathed in a whiskey fog, then in the garage hoisted myself on the washing machine and wrapped my legs around him.

“Yeah, we could,” he told me. “My girlfriend’s on her period. She won’t.”

“I’m on my period too.”

“We’ll have to shower afterwards.” I angled myself against his thick arms, pushed my spring-loaded belly against his hand like a cat, forcing him to pet me. “Separately.”

It went on like that for a few years.

Gatsby was unbearable, after that first time. We gave up the racquetball and he started reading me Whitman, he braided himself into my hair and licked the droplets of sweat off my neck, he’d hover over my hips at night and reach down into my darkness, find that re-coiled spring and play arrhythmic melodies on it, the notes rippling up through my skin like screaming underwater. “You have to want something,” Gatsby would sing to me. “You have to be a hurricane of want.”

I never sat on top of another washing machine, but every time I kissed the boy, my face would go numb, and stay numb until he talked to me again, sometimes days later, sometimes weeks, and I followed him out to California after one night of gin and pineapple juice. He got me pregnant, a little, and Gatsby was there inside the fetus, face blown up like a globe, whispering into all the murky waters that run inside a woman. "Is this what you want, old sport?"

But like I said, it was only a little pregnant, and afterwards Gatsby was there in the blood too. He filtered the drops through his exquisite silk shirts. "Was this the baby? Was it this one? Which one of these contains the thing you want?" Oh I was a hurricane all right. No one tells you how much iron is in blood, or else mine was polluted by the rusty spring. Everything tasted like metal for a year.

Afterwards I saw the boy naked one more time. I tore off his shirt and used my foxtooths to nip the tops off those pimples, trying to drink out what's inside of him, Gatsby's face carnival-reflected in every squelch of pus. "I don't think we should see each other anymore," he said. It was either Gatsby or the boy. I find it harder and harder to tell voices apart.

I moved three thousand miles away and paid electric bills and worked as a receptionist and spent the lurches in my morning commute watching tiny urban mice running between the subway rails. I adopted a dog, a rescued Doberman, the exact color of a melted milk dud, and named him Gatsby. He weighs down the mattress in the night, makes me slide toward him in my sleep. First thing in the morning, I feel so protected I don't want anyone else around. It is too hot in me to hold another person.

My spring is still rewired and rusty and I ache with want but we can never let anyone else into our bed. We'd rip his throat out, me and Gatsby. We'd rip his throat out and we'd play catch with it and then it would just be us again, a team of two.

KAT LEWIN is in the late experimental phases of trying to mate her Roomba with a typewriter. For science, mostly. Her fiction has been published or is forthcoming in journals including PANK Magazine, Per Contra, and Twelve Stories. Her alleged poetry has appeared in Word Riot, nibble magazine, and Breadcrumb Scabs. She is a Fiction Editor for Mixed Fruit Magazine, and starting in fall 2011, she'll be an MFA candidate in Fiction at UC Irvine.

Rodents from Beyond: Part Two

by Stephen Schwegler

General Fuzzbottom stared at his captive. Captain Squeak and his crew – Stink, Stripe, Whiskers and Acorn – had gone down to Earth to collect a pair of humans that Fuzzbottom thought would prove useful.

During the mission, Agent Whiskers had an unfortunate accident. While in a park searching for the toothbrush cleaner salesman, a rubber squirrel had landed next to him. Mistakenly thinking it was the newly promoted Captain Squeak, Whiskers started talking to it. A moment later a very large dog came barreling towards Whiskers and the chew toy. He didn't know what to do. He had never seen one of these before, but was instantly terrified. Taking a cue from what he thought was his commanding officer he stood his ground. He, sadly, did not survive the encounter.

The toothbrush cleaner salesman, Fred Wattsy, was successfully captured, though, then beamed aboard their ship and was now being held in a see-through pod.

"What do you want with me?" asked a terrified Fred.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" answered General Fuzzbottom.

"Yes, I just asked."

"That you did."

"You going to tell me?"

"Eh, sure. Why not?"

"Thanks."

"Not a problem. You see, we're going to take over Earth."

General Fuzzbottom waited for a reaction from Fred. None came.

"As I said, we're going to take over Earth. Well, invade first and then start with the whole taking over and whatnot. We'll

enslave humanity and, well, make you clean up our poo mainly. We don't have thumbs so it's kind of hard. What with these robotic attachments and all."

"Ah."

"I see that you're pants-wettingly frightened. Good."

"Sir," interrupted Private Cutie-Whiskers Fuzzy-Pants.

"Yes?"

"We've gotten a call from our ground party. They're having trouble finding the second specimen."

"Tell them to try harder. Let them know we'll send rodent after rodent down if we need to. That human knows about us. We can't have him selling his insane crackpot theories to the media."

"I doubt people will believe him, sir."

"No one is paying you to think."

"This is a volunteer mission."

"My point still stands."

Private Cutie-Whiskers Fuzzy-Pants left and radioed down to Captain Squeak on Earth.

"Now, where was I?" asked General Fuzzbottom.

"About to let me go since you realized your plan was crazy and there was no way you could take over all of human civilization," said Fred, in his most convincing voice possible.

"That doesn't sound like me at all."

"It doesn't?"

"No. Are you lying to me? You are! I thought we had something here, toothbrush guy."

"Nope, just your captive."

"Yes. I remember. Negotiations."

"You've lost me."

"No I haven't. You're right here. I can see you."

General Fuzzbottom waved. Fred waved back.

"There," said the general, "now that we've established where you are we can get on with things."

"But where am I?"

"Right there."

"Yes, but."

"Listen, if you're not up for the task I can send you home."

"Oh?"

"Yes, through this." Fuzzbottom held up a small tube, no bigger than a vacuum hose.

"This would be the return tube. It goes directly to Earth."

"Can't you just beam me back down?" asked Fred.

"You would eventually beam down, after the initial mile through the tube. And then the additional few yards of tube on Earth. Don't know where on Earth, but it's there somewhere."

"Is there any way we can skip the tube parts of all this?"

"Where would the fun be in that?"

"I would probably live."

"I ask my question again."

"Oh," said Fred, realizing that his adversary wasn't as cute as he looked or as dimwitted as Fred had hoped.

"That sure shut you up."

"Yes," said Fred. "So what can I help with?"

"We're going to need your negotiation skills when we speak with the Earth president about handing over the deeds for everyone's lives."

"A couple of things about that could be a little problematic for you..."

"Such as?"

"Well, for starters, there's no Earth president. Each nation has its own leader."

"And how many are there?"

"Jeez, I don't really know. A lot?"

"And the other thing?"

"People don't have deeds on Earth. Well, they do. For houses and things, but not for things like servitude. At one point we did, but that's really frowned upon now. It didn't go well. I guess the

military does, but that's different."

"Different how?"

"The military protects the nation."

"Double crap!"

General Fuzzbottom walked over to the intercom and called for Lieutenant Nugget to come meet him.

Nugget arrived, saying, "Sir, you wanted to speak with me?"

