

# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

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Online Editor: Mike Sweeney

Production Editor: Samuel Snoek-Brown

Reader: Laura Garrison

Founding Editor/Publisher: Eirik Gumeny

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## Editor's Note:

Ah, relationships.

The very foundation of our lives, the emotional Higgs boson force that surrounds and holds us together, sometimes whether we want them to or not. This month JDP turns the focus on those wondrous and confounding ties that bind, be it traditional romantic love, the unique bond between siblings, the daily camaraderie of coworkers, or that most special of all relationships: the one between a sex worker and the tangible, carnivorous darkness living in her closet.

So kick back with someone you care about, crack open the Whitman's sampler, and have a good read. The February Issue is cheaper than dinner, costs less than roses, and is guaranteed to make you swoon.

– Mike Sweeney

# About the Hiding of Buried Treasure

Kimberly Lojewski

It's common enough to hear about the finding of buried treasure, but the real trick is in the hiding. The finding is easy. You just need some head lanterns, a pick axe, an old sea-worn map, waterproof matches, and a rune decoder. Possibly some dynamite and trip wire if you are being shadowed. But hiding it, that is another story. It is a lifelong toil. And trading doubloons in this economy is almost more trouble than it is worth sometimes. Don't even get me started on grapefruit-sized emeralds and rubies. Vials of diamond dust are sure to raise an eyebrow or two.

Our island is chock full of treasure. It is bursting at the seams with plunder and booty, trap doors, trick caves, and rocks marked with big mossy X's. Pop has trained Jezebel and I to keep it hidden. We scrub the X's off the rocks, cover hidden entrances with branches and hornets' nests, and fill up the sunken mounds of old pirate graves until the earth is smooth. In the winters, when the ground is frozen, and the waves are funnels of salt ice, we practice ice surfing in crowns and tiaras, check our booby traps to make sure they are not frosted over, and search the island for new treasure. It's just us and the polar bears. We throw secret carnivals and glittering parades.

In the summer, there is no time to play. We are positively swarmed with visitors. People come here from all over, although most of them don't know why. Their free-market noses are trained to follow the scent of wealth across oceans and deserts. It is the real story of humanity. They smile at us and sniff the air curiously. They look around at the tangled trees and spur-filled sands and try to come up with convincing explanations for their visits.

"We just had to come see your charming island," they say.

Or, "We felt some draw to explore this part of the world."

They can feel the ground wealth-trembling, even though we tell them that it is just the shifting of tectonic plates and the rumblings of a resident live volcano.

Jezebel and I take great care to appear slow and backwards. We can wear as many crowns and tiaras as we want in our wintry solitude, but when there are visitors on the island, Pop likes us to seem dim-witted. Jezebel paints her lips in uneven red circles and kinks her orange hair with boxes of out-of-date home perms. She talks with a slow southern drawl that has no place on a windswept northern island, but no one ever notices it's farcical. Jezebel likes to experiment with new guises. She's a few years older than I am.

I keep a standard profile. I spin an old yoyo from one finger and blow giant circles of bubble gum that burst on my cheeks. I never wash my hands or comb my hair. Pop grins at them from the docks, big holes in his teeth where he yanked them out with a socket wrench. He's got a set of whale-bone pirate falsies, chipped from chewing on gold coins, that he wears when we go into town to trade.

Pop isn't our real Pop, and Jezebel isn't my real sister, but we feel like a family just the same. Pop stole us from a mainland orphanage and raised us up to be his pretend children. He plans to leave this island's legacy to us one day and retire to the Caribbean. Somewhere that isn't quite so hard to keep a secret all the time, and somewhere he can hear the whales sing while he sleeps. Of course, all that changes the day that the summer winds blow a hot air balloon our way.

I first see it while I am up in the lookout tower. Summer winds are never any good here. They always seem to blow things straight towards us. The winter winds blow things away.

The balloon is a big one, a fancy one. It is shaped like a medieval castle, with elaborate, brightly colored turrets and banners flapping about in the sky. Whoever is inside it clearly does

not know how to fly. I watch it swoop and bump across the breeze in crazy circles for a while, until eventually it trumpets in defeat and wedges itself into the spiky branches of one of our bramble trees, a good twenty feet up from the ground. The nylon shell of the balloon shreds into cheerful confetti, while the thick gushing flame singes the leaves and sends the island's wombat sized, golden-eyed sea gulls flying up into the air with loud caws.

