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Editor's Note:

Submitted for your approval: five stories that twist the boundaries and entangle the mind.

You're about to discover that it all really does depend on your point of view.

Old friend and founder, Eirik Gumeny, gets us started with a story that asks the age old question: who is the real monster – the zombie or the human with the baseball bat?

Next, Josh Denslow channels his inner Salinger and serves up a wonderful slice of American teen life. The boys stare at each other at the end of "Sonny Boy," but what do they really see?

Newcomer James Reinebold presents his own dilemma in "The McElroy Family Hole." Is tradition the glue that binds a family through the generations or is insanity its own end, means, and accomplice?

We look up at the stars but what do the stars see when they look back? That's at the heart of "Beta Geminorum" by Brian Niemeier, who's also making his literary debut.

Finally, the great Graham Tugwell returns to the pages of JDP and asks the same essential question as Eirik: who (or what) is the real monster?

Graham's story is called, "We Left Him with the Dragging Man."

It gets a bit dark.

But don't worry.

The stories on these pages can't hurt you. They are confined to a dimension of the mind, one you're free to visit and – unlike its occupants – able to exit at any time.

If you need me, I'll be standing outside the window in the bushes, smoking a cigarette.

You know, in a cool kind of way.

– Mike Sweeney

Night of the Living

Eirik Gumeny

The office was quiet, dark, lit only by the soft glow of a few auxiliary lights and the reflection of the moonlight off the snow outside. Most of the staff had left within minutes of the governor making his declaration of a State of Emergency – to pick up necessities, to get home to family, to try and beat traffic. Satish and Deepen, model employees that they were, remained behind with a handful of others to try and put a dent in the department's ever increasing workload.

Six weeks later they were still there, hard at work, gnawing on what was left of the severed leg of their coworker James. The rest of James, and the carcass of his wife, Pamela, the receptionist, lay picked clean at their feet.

Cleveland, another coworker, rushed over to them, as quickly as his bad leg would allow, visibly dismayed.

"Out," he growled. "Out!"

Satish turned slowly toward Cleveland, a flap of skin hanging from his mouth, James' calf in his hands, and asked, "Whuh?"

"Peo-ple," replied Cleveland, pointing his scabbed and handleless stump toward the window.

"Peo-ple?" scoffed Deepen, dropping James' thigh onto his desk and turning to face his behanded colleague.

"Yeh," said Cleveland, gravely. "Out."

"Out?" replied Deepen even more skeptically, the brow above his one eye raised. "Out sigh?"

"Yeh! Peo-ple out fakking sigh!"

Cleveland was practically hopping in place, his torn, bloodied clothing fluttering as he bounced, his stump quivering with urgency and once again aimed at the window.

Deepen looked at Satish. Satish shrugged. Cleveland's exposed kneecap began to slide down his shin.

Deepen shook his head and trudged out of James' cubicle.

"Urk," said Cleveland, tapping his stump against the smudged and spattered glass. "Peo-ple."

Satish and Deepen stepped up to the window and looked down from their fourth floor perch, following Cleveland's rapidly decaying appendage to the source of his discontent.

A man. A living, breathing, man. Knee deep in snow, bathed in blue moonlight, and carrying a baseball bat.

Satish and Deepen exchanged glances.

"Fakking peo-ple!" exclaimed Cleveland. "Out!"

"Cahm," said Deepen. "Cahm. One peo-ple. Nuh portant."

"Bat!" said Cleveland.

"One peo-ple," repeated Deepen, raising a single skeletal finger in front of his face. "Us three. Us more." He gestured to the far sides of the office, across piles of overturned desks and collapsed cubicles, over the bile stains and half-eaten organs and bare, broken bones, to the twitching cadavers eating old friends and the shambling corpses gathering at the windows.

"Us more."

"Us more," echoed Cleveland, his torn, clotted mouth forcing its way into a smile.

Deepen turned toward the window once again, his good eye focusing on the young man outside, his hunger growing.

"One peo-ple more peo-ple!" shouted Satish suddenly. "More!"

Deepen turned and slapped him across the face. Satish lost his jaw in the process.

"Cahm. Fak. Dow," said Deepen, grabbing Satish by his exposed collarbones. "Juh. One. One peo-ple."

"Unff peeepelerle morrr peeepelerle," repeated Satish weakly, rapidly expanding and collapsing his chest cavity, the muscle memory of a panic attack. "Allwahaysth morrr."

“Nuh. One.”

“Nuh one,” said Cleveland quietly, disbelievingly, staring out the window.

Deepen turned toward him.

“Nuh one,” repeated Cleveland. “More. More!”

From the window the trio of reanimated corpses could see five more living, breathing, weapon-carrying people meandering along the street below.

“El, fak,” said Deepen.

The ding of the hallway elevator echoed into the silent office.

“Uh?” remarked Cleveland.

“Nurring,” replied Deepen weakly, “juh –”

The lights came on, bathing the entire office in an awful fluorescence. The three deceased coworkers huddled together, looking around the bloodstained, entrail-strewn office. Their undead colleagues did the same, slowly shuffling toward them.

Then they heard it.

“Hello?”

“Shih,” sputtered Cleveland, stepping back and pressing himself against the nearest desk. Satish put himself behind Deepen, clutching at his shoulders.

“Is there anybody in here?”

Satish’s remaining fingers tightened around Deepen’s shoulders. One of Deepen’s arms came off in the process.

“Vraapth,” said Satish. “Vraapth vraapth vraapthing vraapth.”

“Shih!” shouted Cleveland, pounding a fist and a stump against the window. “Shih!”

He pressed his forehead against the glass. There were dozens of men and women now, all un mutilated and breathing oxygen and carrying axes and frying pans and shotguns.

“Nuh,” he muttered, an eye sliding forward slightly.

“Nuuuuh...”

“Hello?”

The voice was getting closer.

"I can hear you. I know you're in here."

Satish shrank back, leaning against the window.

"You fucking monsters."

The elevator dinged again.

"Fak," said Cleveland, turning toward the sound. The rest of the reanimated office workers, gathered near now, did the same.

"Uh uth doooo?" asked Satish. "Uh?!"

Deepen simply smiled, his lips cracking and his bloodied teeth bared.

"Us eat peo-ple brains," snarled Deepen, narrowing his one working eye.

He stepped forward, grabbing a letter opener from the nearest desk with his good arm.

"Brains," repeated Cleveland, stepping beside Deepen, their coworkers lumbering behind them.

"Braaaaaaiiiinnsssss."

EIRIK GUMENY was a boxing kangaroo who died, tragically and violently, in the ring in 1923, fighting Teddy Roosevelt and a time-traveling Muhammad Ali. Find out more at egumeny.blogspot.com.

Sonny Boy

Josh Denslow

We called him Sonny Boy for no apparent reason. Names were just thrown out there and some of them stuck. Like they called me Meat Locker. And William in Produce was called The Shocker.

I hate bagging groceries, but I hate ringing up customers even more. So I made Sonny Boy scan it, and I dumped it in bags. I had this pain in my wrist that I wanted to go to a doctor about. I tried not to lift the bags with my right hand, but that made me move a little slower and you can't ever please the customer. They say things like, "Don't put the bleach in with my tampons," and you just want to smack them over the head. This wrist thing was pissing everybody off.