"Go ahead," General Fuzzbottom said to Fred. "Tell him what you told me."

Lieutenant Nugget looked at the prisoner. Fred relayed the information he had just given General Fuzzbottom about Earth.

"Care to explain why we didn't know about this before we started?" demanded the general. "This makes everything infinitely harder."

"I, uh..." replied Nugget.

"Too late. You're going to Earth."

General Fuzzbottom held out the tube. Nugget hung his head, crawled inside, and was sent to Earth to assist Captain Squeak in finding the other soon-to-be prisoner.

Unfortunately for the lieutenant, the tube's other end had been sent to a proctologist's office. Needless to say, Nugget was never seen or heard from again.

The General took a seat in front of Fred and held his head in his paws.

"Something wrong?" asked Fred.

"I just don't know what to do now. With all of this new information it doesn't seem likely that our mission will be a success. Should I call my men back? Do I let you go? Or do I just blow this ship to kingdom come?"

"I don't know. You might be able to do it?"

"You mean that?"

"Not really. There are a lot of countries. You'd probably lose the majority of your men."

“Right,” said the general. “Don’t really see much benefit in that. What’s the point in taking over a new planet if I have to do everything myself?”

“There’s also the possibility that you’ll die in the takeover.”

“Thanks. Never considered that happening. Now I’m even more depressed.”

“Sorry.”

“You should be. I should vaporize you right now.”

Fred cowered in fear.

“Who am I kidding,” said General Fuzzbottom. “We don’t have that kind of technology.”

“You don’t?”

“Why do you sound so surprised? Should we?”

“I thought you guys did, what with the spaceship and the beaming down to Earth. Not to mention the tube. That thing is terrifying. Didn’t know you could hear the victim scream the whole way.”

“Didn’t know that either. To be honest, Nugget was the first, uh, test subject.”

“Oh. Seems a little harsh. That’s the kind of thing you’d expect to be private.”

“Man, we can’t even get that right. I’m blowing us all up.”

“No! Wait! Let’s not do anything crazy.”

“Now I’m crazy? What next?”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. What if you let me go and I talk to that guy who knows about you and get him to change his mind about you guys. Maybe get him to start saying how awesome you are and that forming an alliance would be beneficial for everyone.”

“That could work... No! No good. We can’t even find that guy.”

Private Cutie-Whiskers Fuzzy-Pants ran in and said, “They’ve found him! Captain Squeak and the rest located the second specimen.”

Thom Krooze was beamed aboard the ship into the pod next to Fred Wattsy. Thom looked at Fred and then at the general. And then back to Fred and again at Fuzzbottom. And then at his shoes. He stared at his feet for a while. To be fair, he did have nice footwear.

Thom looked General Fuzzbottom in the eyes and said, "I knew it! Everyone who doubted me can kiss my butt! Alien squirrels for the win!"

"Calm down," said Fuzzbottom. "Yes, you are right. We exist. But, our plans just changed."

Captain Squeak entered the room.

"Changed? What happened, sir?"

"Ah, Squeak. I'm glad you're here. It seems like we've been wasting our time."

"Oh?"

"Seems like we significantly underestimated the humans and what they were capable of. Fred here clued me in."

"So... Whiskers..."

"For nothing, I'm afraid."

Captain Squeak hung his head and walked out.

"Heavy," said Thom.

General Fuzzbottom and Fred Wattsy explained to Thom Krooze the new plan. The two of them would be sent back down to Earth, the safe way, and inform the people of a hideous race of alien dung beetles about to attack and that the only way to defeat them was to join forces with the squirrels and their anti-dung laser guns.

"I don't know if the people I've told will believe me," said Thom. "It was hard enough for them to trust me concerning you guys. And you're real!"

"But some of them did believe you and with Fred here helping out, we should be able to convince the people of Earth that we are no longer a threat."

“We can create an infomercial and explain it that way. I’ll handle it on television, as well as sell some toothbrush cleaners, and you can take it to the streets, like you’ve been doing.”

“Couldn’t we,” began Thom, “just stop talking about aliens and then everything would be fine?”

Captain Squeak walked back in.

“That would have worked if we hadn’t abducted you two. Our intelligence shows that the humans are starting to get wise, what with several onlookers seeing us throw the tarp over Fred when we captured him. Probably should have used a bit more stealth with that one. And then there was the case of the squirrel magically appearing in a patient at In One End, Out The Other Proctologists.”

General Fuzzbottom twiddled his robotic thumbs and looked around the room. A moment later he said, “See? They’re on to us. We need you guys to run interference.”

“I’m in,” said Fred.

“Sure, why not,” said Thom. “I wouldn’t mind spewing something that is actually crazy since everyone already assumes I am.”

“Excellent!” said the General.

Fred and Thom appeared back on Earth right in the middle of Central Park. They each went their separate ways and spread the good word of General Fuzzbottom and his race of all knowing alien squirrels and their never ending fight against the evil dung beetles from space.

STEPHEN SCHWEGLER is the author of *Perhaps.*, the co-author of *Screw the Universe* and *Itinerant Preacher* at *Jersey Devil Press*. There's a high probability that he's sitting on his couch right this very minute not being the least bit productive.

A Nice Jewish Golem

by Ao-Hui Lin

Let me say from the start, I am not prejudiced. I mean really, after all the troubles my people have gone through, the pogroms, the Nazis, Mel Gibson, how could I be? Persecution is persecution, I always say. But you can't ignore faith and a common background and how important those things can be in a relationship, right? Especially if your families are very different. Don't underestimate the importance of culture and tradition. Besides all that, my son doesn't know that much about this girl. He doesn't know what she's made of. If she was Jewish, at least he'd know that she was raised in the proper way.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, aren't I? I need to start from the beginning, which I suppose was that night that Yeshua came home late from work. That night he was even later than usual, and my boy works long hours, let me tell you.

"You're late," I said to him when he came through the door. Which I know was an obvious thing to say, but Yeshua never notices when people take advantage of him. I used to wish he stood up for himself more, but you know what they say about being careful what you wish for.

"I'm sorry, Ma." Yeshua hung up his coat on the coat rack before settling heavily into one of the chairs at the kitchen table. He is always very neat, just like I taught him. Well, as neat as a boy can be expected to be. I sat down in the other chair, kitty-corner to his. He looked tired, deep lines of exhaustion literally etched into his gray face. There were gouges in his hands and a rip in his shirt, right above where his heart would be.

"Tell me all about it," I said, like a good mother should. I didn't want him to ever think that he couldn't come to me with his

problems.

He tried to wave me off, and I noticed those gouges again.

"I had to go all the way across the river today, into the city. I only just got back to the synagogue an hour ago."

"Those rabbis work you too hard. Why don't they send some of the other boys once in a while?" I know I shouldn't criticize the rabbis. I know they're good men. But they don't appreciate Yeshua properly; it's a failing of theirs.

Yeshua smiled and patted my hand.