It has happened before. That is half the reason the bramble trees are there in the first place. We don't like folks getting too good of an aerial view of our island.

I watch the man inside try to work out a way down for a while before I get bored and wander off. There is a boatload of people arriving at Dead Man's Cove and I scamper over there to make sure that everything looks just the way it should: inhospitable and ugly. We arrange bleached whale bones in the sand and throw laxative-laced fish guts on the rocks every day, so that our ravenous monster birds will shit all over them while swooping and dive bombing their picnic lunches of wine and marmalade sandwiches.

After a few minutes of deflecting curious questions with a surly scowl, and refusing to carry anyone's bags or help high-heeled ladies across the sand, I forget all about the treed man inside his castle of a hot air balloon. There are plenty of greedy ground people around to discourage and dismay.

"Charlie," Jezebel whispers to me from behind a thorn bush. She is dressed like a pygmy today. Her orange hair is coated in mud and she has war paint drawn on her face. "Did you see the balloon in the trees?"

I nod. "He's stuck good. No getting out for a while."

"The colors," Jezebel says. "I've never seen anything like them."

She looks slightly bedazzled. I draw her attention to a couple of backpackers sharing a bag of granola and looking hardy and determined.

"There's no zip lining here," I call out to them. "No waterfall jumping. No rock climbing. No hang gliding, No swimming with



dolphins. Just hungry bears and giant seagulls. If you get back in your kayaks and head south you'll find an island with rainforests and elephants."

They eye me up suspiciously, wander around a little until their waterproofed boots are caked in excrement and fish guts, and then rinse themselves off and head back out to sea. One of our polar bears ambles out of the trees and sends the remaining tourists screaming for their vessels.

"That's an easy day's work," I say to Jezebel, tossing the bear some silver herring from my backpack. But when I turn around the bushes are empty and my sister has disappeared.

Jezebel is breathless over dinner. She is humming with excitement, some secret girl-ness that I cannot understand. Pop doesn't notice. He sucks the meat out of crab legs, crushing the hard shells with his jaws. Butter and boiled seawater drip down his chin. Every now and again he breaks the silence to mutter something about bloody tourists, or the plummeting price of jewel encrusted crowns. Jezebel sighs into her dinner plate. It looks like she is sculpting balloon castles out of her potatoes.

That night she has a headache so I am on treasure duty on my own.

"Sorry, Charlie," she says, scrunching lines into her forehead. I can tell she's faking. I have spent my entire life reading her expressions. "I don't feel very well. I won't be any good trying to cave climb or check traps tonight."

It is the first of many solitary wanderings.

The man stays up in his basket all summer. He makes a rope ladder he can crawl down from to go fishing and swim in the ocean. At night he seems perfectly content to sit in the wicker basket, cook fish and grill star fruit over the open flame, and count stars through the wispy tatters of his balloon. He has no sense of urgency. He

doesn't seem to be trying to get anywhere. Pop doesn't like him too much.

"Simpleton," he says, watching him from a pair of binoculars. But he doesn't pay him much more attention than that, though one night he does have me make a honey trail to the tree to try to attract the bears. Sometimes we have to do this sort of thing.

It's mostly the other people that are the problem. They consume our entire summers. They arrive in ocean liners and jet planes, sometimes helicopters that drop parachuting squirrel gliders out over our private land. Once an entire family beached themselves on our island, sun-swollen and half-starved, on a log raft they built themselves. They kissed our cold shores like they had finally come home. They seemed surprised to find it was just sticks and sand. The look in their eyes was heartbreaking. I wanted to drop some jewels in their pockets as they pushed back off to sea, but Pop said no.

"All we need is for one of these vultures to catch onto what we got here and we'll lose everything," he said. His eyes get a little gold crazy when he talks like this. When he really gets going they turn into spinning 14-karat gold wheels.

We do everything that we can think of to throw them off track. Pop plants fields of ragweed, sour grapes, wild garlic, and saw grass. He threads the trees with bramble vines and poisoned thorns. *His* Pop let loose a plague of jumping spiders, giant rats, and polar bears upon our island. Until the rats ate the jumping spiders and the polar bears ate the giant rats. We tried to train the polar bears to guard the treasure caves, but animals have no interest in cold, glittering inanimate hordes. We keep them around anyway since they hypnotize the tourists with their moony pelts and silver fangs. They gobble them up from time to time, but it still doesn't stop the people from coming.