Sonny Boy kept offering to switch places with me but that wasn't happening. He's pretty tall, but he's as skinny as my eight-year-old sister. His Adam's apple was threatening to burst out of his neck and he had two or three hairs on his chin. His hair sat limply on his head and he was constantly pushing the bangs out of his eyes. When Sonny Boy looked right at you, it was like he wasn't looking at you. Like something way more interesting was going on right behind your back.

When he graduated high school, Sonny Boy wanted to travel across the country in his mom's station wagon. He said he was going to sleep in the back and see everything that America had to offer. Then he was going to move to another country. We all thought he was crazy, but as our high school graduation approached, I realized he was the only one with a plan.

Our manager was named Dobbs. No one ever came up with a nickname for him, so instead, the word Dobbs became synonymous with asshole. If someone talked back or was eyeing someone's

girlfriend, you could say, "Stop being such a Dobbs." When you first saw him, you might be tricked into thinking he was a nice guy. That is of course if you think overweight guys are usually nicer than skinny guys. I used to think that, and I don't know why. Dobbs just looked jolly. And his work shirt was always a size too small and you could see the outline of his nipples and his enormous belly button.

Whenever anyone saw Dobbs walking up, they started acting like they loved their job more than beating off. Once when Dobbs walked up to the Produce counter, I saw The Shocker smile at a customer and it totally freaked me out.

Just as the evening rush was dying down, Dobbs walked up behind me. I tried to act like nothing was wrong with my wrist, but he knew I was faking.

"You really shouldn't be bagging," he said to me.

"Why's that?" I asked casually.

Dobbs raised his eyebrows and all of his wrinkles went away and his face looked smooth like a baby. I bet he was an ugly baby.

"Why don't you rest that wrist and go face aisles two and three."

Bagging groceries and running the register suck and all, but I hate facing. And aisle two is baby food and that shit is never faced out correctly. Sonny Boy sniggered under his breath as I walked away.

Then Dobbs said, "I'll stay here and help you bag for the rest of the rush." Wiped that grin right off of Sonny Boy's face.

The thing about facing is that I could easily spend my last two hours doing what should take me only ten minutes. But the bad part is that the customers are all out there and they are always asking me to tell them where things are located in the store. Do they not notice the signs hanging above each aisle that tells them what to find there?

One time my mom told me I had to look on the bright side. She

said I never see the good in situations, that I'm always talking about how much I hate things. So that's why I decided to think about how at least I didn't have to bag anymore for the day because my wrist really was hurting. And I was also lucky that I got to see that girl from my math class come in wearing her pajama pants and a t-shirt. And she clearly had no bra on.

When I got done facing the baby food, The Shocker poked his head around the corner. "Yo, Meat Locker!"

I looked up and gave him the finger.

"I just saw Mrs. Ewing at the Produce counter." He grinned widely.

That wasn't really her name unless The Shocker was just really fucking good at guessing. Mrs. Ewing came in about once or twice a week to buy a gallon of spring water. And then she worked her way to every register in the store hoping that someone had dropped money. She had a really big ass that seemed to fling itself back and forth behind her dress as she walked. She always wore sandals and her arms were hairier than my legs.

My sister said she saw her at the Sears down the street doing the same thing. Even though it is really funny to watch her bend over and pick up a penny here or there, I sometimes couldn't shake the feeling that I shouldn't be watching. It seemed like a private thing she did. I asked my sister if she felt the same way and she called me a pussy. And she's only eight.

I looked up to the front of the store and it seemed Dobbs had gone back into his office, so I walked down the aisle and followed The Shocker.

About two aisles over, Mrs. Ewing was still looking for the best deal on spring water. The Shocker elbowed me in the arm.

"Snappy left a quarter next to the sale tag." The Shocker had a really deep voice. Not Barry White deep, but pretty deep for a short white Jew. He only had one eyebrow.

And sure enough, as soon as Mrs. Ewing got to that brand of water, her beady eyes landed on the quarter. She angled over at the

waist, her knees not bending at all, her enormous ass pointed right at us, and she reached down and scooped it up into her pudgy fingers. She looked at it for a moment and then gingerly placed into her side pocket.

The Shocker laughed. "Oh man, Snappy totally tagged that quarter."

"What?" I asked.

"He tagged it. He put the quarter in his ass crack for at least thirty seconds before he dropped it there. It's Snappy's signature move." The Shocker said this to me as if I was a dumbass for asking. I then thought about the time that Snappy offered me his Twinkie during our fifteen minute break.

Mrs. Ewing grabbed her water and walked up toward the front of the store. I know that The Shocker thought tagging the quarter was funny, but I bet people did that kind of thing all the time. In fact, The Shocker probably had a quarter in his own pocket right now that someone had put in their ass. It wasn't that big of a deal. Money is gross anyway.

The Shocker slugged me on the arm and walked away. But the more I thought about it, there was a part of me that wanted to run up to Mrs. Ewing and pull the quarter out of her pocket and jam it down The Shocker's throat.

My mom said I had to watch my anger. Apparently my dad had an anger problem too and that's why she left him. One time I had kicked a hole in the wall when my sister ruined the case to one of my cd's and I covered the hole with a poster. My mom wondered why I had turned a car poster vertically, the nose of the car pointed directly at the ground, and that's how she figured it out. My mom was pretty smart. She told me that eventually I wouldn't even remember which cd case was destroyed. And she was right again. She was trying to tell me not to get upset over small things.

I went back to the aisle I was working on and decided not to think about Mrs. Ewing. I turned a jar of peanut butter around and

felt a sharp pain shoot from my wrist to my elbow. I didn't really want to tell anyone about my wrist because I thought they would just make fun of me and say I was jerking off too much. And maybe I was, so I didn't want to get into it. I pictured myself punching Snappy in the face and having the force of it jam my wrist back into place.

Sonny Boy came walking down my aisle, his shoulders a little slumped, his body bobbing up and down with his long strides.

"Going to break," he said. "Dobbs wants you to cover me."

"Fuck him," I said back, but I began walking up to the front.

Dobbs was standing at the register looking at me severely. "You finish facing those aisles?"

"Yeah, for the most part."

Dobbs looked sweatier than usual. "I'm sure you can handle the register for fifteen minutes."

"Yeah."

I leaned up against the register, a little uncomfortable, and waited for Dobbs to walk away.

"So, what did you do to your wrist?"

"Nothing wrong with my wrist."

"Maybe you have carpal tunnel. You should get it checked out."

"Sure." I couldn't go to a damn doctor. We didn't have any insurance and the doctor visit would be that week's groceries. Mom said we only go to the doctor for emergencies. My wrist was not an emergency.

"You know what carpal tunnel is?" Dobbs asked me.

"No."

"It's from repetitive motion."

"Okay."

"I'm just trying to be nice."

One thing I learned from my mom is that people are either nice or they aren't. If you have to try to be nice, most likely you're a prick. Like Dobbs.

Dobbs looked at me strangely. "Look, I can loan you the money

if you need it. You know. To go to the doctor.”

“No thanks.” What was he playing at? Did he think I wanted to be in debt to him? Then he could get me to do all the crappy jobs in the store. And I would try to say something and he’d be like, “Remember that money I loaned you?” And then suddenly I’d be cleaning the shit off of the baby changing station in the bathroom.