"You know they can't, Ma. The others would stand out like a sore thumb. I'm the only one that can go into the city, thanks to you." He winked at me, and I had to admit that he was right. He's such a good boy, my Yeshua. Better than those other boys he works with, although I'm sure that you think that's my pride talking. But it's not just pride. He's the best thing that's ever come out of me, that's the plain truth.

I looked at his hand covering mine. That gouge was deep, even deeper than I'd first thought. His thumb was nearly falling off.

"Tsk! Let me fix your hand. Yeshua, you need to take better care of yourself."

"It's just a scratch."

"It isn't!" I went to the cupboard where I kept my special supplies and pulled out a fat lump of clay, warming it between my hands as I kneaded it. I sat down again and made him put both hands on the table, flat and spread out. I couldn't help frowning.

"How the rabbis can look at this and not feel even an ounce of remorse, I don't know."

"Ma, it's not like it's going to kill me."

I scowled.

"Do you think that's the only thing you have to worry about? What if you get hit by a bus, or smashed under a girder or something. Do you know how much work I have to do to make you look nice? It's not like I pop open a can of Play-doh and poof, you're all fixed!" The clay was nice and soft finally, and I started to

spread it over his hands, filling in the scratches and reshaping his thumb. "And your clothes! Do the rabbis think that your clothes grow on trees? That they wash and mend themselves? What's that rip there? Did you get caught on a branch or something?"

He looked guilty, which is how he should have looked. Maybe if he was feeling guilty, he would listen to me better.

"It's nothing, Ma. I can fix it myself."

"Don't be silly. Of course I'll do it."

"Please don't be upset, Ma. And please don't go to Rabbi Lieberman and give him an earful. It's my job."

Yeshua knows me well, because that's exactly what I did the very next day. I marched myself over to the synagogue and demanded to speak to Rabbi Lieberman right after morning prayers.

"Oh, hello, Mrs. Levine." I could tell from the resignation in his voice that he was expecting me.

"Rabbi, I have a bone to pick with you." I don't believe in beating around the bush.

"If this is about Yeshua..."

"Yes, you know it is. Rabbi, he came home last night all torn up! I know you think he's indestructible, but he's not."

"Actually Mrs. Levine, he is. As long as he's animated by the magic of the letters inscribed on his body, he is supposed to be indestructible."

"You didn't spend three hours last night patching him up and spackling him, Rabbi. That poor boy might continue to move around and do your bidding no matter how many pieces he's missing, but he won't look human that way. And it's only because of me that he looks as good as he does, that he can walk around without causing a scene. It's because of me that he can talk, that he can pass."

The rabbi had the grace to look ashamed.

"Of course, Mrs. Levine. We appreciate how much work

you've put into Yeshua. He is one of a kind, and we owe you a great debt for putting your skills into making him so lifelike."

"You can show your appreciation by not sending him into situations where he can lose a limb!"

"Mrs. Levine, Yeshua is very important to us, but he's important precisely because he can do the dangerous things that a human can't." He sighed. "Nevertheless, we will take more care next time we send Yeshua out."

That was probably the best I'd get as far as assurances go. But even if he wouldn't promise to keep Yeshua out of dangerous situations, at least Rabbi Lieberman could give him the recognition he deserved.

"Rabbi, Yeshua has been working so hard. You keep him out late almost every night, even the Sabbath!"

"Well, especially the Sabbath, Mrs. Levine."

"Yes, I know. But I was thinking that he could use a little vacation. Some time off."

"He's a golem, Mrs. Levine! He doesn't eat or sleep."

"And that means you should treat him like dirt?" Although I do realize, technically, Yeshua actually is made of dirt. "Rabbi, I'd hate to think that you were taking advantage of my boy just because he's made of clay instead of flesh. He's got feelings, you know."

Rabbi Lieberman turned bright red.

"I... I'm sure he does, Mrs. Levine. But we can't spare him at this moment, what with so many of us rabbis leaving for the religion conference in Los Angeles."

"You're taking him to a conference?" I have to admit, I was impressed that they were going to take Yeshua on such an important mission.

"Uh, well, we haven't finalized any plans, but --"

"Of course you were! For your protection. I know California isn't exactly Warsaw or Palestine, but there are bad people everywhere, right?"

“Well, I suppose. Yes.”

“I must say that it's lovely that you're trusting Yeshua with such important responsibilities.” And by “lovely” I meant “about time.” But the Rabbi looked so remorseful already that I left it at that.

While he was gone, Yeshua called twice a day, like clockwork. Eight in the morning, when I was having my breakfast, and six at night, just before dinner. He seemed excited to be in California, though he said most of his work was following the rabbis around and standing outside of hotel conference rooms looking fierce. I told him not to attract attention to himself, but he told me that in Los Angeles, no one even looked twice at him.

One night the phone was already ringing when I walked in the door.

“Ma?” He sounded worried, probably because I let the phone ring so long.

“Yeshua, yes? How was your day?”

“Fine.”

“Did you make sure to wash behind your ears this morning?”

“Yes, Ma.”

“Tell me about what you did today.”

“Not much.” That's Yeshua. Even though I gave him a tongue and the rabbis gave him the power to use it, he often doesn't.

“Have you met any other rabbis?”

“Yes, Ma. There are rabbis from all over the world here. Even China. There are other people too. Christians and Muslims.”

I sniffed. “You be careful around the Muslims. And make sure that they don't get too close to Rabbi Lieberman.”

“I will, Ma. But everyone has been very nice so far. I don't think that anyone would do Rabbi Lieberman any harm.”

“All right.”

“There are even some people from religions that I've never

heard of. Buddhists and Pagans and all kinds of other religions.”

“That’s nice, dear. It’s good that other people can find comfort in their religions, even if they’re those crazy-type ones. I suppose it’s better than not believing in anything at all.”

“There were even people from Inuit tribes that gave a talk about their traditions. It was very interesting!”

I was surprised to hear Yeshua so excited. Usually he’s much more even-tempered, stony even.

“I’m so glad you’re having a good time,” I sighed. “I’m sure you don’t miss me at all, seeing how you’re meeting all kinds of people more interesting than your boring old mother. When this is all over, you won’t want to come home.”

“Ma, don’t say that! Of course I will! I’ll call you tomorrow morning, like always.”

“Oh no, only if you want to. I don’t want to take time away from your important new friends.”

“I’ll call. I promise. And we’ll be home Monday morning.”

After he hung up I went to bed, but I had trouble sleeping. I had teased him about his new friends, but I kept thinking about what would happen when I died, and Yeshua would be all alone.

Monday morning Yeshua wasn’t home when I got up. I thought that his plane would have landed at least two hours ago, more than enough time to get from Kennedy to our apartment. Airlines these days always seem to be running late. I called the synagogue, and the secretary said that Rabbi Lieberman had come in an hour ago, but that Yeshua was running errands.

Waiting for Yeshua was harder than I expected. The apartment seemed emptier than usual, and I realized how much I’d missed him while he’d been gone.

I considered turning on the television, but all that was on now were soap operas, and I didn’t want to watch stories about people falling in and out of love when I was worried that my own son might never get to have that experience. The thought of Yeshua

possibly all alone for ever and ever made me so depressed, I had a little cry, right there at the kitchen table.