Ever since the hot air balloon caught Jezebel's eye something is different with her. I am not a trained treasure hunter for nothing. I tap the walls and floorboards of her room until I find the hollow

spot that contains their secret correspondence. It is in a peeling cigar box, buried under a heap of tiaras and jewels. It is full of perfumed letters and declaratives. Lots of "I love you's" and "I want be with you forever's". I try to tell Pop but he can hardly hear anymore after taking so much booby-trap shrapnel in his ears.

"Don't bother me about yer sister's lady problems," he says. He is busy planning out how to rig a decoy island across the bay with fake treasure to distract the gold hunters for a while. This last summer was particularly stressful. One couple with eye-patches and peg-legs put their tent up right across the grass patch that covers the mouth of our underground tunnels. We had to pepper spray the garlicky breeze while they were sleeping to send them coughing and sputtering away.

"Times are getting tough, Charlie," he says. "We gotta buckle down. Reinforce our perimeters. Tell that ducky to quit mooning over hot air balloons, perm her hair up, and help us keep this treasure hidden. That's what family is for."

That isn't what Jezebel thinks anymore. She sits at the desk in her room making kaleidoscopes of gemstone chips and gold dust. In her journal she wrote about plans to sell them in fancy galleries on the mainland. She wants to leave our island.

"Charlie!" she jumps when she sees me standing in the doorway. I have cat-burglar feet. One of her cheeks is shimmering iridescent where she must have touched her face. I scowl at her.

"Jezebel," I say. "You have to forget the man in the balloon."

"What man in the balloon?" she asks, her face turning an unattractive shade of plum. This is the trouble with girls. You can't trust them worth a dime.

"You're leaving us," I say. "Or you want to anyway. What has he said to make you want to abandon me and Pop?"

"Oh, Charlie," she says, and her whole body shudders. "I'm not a kid anymore. I can't stay here forever. This is no kind of life for a woman to have."

With her frizzled hair and muddy clothes, Jezebel looks nothing like a woman to me. I tell her as much and she throws me out of her room with all of the strength of a born-and-bred treasure hider.

"I'm warning you, Charlie!" she yells through the door. I hear the slide of locks and clicks of latches. "Try infiltrating my personal space again and you'll be impaled by an eleventh-century Viking sword!"

This is enough to make me cautious. Jezebel is a booby-trapping master. She loves restoring ancient Scandinavian weapons. I give up on her. Instead I decide to go to the source of the problem: the Lotharian rake in the hot air balloon.

Pop is frying gull eggs in the dark in the kitchen. He's drunk on pirate rum and wearing a long pajama shirt and night vision goggles. Singing a shanty about adventure on the high seas. He doesn't even notice as I slip out the front door, exiting from a concealed fort cover made of sewn up thorn branches and poison berry leaves.

There is a path through the brush to the man's tree. I suspect my sister has carved it out. I tread in her footsteps quietly, so as not to spook any bats or bears or other nocturnal predators. I am almost to the site of their aerial love trysts when I make an amateur's error. I step into a trip-line ankle snare and immediately find myself swinging back and forth upside down, spiky brush snarling in my hair. This is Jezebel's handiwork. No doubt about it. It never occurred to me that she would booby trap the hot-air-balloon man from me and Pop. This thought sends a piercing pain through me even as the blood rushes downwards towards my head.

A treasure hider is never unprepared. I cut myself free with a dagger from my belt and tumble into a pile of thorn bushes, the ensuing howls giving me away completely. The man in the balloon is alerted. By the time I've righted myself he has climbed down his rope ladder and is standing before me.

"Charlie," he says. I have been imagining different versions of the devil himself trying to steal my Jezebel away. This man doesn't

look anything like that. He is pretty plain, in fact. He smiles at me and his slightly crooked teeth glow white in the moonlight.

"Sorry about the trap." He holds out a hand to me. "Your sister insisted. She was worried your Pop would try to slit my throat while I slept if he thought I was trying to steal anything."

I shake his hand cautiously. It is calloused from climbing and fishing.

"Pop *would* slit your throat while you were sleeping if he knew what you were trying to steal," I tell him.

The man looks at the dagger in my hand and nods. "I'm Nigel," he says. His expression remains friendly. He gestures to the rope ladder. "Want to come up? We can pull out some of those thorns."

I don't like the implication that I need his help for anything. He is a thieving, good-for-nothing hot-air balloonist as far as I'm concerned. I do want to see what he's got in his basket though, so I follow him up, climbing one-handed, pulling thorns with my teeth and spitting them into the night.