Just then, the girl from my math class walked up to the register with her cart loaded with groceries. She had a cell phone pressed to her ear and was talking loudly with some girl named Abby. I only knew that because she kept saying, “No way, Abby! He did not say that!”

She absently placed everything on the belt as I began to scan it. Without even taking a break to breathe or to show any embarrassment, she placed a box of condoms down with everything else. So not only did some dude get to fuck her, but she bought the condoms. If that girl in my math class was my girlfriend, I wouldn’t make her buy the condoms. I would gladly do that with my wages from the grocery store. Hell, I might even be able to slip them into my pocket on the way out one night.

Dobbs settled in behind me and bagged the groceries, but I could feel him eyeing her in a manner that said he was an old man into high school chicks. I personally liked the way her lips moved while she talked, slightly brushing up against her cell phone. But Dobbs seemed to really like her tits.

Without ever looking directly at me, or even noticing that we had a class together, she paid and left with her stuff. I could still hear her on the phone as the automatic doors whooshed closed behind her.

Dobbs shook his head in disbelief. “Man, you should be all over that,” he said to me.

“Okay.”

Dobbs sighed. “How old do you think I am?”

“Forty.” I didn’t give a shit how old he was. I had never even

thought about it before.

"I'm twenty-nine. I'm not that much older than you."

"It's over ten years though." That girl in my math class could have probably figured out the difference in her head.

"You have plans for after you graduate?"

I'd been asked this a lot lately. My mom said I'm the only one who can come up with a plan for my life. She said I don't need to do what some counselor tells me I should do. But the problem is I'm not interested in anything. I suddenly thought of Sonny Boy's plan to travel around the country. I had no idea if he would really do it, but it seemed like the only thing anyone had told me lately that I thought sounded like a good idea.

Dobbs sighed again. "I never thought I'd be managing this place. This was just my job to get me through high school."

"Yeah, I'm not going to work here forever. I'm going to take my mom's car and travel across the country and see everything it has to offer. Then I'm going to move to another country."

Dobbs laughed. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah."

"That's not a plan, that's a vacation. How are you going to pay for gas? When the trip is over, what will you do then? And don't you think your mom will want her car back?"

"I'll find something somewhere."

"Why is this your plan?"

I thought about it and wished I had never said anything to him. I hadn't fully worked it out yet. I just wanted to hear it come out of my mouth. And it felt pretty damn good, like I stood for something.

"Because after I do it," I said, "I'll come up with another plan."

Dobbs looked down at his hands and then tapped the bag dispenser. "I'll be in the office, let me know if you need anything."

Dobbs waddled away and I tried to imagine him ever finding a girl that would want to have sex with him. I didn't think it was possible.

As soon as the office door closed, I saw Mrs. Ewing walk up to the last register and look around on the ground. When she didn't find anything, she shuffled over to the next one.

Snappy suddenly appeared behind me, his hair slicked back exposing a forehead full of zits. "Dude, she has a pocket full of quarters that have been in my ass." He threw up a hand for a high five. Wasn't going to happen.

Just then, Sonny Boy and The Shocker walked up, both of them looking at Mrs. Ewing as she worked her way toward my register.

"I think Mrs. Ewing gives Meat Locker a boner," Snappy said.

"Eat a dick," I said.

"Can you imagine what her pocket smells like?" The Shocker said.

"Yeah, I even ate a burrito for lunch," Snappy laughed.

We fell into silence as Mrs. Ewing hunched over at another register, her beady eyes intensely scanning the ground. None of us could seem to look away.

"I wonder why she does that," Sonny Boy said. "I don't think she's homeless."

At that moment, I realized that Sonny Boy was the smartest guy I knew. He had a plan for after high school. And he wondered why things happened whereas me, The Shocker, and Snappy just accepted things as they were.

"I think you guys are stupid," I said.

Snappy looked at me. "What happened to your sense of humor?"

"We're just having fun, Meat," The Shocker said.

I looked over to Sonny Boy for support but he was still watching Mrs. Ewing.

"Did you tag that Twinkie you gave me the other day?"

"What are you trying to say?" Snappy looked pissed.

"You calling him a Dobbs?" The Shocker said.

"No, I was just asking." Maybe it was a bad idea to try to

understand things.

"I wouldn't do that to you. But maybe I will next time." Snappy looked genuinely offended.

I suddenly felt really bad and my neck felt warm. "Look, I'm sorry."

The Shocker let out a burst of laughter that made the hair on my arms stand up. "You might as well tell him, Snappy?"

Snappy looked pretty pleased with himself. "Yeah, I tagged that Twinkie."

My chest swelled up and I wanted to ram my fist down his throat and pull out his stomach. Why would he do the same shit to me as he did to Mrs. Ewing? I'd be really pissed if I had actually eaten it. But I never trusted that fucker. With a pang, I realized I had given it to Sonny Boy. But Sonny Boy still wasn't saying anything.

Mrs. Ewing was only three registers away now. "The reason tagging isn't funny is because you aren't smart. Any dumbass could come up with that." I had to hit him where it hurt.

"And what, you some kind of rocket scientist?" Snappy retorted.

"If you want to mess with someone, you have to think it through first. A monkey could put a quarter in his ass. But could a monkey super glue it to the ground?" I felt pretty pleased with myself for a moment, until I saw the look of pure joy wash over both of their faces.

The Shocker took off running toward Aisle 1.

"Aisle 15! Aisle 15!" Snappy yelled.

The Shocker's shoes squeaked as he turned around and ran toward the opposite side of the store.

Mrs. Ewing walked up and placed her water on the belt. Sonny Boy smiled at her.

"Hello," she said cheerfully. "I think you rung me up last time."

"I certainly did," Sonny Boy replied.

Sonny Boy scanned the water and placed it in a paper bag.

“Can you believe that I found enough quarters on the ground to pay for this water? Must be my lucky day.” She dug into her pocket and pulled out the quarters.

Without even hesitating, Sonny Boy took them and dropped them in his register.

The Shocker came running up holding a thing of super glue. He waved frantically at Snappy who looked puzzled. The Shocker mouthed the words “stall her” and Snappy suddenly smiled up at Mrs. Ewing.

“Would you like me to help you to your car?”

Mrs. Ewing laughed. “No I think I can manage.”

This was all unfolding before me like a horror movie.

“You know what,” I said, “I’m actually leaving right now. I’ll be happy to walk you out.”

The Shocker was done gluing the quarter to the ground next to the door. I intended to get her past it without her noticing. I grabbed the bag forcefully and the most severe pain shot through my wrist and all the way up to my shoulder. I jumped back as if I’d been burned and cradled my right arm across my body.

Mrs. Ewing looked concerned. “Are you okay, dear?”

“Just my wrist,” I said. “Sorry.”

I tried to grab the bag again but she picked it up too quickly. “You should really check that out. Could be carpal tunnel.” She patted me on the shoulder. “I can manage fine on my own, dear. Such a nice group of young men.”

As she shuffled to the door, Snappy looked at me and grinned. “Brilliant,” he said. “Perfect diversion.”

The pain in my arm was excruciating. I knew my mom was going to be disappointed in me. I was going to have to go to the doctor. I looked up at Sonny Boy but he was staring past me to Mrs. Ewing.

I thought she might not see it. She had made it a step or two past it and the doors had whooshed open. But maybe a glint or a

sparkle caught her eye because she threw a glance back and a smile formed on her face. She looked up at Sonny Boy again and said, "Can you believe I found another one?" Then she bent over to pick it up.