And wouldn't you know it, that's when Yeshua walked in the front door.

"Ma! What's wrong?" He sounded so upset it made me all the sadder so that I couldn't stop crying. "Ma!"

"Oh Yeshua," I said through my old lady hiccups.

Yeshua knelt beside me and put his big gray arms around me. The faint mineral smell of him comforted me.

"Please tell me what's the matter, Ma," he said in his gravelly voice.

"I'm so worried for you," I said. "You know, one day I won't be here anymore."

He looked alarmed. "Are you sick?"

"No, not yet. But I'm old. And I worry about you being all alone when I'm gone. I want you to have someone else that you are close to."

"Ma, that's crazy talk. You're not old."

"You're so sweet, but you don't understand how fragile humans are. One fall and I break my hip and three months later they're putting me in the ground."

"Ma!"

"It's true. I know what I'm talking about."

He must have seen that I was serious.

"Ma, you don't have to worry about me. I promise. In fact," he paused for a long second, "I met someone when I was in California. Someone special. Someone like me. Ma... I'm in love."

My heart sped up and I felt a grin starting to appear on my face.

"A girl? Tell me all about her! Does she serve a synagogue in Brooklyn?"

Yeshua shook his head no.

"In New York, then?" Another no. "New York State? The East

Coast?" Still no, and Yeshua looked so apprehensive that I realized why he was so hesitant.

"She serves somewhere far away, doesn't she? And you," my breath caught in my throat, "you want to move away from me to be closer to her. You're moving out, aren't you, and going far away?"

"Oh no, Ma! No! I mean... yes, she is from far away. Greenland, actually. But she's wants to move here."

"Greenland! I didn't even realize there were any Orthodox communities there! Although," I said, "I suppose it's a very big country. There's bound to be at least one."

"No, Ma..."

"No? Really? How do you know there aren't any?"

"I don't! I mean, that is..." He sighed. It sounded like a road paving machine. "Ma, Anyu isn't Orthodox."

Well that stopped my mental wandering.

"Anyu? With a name like that, I'm not surprised. I suppose she serves a Reform synagogue?" At his expression, I asked, worried, "Not one of those new-fangled synagogues where they don't believe in God? Don't tell me she serves a Humanist rabbi?"

"Ma, Anyu isn't Jewish."

"Not Jewish? Now you're teasing me. How can a golem be not Jewish?"

"She's not a golem. She's a tupilaq."

There was a strange buzzing in my ears. I felt faint. I must have swayed because Yeshua put out a hand to steady me.

"A tupilaq? What...? I don't know what that is."

"She's Inuit. But like me."

"Like you? How can she be like you if she isn't even Jewish?" I couldn't help it, I was yelling at him. For the first time in my life, I was yelling at my Yeshua. I think we were both more than a little shocked by it.

"Ma! You said you wanted me to be happy!"

"How is a girl like this going to make you happy? What could the two of you possibly have in common?"

"We're both made out of dirt and brought to life by magic."

"Hunfph! Like that's some kind of basis for a relationship."

"Ma..."

"What about culture? A common purpose!"

"Ma, I know you'll change your mind once you meet her."

"Meet her?" I said. "I don't want to meet her! Better not to. That way I won't have to hate her when she breaks your heart."

"Ma, she flew all this way..."

I sat bolt upright. "She's here? Now? In Brooklyn?"

Yeshua nodded.

"That's what I was doing this morning. Getting her settled. She's staying at a hotel in Brooklyn Heights."

I raised one eyebrow.

"Brooklyn Heights? Fancy. So she's a big spender, is she?"

"Ma, Rabbi Lieberman suggested the hotel."

"Rabbi Lieberman! So he knew about this, this -- girl, all along?" I was screeching, but I didn't care anymore. "How could he approve of such a thing? A goyim girl? A shiksa?"

"Ma! Don't call Anyu that! She's very nice! And I don't think Rabbi Lieberman was looking at it that way. I don't think it bothers him."

"I wash my hands of both of you! To be betrayed like this, I can't believe that you would do this! Get out!"

"Ma..."

"Stop calling me Ma. Get out. Go to your precious Anyu. I can't believe that someone I created with my own hands would be so disrespectful. Out!"

Yeshua left. I didn't know where he went, and I decided that I didn't care. I was so angry, I cleaned the apartment from top to bottom, even washing the floor behind the refrigerator.

Around two o'clock, Rabbi Lieberman came to see me. I thought about closing the door on his face, but of course I wouldn't do that to a rabbi, no matter what the provocation.

"Mrs. Levine, can I come in?" He looked chastened, to say the least. I let him in grudgingly and didn't say a word.

"Mrs. Levine, I know that you're unhappy with Yeshua and me, but please believe me, Yeshua did not mean to hurt your feelings. He was afraid that you would be upset, and it seems that he was correct in his fear."

"Of course I'm upset!" I burst out. "How would you feel if your son came home with some girl who wasn't Jewish? Wouldn't you be upset?"

He considered the question.

"Yes, of course I would. But it is different for Yeshua. There will never be a question of children, or even marriage."

"No marriage! So you expect him to just shack up with this girl, live in sin?"

The rabbi blushed. "As I understood it, Yeshua does not have... rather, there is no question of sinning, from what I understand."

"If he gives his heart to her, it is as if he were to lie with her in a bed!"

"Well, not exactly, Mrs. Levine."

The rabbi was making me more and more angry.

"You think because he's not human, that what he does isn't important? Rabbi, I should never have made him for you if that's the way that you think."

Rabbi Lieberman took a deep breath. "Mrs. Levine, it is hard enough for someone to find the right person to love in the world, even with all the people in it. For Yeshua, given what he is, it is almost impossible. Would you have him fall in love with a human girl and pine for her until his heart broke and we would have to erase the letter that gives him life? Reduce him back to a lifeless thing?"

"Of course not!" There were stories, old old stories, of golems who did such things. Gave their hearts to human women. The stories always ended badly. No, I didn't want that for my Yeshua.

"Can you not agree at least to meet this girl? Give her a chance?"

You might find that there is more common ground than you think.”

I hesitated. I did not want to meet this tupilaq, this interloper. But I didn't want a story of tragedy for Yeshua either. He was too blinded by infatuation to see how wrong it would be to take up with something like her. Perhaps he needed me to be his reason, to be an objective eye and make it clear to him how impossible it is. I couldn't do that unless I met with her.

“Fine. Yeshua can bring her to dinner. But,” I warned, “I make no promises. If she's a disaster I won't hold my tongue.”

The rabbi looked resigned. “Fair enough. I'll tell Yeshua.”

So that's how it is that I am sitting at the dinner table tonight with Yeshua, this Tupilaq girl Anyu, and Rabbi Lieberman.