Nigel's balloon basket looks pretty ordinary. There are some blankets, disrupted from sleep, a pile of books that have seen better days, a string of dried fish hanging from a rack, smaller baskets, woven out of vines and containing fruit and other foraged foods like garlic bulbs and wild onions. There is a row of old moonshine jugs filled with water and reflecting the sky. From the top of his tree the stars look extra bright. Nigel lights his lantern and motions for me to have a seat.

"So," he says.

"So," I say.

"About your sister," he says.

"You can't have her," I tell him.

This leaves us in silence for a few minutes. I eye him up good and continue to spit thorns, so he knows I mean business. Somewhere in the forest the trees shake with tussling polar bears rummaging for dinner. A colony of bats is dislodged and they

skitter off over our heads. Nigel doesn't flinch. I suppose he's become used to this sort of thing.

"Charlie, you can't keep her here forever."

He sounds suspiciously like Jezebel herself. "Is that what you've been telling her?" I ask him, trying to keep the anger out of my voice. "No one is keeping her here. This is *our* island. It's where we belong!"

"People belong where they want to be," Nigel says softly. Like he's afraid my world will come crashing down around me with his words.

I could kill him. Well, maim him at least. He has the nerve that only an infiltrator that does not belong can have. "Go land on your own island and say that," I say, grabbing his jugs of water and throwing them off the side of the basket, so that they shatter on the ground below. "These are our jugs and you are drinking them." I toss the fruit overboard as well. "This is our food you have taken."

He still doesn't look particularly guilty. "I'm an explorer," he says. "The world is mine."

I see a pile of cloth folded up to one side with sewing needles and thread. I can guess at the colors. He is repairing his turrets. Soon he will be airborne again. The thought of Jezebel sailing away with him strikes real panic in me.

"Alright," I say. "You can have some treasure. Gold, silver, diamonds. I will bring you whatever you want. Just leave my sister behind."

He shakes his head at me. "You can't blame a girl for wanting to see the world," he says. "And you can't blame a guy for falling in love with your sister."

I should shank him. I know I should. Pop would be disgusted by what happens next. Tears, hot and fat, well up in my eyes. I think of things that make me angry. Things to make the tears go away. Things that will make me ready to slit Nigel's throat. Nothing comes. All I can think about is summers without Jezebel.

Winters without her. Nighttime ramblings and booby trapping without her. My face is wet.

I hop out of the balloon basket and scale the ladder before Nigel has time to react. I race through the forest, oblivious to traps and tripwires, wandering polar bears, or particularly persistent tourist encampments.

I'm going to tell Pop. I'll let him do what I can't.

But when I reach the house, Pop is passed out across the kitchen table over a string of pearls, his night vision goggles slipped to one side. He is snoring enough to bring the walls down. I knock on Jezebel's door but she doesn't answer. I do the most shameful thing I have ever done, and cry myself to sleep with my favorite crown on.

In the morning, it is Pop who shakes me awake. "Come see, Charlie. That pickle-brained dope has finally left the island."

I shake doubloons off me and take off my crown.

"Wake up your sister so she can see," he says. He grins, swigs leftovers from a mug of last night's rum, and heads out into the clear morning.

I don't knock on Jezebel's door. I don't bother. Instead I go after Pop and we walk down to the beach where tourists are lined up along the water's edge for a good look.

The castle has been patched up and the turrets are erected into the chilly morning air. It is a cold wind that meets me. The first wind of winter. It makes the crowd shiver and gives speed to the monstrous balloon.

Pop's eyes aren't too good but I know he can see the shock of orange hair that is Jezebel. She is waving goodbye to us from above the ocean.

For a moment Pop is rendered speechless, and then he breaks into such a terrible fit of obscenities and vulgar threats that the crowd on the shore dissipates. The last of the summer treasure hunters pack up their belongings and make for the sea.

Pop is inconsolable. He rants. He raves. He fights a polar bear. He breaks everything in the house. He tears trees straight out of their sockets. He goes on a rum bender for at least a week. I do my best to avoid him for most of this time.

Then one day he simply disappears. He takes the good boat that we hide in a cave at the southern tip of the island. I don't know where he's gone. To sell treasure, or maybe to rescue Jezebel. I find myself staring at the wintry sky a lot, and looking for colored banners and streamers on the horizon with a spyglass. I don't find any. I try to keep to my usual routine. Checking traps, exploring caves, counting treasure.