But it wouldn't budge.

Snappy was desperately holding in his laughter as Mrs. Ewing tried to work her pudgy fingers under the quarter. The blood seemed to be rushing to her head and her forehead was turning red. Her ass rocked back and forth frantically. She was determined to get that quarter.

Just behind her, The Shocker mimed that he was fucking her. He had his eyes closed and was throwing his right hand back and forth as if he was slapping her.

Mrs. Ewing grunted and Snappy had to clamp his mouth shut.

My stomach rolled and I could feel my large intestine working its way up my body to strangle me. There was no way I was going to live through this. I gasped for air.

I made myself turn away. I made myself stop watching. And I found myself looking up at Sonny Boy. And for once, he was looking right at me.

"Sonny Boy" originally appeared in print in *Upstreet* Number Four in 2009.

JOSH DENSLow's stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Black Clock*, *A cappella Zoo*, *Storyglossia*, *Fifth Wednesday*, and *Twelve Stories*, among others. He has written and directed five short films that played at a few festivals, and he plays the drums in the band Borrissokane.

The McElroy Family Hole

James Reinebold

When we finished eating the leftover chicken and crusty mashed potatoes my neighbor had brought over the night before, Katie and I went to the living room to prepare for my first night of digging. I told her to find a flashlight and one of the shovels. She brought me Dad's primary. I thought it was important that she watch as much as possible for when it was her turn.

The week before Dad died he hit another rock layer that stifled his progress. The shovel my daughter brought was chipped and a little too heavy by modern standards. The last thing Dad told me before he died was to look into getting a new one.

I don't know why, but he wanted to be cremated instead of buried at First Baptist with the rest of the clan. His ashes were on their way express to Hawaii to be scattered in some volcano he had read about in a magazine.

"Come on," I said to Katie. "Let's go."

The hole had been started in 1820 and was only a short walk from the house. Each of the previous generations of McElroys had done their share of it. My dad wanted to dig the deepest and break the record that Jacob had set so many years ago.

He ended up being short by four feet. Still, second place in our line wasn't too bad and his father had lived unnaturally long at ninety-eight so the odds were against him. There was a chance I could break the record if my health kept up.

I watched as Katie carefully laced up her bright yellow rain boots. A light drizzle was starting to fall, so I made sure she put on her jacket. I didn't want her catching a cold.

The color of the sky was beginning to morph into shades of orange as we trudged to the entrance. A blue tarp covered the

opening to keep out the rain. I parted the overlaying sheets of plastic and we walked inside.

The hole, our hole, spiraled downwards with a five-degree angle of descent and a radius of thirty feet. Katie shined the flashlight down into the earth. The beam poked between rocks first uncovered 190 years ago.

She bent down and grabbed a handful of wonderfully soft mud, surface mud. I watched her fingers squeeze it and how beautifully it deformed to her touch. But I wanted to get started so I motioned for her to leave it be.

She led the way down. As she grew up I made sure to encourage her to play around the hole. We threw her birthday parties in it, opened our Christmas presents around the rim, and every Fourth of July I'd remove the tarp to set off fireworks from inside and she and my wife would watch them poke up from beneath the surface and explode in flashes of red and orange. She spent most of her time either there or in the sandbox Dad had built for her.

She was probably going to surpass us all. Her forearms and back muscles already were starting to bulge. The night I found her in the basement at my weight set struggling to lift the bar was perhaps my proudest moment as a father. Once or twice I caught her digging in the hole at night when Dad was asleep. I had to ground her, of course (it wasn't her time yet), but inside I was happy.

Katie started humming to herself as we crept downward. The walls of the hole were smooth and bare of graffiti or other markings. But you could always tell where a changeover happened. Sometimes the digging got better and sometimes the digging got worse. Sometimes it wasn't really better or worse - just different. But it was always different.

Soon we came to the bottom of the hole. The same spot I had sat and watched my father set down his pick and shovel for the last time. Katie unfolded the rusted lawn chair leaning against the wall

while I angled the shovel into the ground and raised my foot above the blade. Some of the rain from above us had leaked through a hole in the tarp and reached the bottom. The rain would make the digging easier.

“Good luck,” she said.

I sighed and pushed the shovel into the rocks beneath my feet. Katie sat back in the lawn chair and watched me work, patiently waiting for her turn.

JAMES REINEBOLD is a computer scientist researching virtual reality in Los Angeles. He spends his spare time writing weird stories and programming video games. His personal website is www.reinebold.com.

Beta Geminorum

Brian Niemeier

Edwin Dawes swerved around a panel truck that was only doing sixty in a fifty-five zone and gunned the engine of his Charger, speeding past the lumbering vehicle and cutting it off without signaling. The risky maneuver deposited Ed mere feet from the off-ramp leading from the bridge onto the Boulevard of the Allies. The Charger took the exit at a sharp diagonal and decelerated to double the turn's posted limit before merging onto the busy thoroughfare. One benefit of being late, Dawes reflected, was missing the worst of morning rush hour traffic.

Dawes was speeding southeast past the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* when something large struck the roof of his car hard enough to burst all the safety glass, turning the Charger's cabin into a hailstorm of rock-candy fragments. Dawes emptied the coffee from the wax-coated paper cup in his right hand onto his corresponding leg. This sequence of events culminated in the car's collision with a concrete embankment.

Einrich reviewed his incident notes a fourth time, concealing trepidation with thoroughness. In his career as a detective with the Bureau of Police, there had been few crime scenes he'd looked forward to examining less than this one. The detective considered asking the witness if he could remember anything else but thought better of it. The guy's nerves seemed pretty frayed, and the traffic sergeant who'd been first on the scene had already cited him for reckless driving.

Closing his notebook, Einrich wished Dawes a pleasant day and forced himself to traverse the stretch of road between the United

Steelworkers' Union and the newspaper like a soldier crawling from the trenches. He ducked under the yellow warning tape enclosing a fifteen square foot area of the eastbound lane and stepped toward the car.

The forensic techs had already come and gone, having carefully preserved the mess for the detectives. A pair of uniformed officers stood nearby to keep the crowd of rubberneckers from contaminating the crime scene. *If there even was a crime*, Einrich mused.

The object that Dawes claimed had struck his vehicle wasn't an *object* at all. It was a man. The prone figure still lay motionless inside a sizable depression in the car's top. Einrich considered himself a seasoned veteran of the force, and those in the bureau who knew him would have agreed. He'd put in eighteen years and had seen his share of jumpers. This one was different, though, because it was somebody he recognized. So did many of the gawking bystanders, based on the name he heard them whisper again and again.

The corpse wore a blue, single-breasted suit with a cream-colored shirt and a red tie with wavy yellow horizontal stripes. The dead man's face was the hardest part to look at; not because of any hideous injury, but because of its brazen familiarity. The head lying against the grey metal was turned to the side, clearly revealing the distinguished features of an elderly fellow with bushy eyebrows, a large rounded nose, and full lips under a greying mustache. The deceased hadn't been carrying any identification, but Einrich instantly recalled his appearance from the TV news of his childhood. Identifying him should have been easy, considering his notoriety. The only problem was that he'd been dead for almost two years.

"What do you make of *that*?" Chet Collen from homicide asked as he stepped up beside Einrich.

"Guy fell, hit the car, and died."