Anyu, oy! She's even worse than I expected! Her people had put her together out of mud and leaves and bits of rock and human bone. It's disgusting! I won't deny that there are parts of her that are pretty -- her face and her hands, for instance. She has an indecent kind of figure, like Marilyn Monroe, and I'm old enough to remember Marilyn when she was still alive. There are leaves stuck in her hair and when she laughs you can see real human teeth in her head. Twigs and bits of bone poke out every once in a while when she moves.

She tries hard; too hard. Careful to say her pleases and thank yous, and she makes a point of telling me how much she likes Brooklyn, and now she wouldn't dream of living elsewhere. As if I want her anywhere near Brooklyn.

I can barely stand to speak to her, and it falls to the Rabbi to make conversation.

“So, Anyu,” the rabbi says over dessert. “What line of work do you do? Yeshua wasn't very specific about it when he told me about you.”

She glances at Yeshua, as if to check with him before saying anything.

“Oh, mostly I work with computers now. Originally I was made to wreak havoc on a neighboring tribe, sometime around the late 1700s. But you know, times change. Now it’s all about internet gambling and I ended up getting into the tech side of it. Sort of a holdover of the revenge business, but hacking instead of... well, hacking.” She makes an ax-chopping motion with her hands.

Yeshua puts an arm around her.

“She’s so smart. That was the first thing that I noticed about her.”

Trust me, it was not her smarts that drew Yeshua to her, the little hussy.

“Mrs. Levine,” says Anyu. “These mandelbrot are delicious!”

I’m surprised. “You can eat?”

Anyu nods. “Oh yes! Not a lot, but I like to taste new things. I’ve never had anything like this, though! It’s wonderful. I’d like to learn how to make it.”

“You cook, too?” She nods again, and I sniff. “Well, it won’t do you any good. Yeshua doesn’t eat.”

“Oh, I know that. But maybe if you teach me how, we could cook together? For your friends? I love cooking.”

“I don’t think...”

“Only if it’s not too much trouble, of course. Yeshua spent the whole plane trip here telling me what a good cook you are, and I’ve always dreamed about learning to cook from someone...” She trails off.

“What?” I ask, curious in spite of myself.

“Oh, you’re going to think it’s silly, but I’ve always had this daydream that one day I would have a proper family. You know, someone to come home to, who would have family of his own, since I don’t have any. My maker died two centuries ago. And I could do... family things. Like cook supper and help around the house.” She bites her lip, showing those human teeth again. “I’m sorry, I know it’s silly.”

“Hunfph.” I’m not about to tell her that I have daydreams like

that myself. "I suppose I could try and teach you something simple."

"Thank you!"

"Assuming it's not treyf to have you in my kitchen." All those bits of bone in her, it couldn't be kosher, could it?

"Mrs. Levine --" begins Rabbi Lieberman.

"Ma --" says Yeshua at the same time.

"Please," says Anyu, but she says it to Yeshua, not me. "Your mother is right. We should make sure that it's OK. I don't want to do anything that might violate your faith. Culture and tradition are very important."

"Exactly!" I say, and for a moment, I can see that maybe there is something more to this Tupilaq girl than I had originally thought. And Yeshua, well, I can't deny that when he looks at her, it's with love.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not taking her in with open arms. There is no getting around the fact that she's not Jewish and doesn't know our customs. But... I suppose it's something that, given enough time, even a Tupilaq girl might learn.

AO-HUI LIN spends a lot of her time pondering the nature of motherhood and hopes that when her children are grown they won't wonder why so many of her stories about mothers end in tragedy.

Red Hot Panda Love

by Danger_Slater

Day 584

“Ellie! Ellie! Come in here, quick! I think the pandas are about to fuck!”

Ellie scurries in, her orthopedic shoes going *clomp clomp clomp* across the concrete floor. She leans over me and looks at the monochromatic computer screen. I can feel her breath against the side of my neck. It smells sweet. Like bananas.

On the monitor, Oreo and Bandit playfully sniff at each other. I scribble notes feverishly. What is their body language trying to tell us? Are they lustful? Libidinous? Is he flirting with her? Is she playing coy? Have their inhibitions been lost? Are the fires of unbridled, animalistic passion erupting like magma from their furry loins? There are so many variables. So many nuances. With each twitch of an ear, wrinkle of a nose, blink of an eye – what are the pandas trying to say to me?

Oreo takes a shit. Bandit eats it.

“Goddamn it!” I say, throwing my clipboard down on the table. A metal spring pops off of it. The clipboard no longer clips. It’s just a board.

“Great,” I huff. “There’s another expenditure we can’t afford.”

“But Alan,” Ellie says to me, “we’re going to need clipboards.”

I sigh.

“I suppose I’ll have to give the commissioner’s son *another* kidney.”

Our research facilities are criminally underfunded. We currently

rank 1,346,482nd on the government's annual expense report – sandwiched between the Mongolian Deathworm Liberation Front and Concerned Citizens for Celebrity Nose-Jobs.

When I first started UPROOT (the United Panda Repopulation Offensive Of Tomorrow) I had but one lofty goal in mind: to save these beautiful, gentle creatures from the brinks of extinction. These pandas *need* a person like me. They need a savior. They need a messiah. And I have made it my life's work to become that messiah. Are you even aware that there are less than one thousand pandas left in the wild? And that number is dwindling every day!

With my help, my influence, my blood, sweat and tears, my undying conviction, hopefully that will all soon change. I can picture it so clearly in my mind's eye – the not-too-distant future – there's millions of pandas. Billions of them. A panda for every man, woman and child on Earth. We can even teach them to do things. Imagine a panda driving your taxi cab, serving you at a restaurant, or delivering your mail. The possibilities are endless. It could be a world where pandas and people live together in harmony. Forever. Oh, what a glorious sight that would be! Just like Heaven! And it all starts here. In this lab. Today.

...

Just as soon as soon as I figure out how to get Oreo and Bandit to have sex.

Day 612

Today I read the pandas erotic literature.

I had spent several hours in the train station terminal, traveling from magazine stand to magazine stand in search of the hottest panda-centric text I could find. I eventually settled on a steamy little book about a zookeeper and a rhino poacher and their forbidden love.

I read it out loud to the bears, enunciating every salacious

syllable. I even did voices for the characters. The imagery was palpable. I could almost taste Fabian's sweat. I could almost feel Genevieve's soft, supple breasts. When I finally finished the novel, I returned to the lab. Ellie and I watched...

And waited...

And waited...

And waited...

Research Note #1,542: Pandas don't like Harlequin romance.

Day 655

Question: What is world without red hot panda love?

Answer: Not a world I want to live in.

Panda aphrodisia is a complex science, and an expensive one too. Our \$300,000 in unpaid dildo bills can attest to that. Fake dicks fill the laboratory – a thousand different cocks in a thousand different colors, lining the shelves like a rubber rainbow. But we're not in the business of true love.

We're in the business of S-E-X.

I'm like the Panda Jesus, here to save these wretched creatures from their prudish, destructive ways. I even went so far as to show them how to do it myself once. Late one night, long after Ellie went home, I snuck into their cage, undid my belt and started jerking off in full view of both of them.

"You see?" I said, spastically tugging on my own shriveled manhood with impassioned resolve; every stroke, every squeeze, every tickle, yank and squish a desperate plea for their salvation. "Your sexuality is nothing to be ashamed of. It's natural and beautiful and a part of life!"

I continued masturbating for another 30 or so minutes, but I never fully reached orgasm. I'm a scientist, for God's sake, not a goddamn porn star.

Day 724

"I think I've got it!"

I hold up a clear glass vial filled with a neon green liquid.

"What is it?" asks Ellie after clomping over.

"What is it?" I scoff at her. "It's only the most potent synthetic pheromone that pandakind has ever known! Serum #306. I call it Lightning Panda Fucksauce."

"Lightning Panda Fucksauce?" Ellie says in disbelief. She leans over me and peers through my microscope at a sample I've mounted. A wisp of her strawberry blonde hair tickles my nose.

"Hmmm. Interesting cellular disbursement," she says without looking up. "Though the enzyme pairing along the fifth helix seems a bit shaky..."

"Nonsense." I brush her off. "The enzymes are fine. This serum? This is the one."

"That's what you said about serums 1 – 305."

"Yes, yes, but this one is different. I can feel it. You've got to have faith, Ellie. A new page in history is about to be turned, and guess what? I'm the one who's writing the book!"

Ellie rolls her eyes.

"Come on," I say. "Let's test this stuff out."

Ellie follows me into the cage, documenting my every movement on our does-not-clip-board. I fix Oreo a fresh bowl of water, dosing it with a few droplets of Serum #306. We rush back into the lab to watch from the monitor. I'm so excited I can barely breathe. I've waited many bloodshot, coffee-addled years for this moment. I am ready to ascend my throne. To accept my fate. To become the messiah I was born to be.

Oreo slowly walks over to it. Our eyes widen. He sniffs at the bowl with trepidation. Finally, his pink tongue unfurls and he starts lapping up mouthfuls of Fucksauce water. After getting his fill, he sits back on his hind legs. Ellie and I lean in closer to the

monitor, both of us afraid to even blink. Oreo looks down at his fuzzy crotch. He flicks his limp wiener, yawns, and then decides to take a nap.

Serum #306 doesn't work.

I am devastated.

"I thought I might find you here," says Ellie.

I'm at the bar in the building next to UPROOT's headquarters, six whiskeys deep in my sorrow. *Failure! Failure! Failure!* The words echo over and over in my head. I take another sip and the voices get just a tiny bit further away.

Ellie sits down in the stool next to me.

"Whatdaya havin'?" the crusty old bartender asks her.

"Just a water," she goes.

"All I wanted to do was save the pandas." I take another sip and sway in my seat. "Is that too much to ask?"

"I know you probably don't want to hear this, Alan, but have you ever thought that maybe pandas aren't worth saving?"

I don't respond.

"I mean, you see how fucking stupid they are," she continues. "Honestly, how difficult is it to have sex? It's supposed to be built in. If a room full of rubber dicks can't do the job, what hope do we have?"

I polish off whiskey number seven.

"I never asked to be the Panda Jesus, Ellie. Sometimes I even feel like the Panda Jesus doesn't really exist. Like I'm a fraud, or something."

"You know there are a bunch of other animals that need saving too," she consoles. "Have you ever thought about saving some Bactrian camels? Or caribou? Oh! What about condors? Condors need a Jesus too."

"What are we talking about?" I drunkenly and resolutely shake

my head. "This isn't a debate. Being the Panda Jesus is not something you can decide. It's something you're born with. You can't just turn it off like a light switch or dump it down the drain like we did with all that fucking useless Fucksauce. We all have a destiny, Ellie. We can deny it. We can fight it. We can pretend like it doesn't exist. But in the end, destiny has a way of sorting things out. I will save the pandas. I will save them all."

"Okay." She nods. "If that's how you feel, we can keep on trying again tomorrow."

She takes a small sip of her water and her face wrinkles up around the glass.

"What?" I ask.

"This water tastes funny," she says.

"Well, it's from the sink in the bar," I go. "It's not exactly Evian."

"It's making my tongue numb."

"The water is making your tongue numb?"

"Yeah. I think so. Or maybe it's a bug bite or something." She starts fanning herself with her hand. "Is it hot in here?"

"Um... not really. Normal, I guess."

She pulls off her glasses and unbuttons the top button of her blouse. Between her cleavage I see a gold chain and a tiny gold crucifix. I knew she was a believer.

"Are you sick or something?" I ask her.

"I don't know."

Her cheeks are turning flush and her pale skin seems to glow.

"You know, my apartment is only two blocks from here," I say to her. "Maybe you'd want to go there and lay down while I call you a cab?"

"Yeah," she goes, letting her pineapple hair fall out of its uptight bun. "If you don't mind."

Ellie enters my apartment and does that look-at-everything-on-the-walls-and-mantle thing. There's photographs of me at various zoos across the country. One of me hiking the hills of the Shaanxi province in China. A couple of Oreo and Bandit when there were just cubs, looking so happy and innocent in their adolescent fur coats.

"You really love these creatures, don't you?" she says. She doesn't appear to be sick anymore.

"They are why I was put on the Earth," I reply.

She picks up a handcrafted ceramic statue of Puff-Puff, the world's most famous panda.

"That was given to me by Puff-Puff's trainer, Professor Jim K. Dickenson," I tell her. "To me, it was like meeting The Beatles and having John Lennon hand me his guitar. It was Professor Dickenson's research that inspired me to get into pandas in the first place."

She puts the statue down.

"You're a very special man, Alan," she says, placing her arms lightly around my collar. "Has anyone ever told you that before?"

"Um... I think my grandma used to say something like that," I go, suddenly realizing how strange she was acting.

"Did your grandma know that I've always had a bit of a crush on you?"

"How would my grandma know that?"

"Watching you work these past few years..." she continues, leaning in closer. "Your passion. Your intensity. It's enough to make any girl... horny."

I gulp. She leans in and kisses me. Her lips are soft, almost like silk. They feel so nice against mine. I kiss her back. Our tongues entwined.

"Shall we go to the bedroom?" she coquettishly says.

"Okay," I reply, hypnotized. She takes my hand in hers and leads me. "No wait," I say, pulling away. I walk over to the closet

and open the door. Inside are two plush panda costumes, like something you'd see at a second-rate amusement park. One is sized for a man and the other for a woman. "I bought these so long ago. I've never had an opportunity to use them."

I give her an awkward smile. I'd probably be more embarrassed if I wasn't still drunk. She just smiles back.

"Oh, Alan. I wouldn't want it any other way."

The Next Day

I awake to the sound of an ambulance wailing. Like acid, the screech of the siren soaks into the sponge of my brain, shattering my whiskey-induced sleep like it was a pane of thin glass.

Oh, my aching head! I am HUNG-F'ING-OVER!