“Any idea where he jumped from?”

“Might’ve been from the Steelworkers’ building,” Einrich ventured. “But I doubt it.”

“What about the bridge?”

Both detectives turned and peered upward. A footbridge crossed overhead, standing perhaps thirty feet above the boulevard at its highest point.

“No way you’d see this much damage from a fall that short.”

“Well,” Collen sighed. “I’m about to wrap up here. Meatwagon’s on its way. The autopsy should tell us more.”

Einrich went home that night, doing his best to forget about the anomalous suicide. His selective amnesia was aided by the stack of unsolved cases cluttering his desk. If some police intuition hinted at the coming carnage, the detective dismissed the warning as frayed nerves.

It wasn’t until the upheaval had mostly subsided months later that the coroner’s report finally turned up. According to the chief forensic tech on the Dawes case, the deceased had been a Caucasian male in his early sixties. Einrich shivered at the pathologist’s description of what she’d seen inside the dead man—if man he’d been. The body had simply been a skeleton covered in a solid, fleshy mass. Test results had matched the corpse’s general chemical makeup to that of human tissue, but the homogenous substance had departed so completely from normal internal anatomy that the report had concluded against the subject ever having been alive.

Einrich couldn’t have known at the scene, but the elaborate meat sculpture’s collision with Edwin Dawes’ car had been just the first drop of a storm—terrifying in its absurdity—that would incite global panic and drive the world to the brink of anarchy.

It was one of those seminal events that the survivors remembered forever. Anyone who lived through the Fall could’ve told you where they were and exactly what they’d been doing the

day that billions of men—or rather, one man copied billions of times—fell to earth in one terrible moment.

Detective Einrich had the good fortune to be one of those survivors. Four days after Dawes' accident, he'd been summoned to his office window by a loud and unearthly sound. The detective looked upon a street covered in crumpled, prone bodies and immediately thought of some horrendous terrorist attack. He had only just noticed the identical blue suits worn by all of the dead when pandemonium erupted. Einrich and his fellow officers were forced back from the windows as an overturned city bus burst into flames across the street.

No one working that day had known the full extent of the disaster. Einrich figured—or hoped—that the bodies had only fallen city-wide. By noon on the day after, however, emergency radio and TV broadcasts resumed. Local newscasts initially speculated that the surreal catastrophe struck the entire eastern seaboard. Around five p.m., the national scope of the crisis was confirmed. After that, it seemed to Einrich as though reports of the destruction's expansion came in every time he turned around. He'd gone numb to further sorrow by the time global decimation was announced.

Unprecedented hysteria and unrest followed in the catastrophe's wake. Looters, rioters, frenzied doomsday cults, and armies of unstable people pushed over the edge stormed into the streets, turning the city into a powder keg that all too often exploded into violence. During one harrowing episode, staff from the sub-station up at Carnegie Mellon crowded into Einrich's precinct house after their own offices were overrun by rioters.

The brave but ultimately futile efforts of local police were finally bolstered when the governor mobilized the National Guard. Einrich would be haunted for years by memories of reservists in

full combat gear wading into the seething mob with paint guns, pneumatically-propelled nets, and quick-setting immobilizing foam. Troublemakers were tagged with indelible, high-visibility ink delivered via paintball. The troops were ordered to arrest anyone caught with more than three marks. Detainment usually involved application of the foam or the nets—sometimes both. Prisoners were then reeled in by motorized winches attached to modified dump trucks. The netted detainees would be read their rights *en masse*. Despite the deployment of these measures in every major city, order wasn't restored to the continental United States for six months.

The chaotic aftermath rendered an accurate report of the initial death toll impossible to confirm, but the faux bodies had hit with sufficient force to seriously injure anyone in their path, and hundreds of thousands were killed on impact. If losses resulting from traffic and other accidents, plus heart attacks and stress-related causes were taken into account, casualty figures soared into the millions worldwide.

Disposal of the countless counterfeit corpses filling the streets became a hotly contested matter of public policy, and finally a startup industry. Most nations first sought to inter the bodies in mass graves, but available space was soon exhausted. Burning was tried, but the choking smoke clouds hanging over the chimney stacks of vast, hastily-constructed crematoria soon raised health concerns. Many of the fallen were simply left to the depredations of wild fauna and microbes. The resulting wave of disease accounted for many thousands of additional deaths.

Some countries, viewing the human facsimiles as a resource to be exploited, found rather creative means of disposal. Japan reclaimed large swaths of the seabed through the use of landfills. Brazil rendered their fallen cadavers into bio diesel. Persistent whispers leaking out of North Korea claimed that the nation's

hunger problems had been resolved in a rather sudden and sinister manner.

Others found additional windfalls to be had from the fallen. For years after the event, poor and homeless men could readily be identified by their common uniform of blue suits, white shirts, and red ties. Under close examination, the clothing's composition was found to be as unusual as that of the corpses it had adorned—being woven not from cotton, wool, or silk, but from micro fibers of an unknown polymer compound.

Though Einrich felt obligated to remain on duty during the long, agonizing cleanup period, the detective was never again able to approach his work with bureaucratic indifference. He wandered through the next decade, haunted by the possibility that the damage could have been mitigated had he pursued the Dawes case more diligently. Upon retirement, Einrich rededicated himself to the case he'd once ignored.

Comparing notes with other Fall investigators, Einrich finally concluded that the pattern of dispersal had been remarkably uniform across earth's surface. On average, there had been one impact every ten square feet. The final estimate of around thirty billion fallen omitted the countless others that must have landed in major bodies of water whose depths made dredging impractical. But reports from private and commercial vessels, many of which unfortunately capsized in the event, seemed to confirm that the dispersal ratio had been pretty much the same over the oceans.

The riddle's answer ultimately eluded Einrich. He finally contented himself with the knowledge that human civilization had faced the greatest challenge to its collective sanity and endured.

* * *

The thirty-third anniversary of the Fall was nearly nine months gone when Lionel's car pulled up to the corner of West 52nd and Sixth on an overcast New York afternoon. He stepped from the vehicle and straightened his tie before striding across the crowded sidewalk and into the lobby of Black Rock.

Lionel approached reception and showed his credentials. The twentysomething page manning the desk smiled and politely asked the visitor to wait while he called upstairs to confirm the appointment. Ten seconds later, Lionel was riding the elevator up to archives.

Telly had already completed the request submitted by the *Times* reporter the previous night. Lionel never ceased to be amazed by the unerring expediency of the CBS archivist. "You already narrowed it down?" the journalist asked, confident of the broadcast engineer's abilities but compelled to question the speed of his research.

The thin, balding man seated at the console winked through gold-rimmed glasses and flipped a switch. "See for yourself." The bank of monitors lit up. Lionel stared at the image they displayed. There was no doubt anymore. It was like coming face to face with a ghost—or thirty-billion ghosts. "CBS Evening News," Telly proclaimed smugly. "December 5, 1978—night that senator's wife died in that plane crash."

"Stevens," Lionel supplied absently as he stepped closer to the screen. It wasn't the senator's picture he was studying with such singular intent, but the distinguished face of the newscaster positioned in front of it.

The naming of anomalies is one of the most enduring human habits. The mock bodies that had plummeted to earth better than thirty years before were no exception. Depending on who you asked, and in what part of the world, the cadaver facsimiles were referred to as jumpers, the fallen, uncle walts, or the flying cronkites. At last, the *Times* reporter thought he'd found their model. "The clothing's the same?" Lionel asked.