I reach out next to me, but Ellie is gone. Just the plushy panda costume remains, crumpled up and discarded like a used condom. Last night was definitely... unexpected. I always figured Ellie was a lesbian. Or at the very least asexual. Like an amoeba. Aside from the occasional "weird dream," I've never thought about her in any carnal way. But let me tell you, those "weird dreams" were Saturday morning cartoons compared to the depraved sexual gymnastics that girl performed on me last night. I can't even recall the last time I had gotten laid, and truthfully, I'm a little relieved to know that that thing between my legs still works properly. Of course, they say you never forget how to use it. Like riding a bike.

A sexy, sexy bike.

The ambulance continues wailing. I drag myself out of bed and hobble over to the open window just in time to see it speeding down the street. Close behind, about a dozen naked men are sprinting after it. The paramedic behind the wheel takes a turn a little too tight and loses control of the vehicle. It flips over on its side and slides into a building. The naked men, all fully aroused, catch up to the wreckage and start humping it. And I mean they're

really *humping* it – they’re not kissing, seducing or flirting with the ambulance. They’re not asking it out to dinner. They’re not trying to wine and dine it.

They’re fucking the shit out of it.

The paramedic kicks open the door and makes a run for it. He only manages to get a few steps before the naked men seize him and subject him to the same fate as his vehicle. By the time they’re done, he’s totally naked too. Just one of the crowd, roving the streets for the next thing to hump.

Hmm. Must be the Pride parade or something, I think.

By the time I reach street level, the crowd has dispersed. I’m anxious to get back to the lab. I have to talk to Ellie about what happened last night. I must assure her: red hot panda love – that is still our number one priority. Fraternization, fornication, and that thing she did on my balls with her tongue will have to remain, respectively, priorities two, three and four.

Aside from the catastrophic ambulance accident and the Gay Pride Parade, the city is unusually quiet this morning. Actually, it’s a little more than quiet. I look up and down the avenue. Not a single car purring, nor a businessman hurriedly making his way to work. It’s empty. Completely, soberly, eerily empty. I stop walking. Stop breathing, even. I focus all my energy on my ears and listen.

And faintly, I can hear... something.

It’s muffled and rhythmic, like the fanfare of a distant carnival or the thump of a giant heart under the concrete chest of this sleeping city.

I follow the sound, determined to find its source. Determined to find out exactly what the hell is going on. Around blocks, down alleys, through crosswalks, intersections and overpasses. The pulsation gets louder. And louder. And louder still until it’s echoing down these streets so clearly there is no mistaking what it

might be. It's not fanfare, nor the thump of a monstrous heart. Rather, it's the sound of moaning. Unrestrained, unrepressed, synchronized moaning.

"Uh! Uh! Uh! Uh!"

I turn the next corner and freeze. Ahead of me is a park filled to the gates with naked people, all tangled up in each other so that they form a huge, fleshy ball, eighty-feet tall. I duck behind an abandoned hot dog stand and watch in disbelief. Men, women, children, old folks, *dogs* even. It didn't matter. They're all twisted up in there. In the orgy ball. Having sex.

I can hardly watch. From the side streets more participants emerge. They run full-speed, fully nude and fully aroused, diving genitals first into the massive fuckpile. Almost immediately, they're absorbed. Sucked beneath its quivering skin. One of thousands, crying out in ecstasy.

"Uh! Uh! Oh yeah! Uh!"

I try to back away, but something has a hold of my feet. I look down. My shoes appear to be stuck in some kind of semi-translucent, milky white substance. It smells sort of like chlorine. Sort of like... OH GOD NO!

I jerk around spastically trying to free myself, but only succeed in losing my balance. I tumble to the ground, taking the entire hotdog stand down with me, spilling all-beef franks all over the semen soaked pavement. The crash catches the attention of some of the orgy ball's lower-level members. A couple of heads look up and spot me trapped in the ejaculate like a fly in spider web. Lust-filled eyes narrow as a couple dozen spindly arms come out of the ball.

"Want sex? Want sssseeexxxxxx?" it starts moaning. More heads and eyes see me. The orgy ball claws across the concrete, digging in so deep its fingers look like squashed cigarettes. It's dragging itself towards me. Slowly, through the park gates and across the street, as I wiggle helplessly in the stinky spunk. I'm glued to the ground. If I could just get out of my clothing, I might

have a chance. I remove my coat and shirt so that my torso is free. I unbutton my pants and start untying my shoes. The orgy ball gets nearer. Nearer.

“Want to love?” “We love you.” “Come to us.” “We loveeeeeeeee.”

It’s right next to me, eighty-feet tall, casting its horrid fuckshadow between me and the sun. This is it. I’m going to die. I’m going to be consumed. I’m going to become part of it...

But no, I’m not being absorbed. I’m not being absorbed because the ball has stopped and it seems to be momentarily engaged in something else. I look down. It’s the hot dogs! It’s distracted by the hot dogs! It must be mistaking the Oscar Meyer wieners for actual human wieners because it’s gobbling up the spilt frankfurters like a bridge-and-tunnel crack whore on payday. *Slurp. Slurp. Slurp.*

I don’t waste any time. I untie my other shoe and leap away. I run down the street in just my underwear and socks. The orgy balls growls as it watches me escape.

“Come back.” “We love you.” “Want to love?” “Come to pappppppaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

I thankfully make it back to the lab without being spotted by any more of those... those... people? I don’t know what to call them anymore. Monsters? Maniacs? Cock-gobbling cum junkies? And what in God’s name were they doing to each other? That wasn’t just sex. Sex implies something sensual. Something natural and loving. What I witnessed in the park was no act of love. Nor was it consensual. The people in that sex ball were out for blood – ripping through flesh, tearing apart appendages, pulling out chunks of hair and scalp, penetrating or getting penetrated in any open wound they could find. They weren’t just having sex.

They were *murderfucking* each other.

My vision drifts to the nearby computer screen. I can see inside

the panda's pen. Oreo naps in the corner. Bandit is sniffing around her empty water dish. Stupid, benevolent, inspiring creatures – they have no idea of the chaos transpiring outside of these four walls. Eat, sleep and shit; their world is so simple. So pure. There's no rampaging sex zombies threatening their lives. Actually, there's no sex in their lives at all.

I hit the button that unlocks their cage and gingerly step inside.

"What's wrong, Bandit?" I say to the bear. "You thirsty?"

I carry the water dish over to the sink and begin filling it. "I guess Ellie forgot to leave you guys enough water last night after we dumped out the serum..."

I pause. I look from the dish to the hissing faucet and back to the dish again. The bowl overflows, neon green tap water spilling over its edges and falling in huge droplets into the stainless steel basin.

...

Neon green tap water?

"Oh my God!" I say out loud, the full magnitude of the situation finally dawning on me. The water. The city. The sex. The serum.

IT'S CONTAMINATED!!!

Immediately there is a crash behind me. I whip around to see Ellie standing there, completely in the nude. A devious, hungry smirk is smashed across her lips. Man, she looks good, even without the panda costume on.

No! What am I saying? She's infected. She's one of them. She drank the water. She's a sex zombie. A fucker.