Telly slid a sheaf of papers across the editing desk, and the reporter scooped them up. Neither man knew it, but the documents contained the same police report that Einrich had brooded over three decades before.

Lionel compared the blue suit worn by the corpse sprawled across the top of the antique Charger to the one that the real Cronkite had worn on the night of December 5, 1978, caught in freeze frame before him.

It was a perfect match, right down to the silver tie clip.

Lionel quickly returned to the Pittsburgh police report held tightly in his hands. His eyes scanned the document until the detail he sought was found. "August 13, 2012," he recited from the report. "Thirty-three years, eight months, and one week from the date of the broadcast."

"Plus a few hours, but yeah," Telly affirmed.

"Mind if I borrow the original tape for a while?" Lionel asked.

The technician shrugged. "Whole archive's backed up off-site, anyway."

"Thanks," the reporter mumbled as he took the large plastic rectangle and left the room.

Lionel promptly sent a message to his editor excusing himself from the office for the rest of the week. Telly had filled in a vital gap in his own research, and the reporter threw himself into his work with a vengeance.

The big event had occurred on August 17, 2012, but the first known incident happened four days prior. The missing puzzle piece supplied by Telly had been matching Cronkite's wardrobe with that of his doppelgangers.

The Fall had been investigated for years, of course. Everyone from theoretical physicists to meteorologists; from cops to other reporters had put in their time on the great mystery, only to end in defeat. The *Times* man now stood on their shoulders, achieving a clearer view of the situation than any one of his predecessors had

enjoyed.

Lionel did a bit of research before calling up Shelton at Columbia University. Though he was furtive with the facts, what the reporter did divulge prompted the astronomer to clear his schedule for the following afternoon.

The next day, Lionel arrived at Shelton's office at one thirty, briefly pausing to exchange pleasantries before launching into his theory. By two o'clock, the professor's eyes were bulging. Before the reporter finished speaking, Shelton had turned to his terminal, calling up images that looked like negatives from a kid's connect the dots book. "Pollux," the scientist said, his arms folded across his chest in a display of satisfaction.

Lionel's brow furrowed. "The Greek god?"

"The star," Shelton explained, gesturing toward the chart on his monitor. "Also known as Beta Geminorum—the brightest constituent of the constellation Gemini. An earth-like planet was discovered orbiting it in 2006."

"That's interesting," Lionel said. "What's it got to do with my story?"

"Pollux is thirty-three point seven light years from earth," Shelton said. "Give or take."

"What do you mean, 'give or take'?"

"The movement of celestial bodies isn't precisely consistent," the astronomer said. "For example, there's a wobble in earth's rotation that's minutely changing the length of the year."

The math suddenly clicked in Lionel's head. "If a beam of light left earth on December 5, 1978, it would reach Pollux in August of 2012?"

"More or less."

The reporter took a deep breath, hesitant to ask an interview question for the first time in his career. "Do you think that someone on that planet orbiting Pollux received the TV signal from 1978 and sent the fallen as...what, a kind of reply?"

"Someone," Shelton replied, "or some *thing*."

"But the signal took over thirty-three years to reach them," Lionel argued. "Shouldn't the cronkites have appeared sixty-seven years after the original broadcast?"

"Considering what happened, is postulating some sort of faster than light information transfer really that incredible?"

"What about signal degradation?"

The astronomer smiled. "You have to figure that a culture smart enough to cause the Fall has the hardware to reconstruct scattered video information."

Lionel frowned in thought. "If we're attributing the uncle waltz to extraterrestrials, why did they only respond to a news show from 1978? Why no incidents before or since?"

"The time index immediately prior would've been in 1955," Shelton calculated. "We didn't have satellites carrying TV signals back then. As for why no contact since 2012..."

The astronomer returned to his star charts, his hands flying over the terminal. The chart turned, pitched, and yawed at his command. "That's it," Shelton concluded. "Due to the relative motion of Pollux and the earth, observers at Beta Geminorum only have one fifteen minute window every thirty-three point seven years to receive radio signals from earth."

"What about the Pittsburgh incident four days earlier?" Lionel asked.

Shelton pointed to a small, lonely sphere hanging against his model's black background. "This is Pollux II," he explained. "It's slightly closer to us."

"By four days as the photon flies?"

The astronomer did some quick mental math, then nodded.

"Yeah, that's about right."

The reporter thanked the scientist for his time. The two men shook hands, and Lionel took his leave. His pace quickened to a brisk jog once he'd left Shelton's office. He placed a call to Telly on his way to the car. "I need you to research something else for me,"

Lionel told the archivist. “Find out what was showing on August 13, 2012 between eight forty-five and nine a.m.”

The reply came during the ride back to Lionel's apartment. It was *The Morning Show*. The indicated time frame, gleaned from Einrich's report, had been devoted to a segment filmed at an African nature preserve.

Lionel spent the cool April night passing in and out of restless dreams. He woke to find the morning news abuzz with reports that the roof of a Cleveland movie theater had been caved in by a falling elephant

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We Left Him with the Dragging Man

Graham Tugwell

Blood.

Bright where the shaft of sun falls on it.

Dark in corners where the flies gather.

Gristling every surface, fat waxy beads of flesh and blood,
stickiness dripping on slender threads...

We stand in the doorway.

Bodies have come to pieces in here.

We can smell them.

Taste them.

In the doorway we stand, boys shocked and wordless.

In the dark before us something moves—

“Help.”

Speaking with a weak and broken voice—

“Help me.”

Barely there at all...

“Please. Help me.”

Four boys, running across a field as fast as their bodies will let them—

Cormac Sulltry, short and stout, covers ground with a speed that belies his size, vaulting the low slant-angled fence he hits the corrugated earth; staggering, stiff-legged, for a step, the impact knocking the hat from his head.

It lies upturned, unheeded on clay— Sulltry stares at a horizon hammering up and down with footfalls, arms like pistons, breaths shredding between grimacing teeth.

Saltswat pinches eyelids.

Nothing will slow him.

Boots thump the dirt behind, flattening the hat like a careless pet— Kevin Shields— huge, unmolded, left hand on right shoulder tight, trying to keep the blood within. A rose is blossoming under his fingers, turning the green of his jersey brown.

Curly hair bouncing, jug ears bright red, Kevin hollers through crooked teeth “*Cormac! Cormac! Cormac! Cormac!*”

Nothing will convince Sulltry to turn, to look back.

Close behind, in the wake of Shield’s ungainly frame I run.

I’ve lost a shoe to the lip of the ditch and a stitch is folding the breath out of me. Slapping a palm to settle my glasses, I leave a smudge across one lens, blurring the backs of the boys. My other hand plunges in pockets—

My inhaler—

Where’s my inhaler—?

Left it behind—

With—

There’s a screech behind me.

Little Tommy Sweetnam, foot swallowed by a rabbit hole, pitches forward, heels of his hands and knees hitting the turf, shrill screams bursting his hamster’s cheeks— “No! Don’t leave me!”

Can’t catch my breath— pins in the heart of me—

Cormac a distant smudge, Kevin loping after him, and Tommy struggling, blonde head pressed to the mud—

I take the softness of his hand, drag him to his feet. “We left him,” says Tommy, tears carving pink in the muck. “We just *left* him.”

I grab him by the sleeve and haul him over the tumbled fence.

And the last of us, the fifth boy—

Alby Gorman.

Where’s Alby Gorman?

We left him with the Dragging Man.

* * *

The five of us were friends because no-one else would have us.

Cormac Sulltry was bossy and arrogant and short-tempered and always convinced he was in the right. He wore a cap, like a gang leader in his comics.

Kevin Shields was slow and his father was strange and his mother took a knife to her wrists a month before school began.

Tommy Sweetnam was soft and gentle, and while all the rest of us were growing up, he remained a baby, younger than us in every way.

And me, stricken with pneumonia at an early age and never truly recovered; a sickly air hung round me, made me cold and distant. Happy to wait and listen.

And Alby Gorman...

Was Alby Gorman.

We came together, the scraps and odds and ends...

Friends because no-one else would have us.

We learned that Cormac was fearless and cunning and clever and Kevin was kind and loyal and loved his kittens, and Tommy was an artist, such a voice—he'd sing for us, behind the Water Tower. He was *good* like that.

And me, I'd listen.

I was there for them.

Even Alby Gorman.

Screams.

Bringing children around corners, pressing teachers against windows, sending Joe the caretaker racing across the tarmac.

Tommy finds me by the rosebushes.

"He's *doing* it," he stammers, pudgy face pale, "Doing it *again!*"

Leaving my lunch on the wall I run, up the slope, along prefabs to the gravel behind the boiler, pushing through gathered children— Cormac and Kevin already there.

So is Alby Gorman.

Kneeling on the small of Pascal Givens' back, one hand worked entwining in his hair, Alby presses the trapped boy's head down amongst the sharp and scraping stones.

Givens' voice— the high shriek of a pet crushed in a closing door: "*Help me help me help me—*"

No-one moves.

Because the look on Alby Gorman's face— that placid concentration, the tongue-tip in the corner of his mouth. Softly, serenely, he twists Pascal Givens' arm— eyes bulging pale bubbles, close to popping, free hand slapping and clawing gravel— Pascal can do nothing as Alby drags the limb around and up the length of his back.

It resists.

For a moment.

We all hear it—

The soft wet *click* of something forced out of place.

Pascal's scream rises until, at the edge of hearing, it empties him.

Still he lies on gravel.

Only then does Alby Gorman look at his audience.

Cormac impassive and Kevin sick and Tommy distraught:

"Why Alby?"

Alby looks at us as if the answer's obvious, as if we're stupid. He smiles. Says "I wanted to see his new watch."

(The limp wrist, red and purple, and the yellow plastic of a strap)

Alby Gorman shrugs. "He wouldn't let me. So I made him."

Joe the caretaker lifts the boy from the gravel, pushes his way through the children.

Alby's smile widens. "What's the problem? I didn't *take* it."

Joe puts Pascal on the backseat of his car.

A curve of kids and teachers stare down at Alby Gorman.

Wondering what he is capable of.

What he will do next.

Alby Gorman squats on haunches.

"It didn't land on his feet."

He prods the white kitten.

"I thought they always landed on their feet..."

He rises as Kevin gathers the limp thing in his hands—his silent tears huge and bright and awful.

"Maybe I kicked it too hard," says Alby Gorman and he grins.

"Give me another one, Kevin. Let's try again."

"How high can you sing, Tommy?"

They sit behind the Water Tower, watching traffic pass.

Tommy plucks at his sleeve.

"Em," he says, "Em. Dunno."

"Try, for me," says Alby Gorman.

"What, em... what song do you want, Alby?"

He smiles.

"Surprise me."

"This is... em... this is something Mammy and her sisters sing."

"Come and look out through the window."

"That big old moon is shining down..."

Alby nods. "Can you go higher?"

Tommy's voice sharpens:

"Tell me now, don't it remind you."

"Higher."

And sharpens further, hangs there, shivering:

"Of a... blanket... on the... ground."

"Let me help," says Alby Gorman.

Hands close on Tommy's throat.

Tighter and tighter.

Until song becomes scream.

Alby Gorman.

Brown haired and blue-eyed.

And all of us so scared of him.

He lived with his grandmother and little sister until, one day, he lived with just his grandmother.

And he *smiled*.

All the time he smiled and stared and we learned that life was easier when he got his own way.

The four of us, we became friends because no-one else would have us.

But we weren't *friends* with Alby Gorman.

He didn't know the meaning of the word.

Once, he found me by the rosebushes. Sat beside me.

I settled my glasses. "Are you okay, Alby?"

He ran his finger over thorns. Snapped a budding rose from its stem.

His voice was low. "Why are they scared of me?"

Stomach a cold plunge, I replied, "Who, Alby?"

He plucked a curved leaf, flicked it in the air.

"The rest of the class."

Another red leaf fell.

"The people who say they're my friends."

Scraps of rose settled on his lap.

His blue eyes did not blink.

"You," he said.

Wanted to run. Could feel my chest collapsing—fingers searched for my inhaler.

Finally, I found my voice. "You... you hurt people," I whispered. "You don't know how *strong* you are."

"And when you *hurt* them..."

"You don't care."

He smiled.

Horrible.

"I hurt people?" he said.

I nodded.

"Is that so..?"

My inhaler—where—

He tapped his lap.

Curls of soft red plucked from the bulb...

I stared at them.

"Eat them."

Unblinking.

"Eat... them..."

His hands curled in fists.

Imminent things.

Breath dragging, throat and neck enclosing, I bent. With numb lips, plucked a leaf from the lap of Alby Gorman.

Chewed.

Swallowed.

I sat back.

He smiled, patted my cheek.

"We're *friends*. We're kind to each other. We play games."

His fingers rested for a long time.

"Don't be scared of me. I don't *want* that."

He left.

The taste.

The taste of roses.

"No more," says Cormac Sulltry. "Something has to be done."

He slams his fist into the palm of his hand, the way they do it on TV.

We're in Tommy's house, in his bedroom.

Kevin sits on the floor, Tommy and I sit on his bed.

Cormac strides, repeating, "Something has to be done," under his hat he scratches his greasy scalp.

"But what?"

Silence falls.

It is Kevin who solves our problem.

"I know a place," he says, running fingers along his kitten's ears. "Dad... tells me...The place where he and Mam went. A terrible place. There's a *thing* inside it."

His voice drops to a whisper.

"The Dragging Man. That's what she called it. It had its hold on her and wouldn't let go. Dragging her into the dark. It has no hands and no feet but it holds you tight. In the end she had to cut herself away..."

Kevin looks at the biscuit-coloured kitten in his lap. Patches mews and plays with his fingertips. "We can leave Alby with the Dragging Man."

Cormac has that look. A plan, falling softly into place. He replaces his hat.

"Yes," he says.

That half-away look, working the angles...

"Yes."

Deciding the way the world will work...

"But we all have to agree," says Cormac Sulltry. "All of us."

"Yes," says Kevin without hesitation.

"Yes," I say, after a moment.

Tommy rests his head on folded arms.

"I can't."

He shakes as tears come through him.

"It's not right."

Cormac looks at me and nods his head.

I put my hand on Tommy's arm.

"Tommy," I say, "He hurts people. Someone has to do something. Before something awful happens."

Tommy shakes his head.

"You know he has it in him."

I touch the bruises on his neck.