"Stay right where you are, Ellie. I don't want any trouble."

My words tremble as they leave my mouth. They hang awkwardly in the air like a balloon low on helium. Ellie's smirk just gets more devious. And hungrier.

"That's too bad, because trouble is what you're in for, mister," she says as she steps towards me, the red vinyl stiletto heels she has

on going *clomp, clomp, clomp* against the concrete floor.

"Please don't," is all I can whimper.

I close my eyes just as she's about to pounce on me.

But then --

RRRRRRRAAAWWWWRRRRR!!!!!!!

Oreo comes charging out of the open pen, knocking me to the ground. He leans back on his hind legs, raises his paw and takes one big swipe at Ellie, tearing off a nice chunk of shoulder and most of her face. She collapses. Oreo takes off, galloping towards the exit. Bandit follows closely behind.

"No!" I scream, clawing my way up the desk. I frantically type the emergency lockdown code into the computer. Alarms honk. Lights flash. The metal fire doors grumble to life. Oreo and Bandit run faster. Faster. Faster. Squeezing out the slowly closing door just seconds before it slams shut with a mechanical crunch.

It's too late now. My pandas are gone.

"Alan?" a faint voice says.

I turn around. Ellie lays in a pool of blood, only summoning enough strength to whisper at me. I fall to my knees next to her.

"Oh, Ellie, I'm so sorry! I did this to you. It's all my fault."

"Don't blame yourself, Alan. You did your best."

"But I turned you into one of those... fuckers."

She coughs up some blood. It dribbles down her skinless cheek, joining the puddle beneath.

"Wha - what?" she says.

"Last night? The water in the bar? The sex? You were right about Serum #306. It wasn't ready. And after we dumped it out, it got into the water table. It turned everyone in the city into sex-crazy psychos. I should've listened to you."

"What are you talking about?"

"What do you mean, 'what am I talking about?' Aren't you one of them?"

Her left eyeball falls out of its socket and swings gently by a

sinewy strand of pink veins. She coughs up more blood.

“Alan, please. I’m not a sex psycho, or whatever you said.”

“You’re not?” I say.

She attempts to shake her head no.

“You mean, you had sex with me because you *wanted* to?”

“Well... yeah,” she bashfully says, smiling as best as a faceless, mutilated person can. Her breathing get heavier. Gaspings. Gurgling for air. A tear runs down the side of my cheek. She reaches up with her good hand and gently wipes it away. The only woman who ever willingly had sex with me, and I’m sitting here like a statue, watching her slip away.

“Please, Ellie. Hang in there. Don’t die. You hear me, Ellie? Please, please, *please* don’t leave me here.”

But my words don’t heal her. Words don’t do that. Her breath falls shallow now, slowing down. I cradle her in my lap as she sucks in her last labored gasp. And then she’s gone.

For the first time I can remember, I’m thinking about something other than pandas.

Day 1,849

Sexpocalypse.

That’s what the media called it. Back when there was a media. Before Matt Lauer and Al Roker started buttfucking each other live on the Today Show. Before the Senate Majority Leader organized a filibuster-style circle jerk on the Bill of Rights. Before the economy collapsed. Before the power went out. Before the last human voice cried out for help. Before the world ended. Before all that – it was called the Sexpocalypse.

Now it’s not called anything. It’s just the way things are.

Three years I’ve been sealed up in this lab. Caged like an animal. Cloistered like a nun. I’ve managed to survive on the bottles of champagne and packages of edible underwear we had

stockpiled for Oreo and Bandit. But now even those have run out. Pretty soon, I'm going to starve to death.

Written all over the walls are equations, complex algorithmic calculations worked and reworked and reworked again until all my pens ran out of ink. Now they're scratched onto surfaces with the tips of rusty nails or painted on the floor in feces and blood. The table in front of me is littered with beakers and test tubes. Even though the electricity is gone, the Bunsen burners scattered about illuminate the room, passing through liquid-filled vials that seem to glow against the firelight. One in particular, a neon orange concoction, seems to glow brighter than the rest.

I carefully fill a syringe with it and slip the needle into the pocket of my soiled lab coat.

I realize that no one is going to rescue me. And I can accept that. I've never relied on anyone before. I guess I've always been a bit selfish in that way. I was destined to be a savior. Not a victim. But even the chosen have their moments of doubt. Perhaps it was my pride that got in the way. Perhaps that's why I never became the messiah I was meant to be. I realize now that Jesus didn't save so that a bunch of foolhardy Christians could get together every Sunday and kiss his ass. No! Jesus saved because the people needed saving. With the pandas, I wanted to be the one rewarded for carrying that load. I wanted the praise all to myself...

But now... I get it now...

I run my hands along the edge of the thick, fireproof door that has sealed the world up from me. It's closed tight. I search the lab for something, anything I could use to help pry it open. All the tubs of K-Y Jelly certainly aren't going to do the trick, nor are the dozens of VHS tapes filled with 1980s' pornography.

That's when I spot our old does-not-clip-board.

I wedge the board in between the door and the frame, pushing it deeper and deeper until it won't get wedged any further. Then I pull back my leg, gaining as much leverage as I possibly can, and I kick it. And kick it again. And again. And again. The board snaps

in half, now a fraction-of-a-board-that-does-not-clip. The board snaps in half and the door moves, just a little bit. Grabbing the tarnished silver handle in both of my hands, I pull. I pull with all my might, every muscle in my body screaming out in pain, from my fingers to my toes, from my brain to my heart, all working together. All pulling on the handle. Until my palms bleed. Until the handle finally snaps off. Bent screws and pieces of metal fall to the floor with a *tink* and the door slowly slides open on its rusty hinges.

The sunlight pours in like microwaved honey. So warm and sweet and so goddamn bright! Has the sun always been this bright? I can't remember. I've spent too long underground. But now – now I can finally face it. I can let the sun wash over me again. My days of hibernation are gone. I am awake.

I can't be certain of what I'll encounter out there in the post-sexpocalyptic fuckscapes of my molested planet. Horny zombies and orgy balls, lakes of semen and vaginal secretions, caressed carcasses, deflowered flowers, defiled human entrails and limbs strewn about like garland at the devil's Christmas party, and dildo factories upon dildo factories, as far as the eye can see. Is this the world that awaits me?

Perhaps there's something else happening out there. Something hidden and beautiful, far away from this city's sex-crazed hands. Perhaps Oreo and Bandit managed to escape. Perhaps they just kept running until they were safe. Perhaps they found somewhere quiet. Calm. Serene. Perhaps there is someplace pure left on our motherfucking Earth. Perhaps they've built themselves a den. They fell in love. Nature took its course. Little pandas were born. Perhaps humans and pandas can live together in harmony. Perhaps Heaven does exist, after all.

Or perhaps they're already dead.

Either way, I must move on. I must accept my fate. I put my hand in my pocket and squeeze the syringe in my bloody palm.

This is it. Serum #307 – humanity's last hope. The antidote. The

cure.

I step out of my tomb.

I have risen.

Amen.

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