"Why us?" sobs Tommy.

"Because we're his friends," I say. "He trusts us."

Tommy looks at me. "Do you think we should?"

I nod.

Tommy drags a rattling breath and tries a little smile.

"Okay," he says.

And the door opens.

Alby Gorman.

Looking in.

Brown-haired, blue-eyed and smiling.

Tommy gasps. Kevin clutches his kitten. It hisses.

"Secret meeting?" whispers Alby. "Was I not invited?"

He taps the wood of the door.

We say nothing.

"Why not? Am I not your friend?"

Cormac clears his throat.

He has a plan.

Always.

"We're planning a camping trip, Alby. It was going to be a surprise."

Alby grins. Something glistening on a surgical glove.

"Count me in."

Down we go by Wishing Lane and up into the woods and hills.

Cormac Sulltry leads the way, and Kevin Shields close to guide, next is me and Tommy Sweetnam. Last of all is Alby Gorman, smiling at sunlight through the trees and throwing sticks at birds.

Five boys on a camping trip.

Singing. Laughing. Looking back at Alby Gorman.

Kevin points. There is a house, dark and broken, in the crease

where two hills meet.

"Here," says Cormac Sulltry, "Here's where we camp."

And Kevin stares at the door ajar and the black windows and we must call his name three times.

Slowly, and slanting, the tent goes up.

(Why straighten it? It won't be slept in.)

We watch Alby Gorman wander up the overgrown path.

He presses his face against dirty glass, runs his fingers along the splintered wood—a piece comes away with a crack. He turns, his grin the gleam of a freshly-dropped turd.

"Dump." He skips the wood back down the path. "What do you think happened here?"

Kevin makes a strange sound, deep in the back of his throat and Cormac coughs to cover—

"Alby," he says, "Let's explore." A single bead of sweat crystals his brow. "Let's explore."

Alby Gorman looks at us and our stomachs freeze over. Time turns to creaking slowness. After an age Alby puts his shoulder to the door and shunts recalcitrant wood aside.

Cormac and I follow him, Tommy a pace behind, and Kevin staying where he is.

We go in and find:

Filth and broken furniture and stained rags on the floor, a fireplace clogged with leaves, and a cracked mirror returning our shadowed faces in pieces. Peeling wallpaper. Swollen wood. A shaft of sun trapping a zithering fly.

And there is the smell of beer, sharp and bloated, making our heads swim.

And there is something in the darkness beyond.

Moving slowly through the other rooms.

I look at Cormac, my chest a pinched unbreathing.

He nods.

And the thing we've come to find leaves the darkness for the light. It passes the doorway and stands there, looking out at us.

Pink.

Wet.

Ribbed.

A worm, trying its best to be a man.

It has no feet.

It has no hands.

Its arms and legs go on and on.

The Dragging Man.

"Children," it says. "Stay with me. Stay with me."

Alby Gorman's smile disappears.

For the first time there's a look—

Confusion. Almost... almost... panic—

"What..?" he mumbles.

"Now!" cries Cormac Sulltry.

We grab and we push.

We are not strong— Alby Gorman will not be moved—

"Children," cries the Dragging Man. "Stay with me. In the dark."

And there's a scream—

Not the Dragging Man.

Not Alby Gorman.

Kevin Shields, thundering down the path, bursting through the doorway, screaming: "You kicked them—kicked to *pieces*—"

He grabs Alby Gorman and with his strength added to ours we force Alby further in, dirt and rags entwining in our feet. It dawns on him: "Leaving me—trying to *leave* me here!" and Alby Gorman fights us, pushes us back—

I trip on the broken sill of the door.

Five boys falling, tumbling into summer suns but Kevin is not quick enough—Alby Gorman digs his nails into his chest, feet scabbling for purchase on the tall boy's thighs.

Kevin screeches "Get him off me! Get him off! *Aaargh!*"

Cormac and me, we take Alby by the arms and try to pull him

from Kevin—Alby’s teeth close upon the meat of his shoulder and when finally we manage to wrench him off a long wet string comes away in his mouth.

The soft wet noise of it...

Blood gushes and Kevin collapses and Tommy is softly sick through threaded fingers.

“Cormac!” screams Kevin, hands flapping at wounds down neck and shoulder, “Cormac!”

“Not my idea,” mumbles Tommy, “Not my idea...”

And as Alby readies himself to pounce again, as the Dragging Man drifts through the room, I see...

There is a stout branch in the grass by the front door. I pick it up and break it across the forehead of Alby Gorman.

His eyes roll up in his head.

“Ulm...” he says, gulping, “Ulm...”

He steps backwards, puts his hand upon the blood licking over an eyebrow.

Without a sound the handless arms of the Dragging Man close over his throat, over his chest and it is almost a loving thing.

Alby Gorman is dragged into the dark.

Slowly the door of the broken house closes.

We stand there, looking at that door, for a very long time.

“Pack up,” says Cormac sharply. “Pack up and *home*.”

Kevin makes a noise. “Cormac, it’s not stopping. I can’t...” He paws at the wound. “It won’t stop.”

“No,” weeps Tommy Sweetnam, his head in his hands. “No.”

“Hurry,” shouts Cormac Sulltry

We busy ourselves.

There are noises.

We try to ignore them.

Hammering.

Bodies falling.

Short gasps and sighs and grunts and once, a long, resounding scream.

And there are shadows behind the dirty windows....

Tommy Sweetnam —

We are busy. Before we can stop him he is down the path. He is through the door.

Tommy Sweetnam —

He was *good* like that.

“Alby — Alby,” he cries, “I’m sorry — I’m sorry —”

We are behind him shouting, reaching out to pull him back — but we are too late.

We enter the house again.

Blood.

Bright where sun falls on it.

Dark in corners where the flies gather.

We stand in the doorway, shocked and wordless.

A body has come to pieces.

Something moves —

“Help.”

Speaks with a weak and broken voice...

“Help me.”

Barely there at all...

“Please. Help me.”

We look down at the twisted thing cowering in the corner.

“He got out,” whispers the Dragging Man, staring with his one remaining eye, “Couldn’t hold him. Help me...”

The bruises.

The bite marks.

The severed limbs.

“Run,” says Cormac Sulltry.

* * *

Four boys, running as fast as they can across the field.
And where's the fifth boy?
Where's Alby Gorman?

We find out, one by one.

Cormac, by knife, in the carpark.
Slashes on his palms and chest.
He fought.
July 26th.

Kevin, at the foot of the garden, black bruises on his throat.
The last straw for his father.
The kittens left to starve.
August 5th.

Tommy, in his bed, a pillow over his face.
So small and delicate.
You'd think he was asleep.
August 17th.

And me?
I wait now for Alby Gorman.
And what words will we exchange, before...?
I wait.
Remembering four boys running across a field, as fast as their
bodies will let them.
Remembering the taste of roses.
Seeing a body disappearing into dark.

We were young.
We were scared.
We left him with the Dragging Man.

GRAHAM TUGWELL is a writer and performer. The recipient of the College Green Literary Prize 2010, he enjoys writing work of abiding strangeness, aimed at provoking that apocalyptic oscillation where the brain cannot decide what is appropriate—laughter or grief. He has lived his whole life in the village where all his stories take place. He loves it with a very special type of hate. Visit his website at grahamtugwell.com.

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“The Final Word”

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