When Pop reappears he is not alone. He pulls the boat right up onto the sand at Dead Man's Cove and jumps ashore proudly, his chest thrown out like he's staking a claim.

"Charlie!" he calls and I rush down to greet him. He spits out his pirate falsies and puts them in his pocket. "Get us some rum. We are having a celebration!"

A girl climbs out of the boat from behind him. She is smaller than Jezebel and younger too. Her eyes are huge. In her hands are gems, tons of them, glittering different colors in the pale sunlight.

"Meet your new sister, Calliope. Calliope, this here's Charlie. He's going to teach you all about wolf traps, and squirrel snares, and hangman's nooses."

Calliope smiles at me. "Hello."

"Nice to meet you," I say back.

"Is it true this island is full of treasure?"

I nod and Pop looks pleased. He belches and smiles a big, gappy grin.



**KIMBERLY LOJEWSKI** is currently an MFA fiction candidate at UMass Amherst. She received her MA in English from Florida Gulf Coast University. Her works have been published (or are forthcoming in) *Aesthetica Creative Works*, *PANK*, *Gargoyle*, *BloodLotus*, *Toad*, and *Mangrove Review*. She is the founder and Editor in Chief of *Belletrist Coterie*, a new magazine that spotlights storytelling through different artistic mediums. She is also unnaturally obsessed with whales. To this end, she works on a whale tour boat, logging Captain's hours and waiting for the day when she can fully abscond to the sea..

# The Remarkable Case of Lily Temple

George R. Kovalenko

The exquisite Lily Temple sat, naked, on the edge of a rickety wooden stool and popped her freshly rouged lips at her mirrored reflection. Just the right amount of red: any more would make her seem overbearing, any less and business would be underwhelming. The eyeliner was a different story. She piled it on gratuitously. It glimmered alluringly around those gleaming emerald eyes. The rest of her was a statuesque, porcelain doll. Lily Temple didn't put much stock in clothing, and the world thanked her for it.

Satisfied with this illusion of composed, cultivated sexuality, she stood and made her way daintily through the graveyard of discarded underthings and used contraceptives strewn across her bedroom floor.

The closet was a sordid assortment of mid-priced lingerie and skimpy dresses. After a few moments of consideration she decided on a blood-red frock that revealed more than it hid. A pair of lofty stilettos and a quick glance in the mirror followed.

Venus never looked so good.

She took a deep breath that might've been the slightest bit unsteady and tugged at the yellowed piece of yarn that dangled from the ceiling. The light went out.

Heels clicked along the floorboards. Then, she heard it: that guttural, throbbing, moan. Silence followed. It had come from the dilapidated closet door at the other end of the room. In the dark, you could just make out her sweet, weak smile:

"Soon."

\* \* \*

Work was rougher than usual that night. She tried three street-corners and turned down at least half-a-dozen wealthy Olympian figures before she found what she was looking for. He was a thick man with almost marbled skin. He was raging drunk and looked like he hadn't done anything remotely like this before. His pale eyes twitched nervously in their sockets. Probably married, though he didn't wear a ring. Still, it didn't take Lily Temple long to sway him. He insisted that he had a place that they could go but a pout-and-a-half later, they were standing at Lily Temple's front door.

She stumbled through the doorway with her intoxicated prey leeched to her face like some slimy annelid. He groped at her petite frame. With a quiet rip, her dress joined the other forgotten articles on the floor. Ogling her and grinning stupidly, the gentleman pushed her back onto the bed. A second later, his pudgy ribcage was smothering her. He was the sort of man who was perpetually perspiring. Little droplets of sweat clung to his chest hairs like ticks. With a wet grunt he fumbled with his belt and pushed aside the last remaining bit of fabric between them.

And then he felt it snaking up his back. Cold. Wet. Viscous. He froze. From Lily Temple's shapely womanhood grew a single, black-green tentacle.

She tucked a strand of jet black hair behind her ear and cocked her head to one side. Those emerald eyes seemed suddenly bottomless. The man started screaming.

"What is this?!"

Up, and up, and up.

"Okay! Come on! Quit fucking around!"

At the first sign of a struggle, the extra appendage forced him even closer.

"Oh my god!"

To no avail, he flopped his arms against the unmade sheets in a feeble attempt to free himself.

"Oh Christ, please!"

The tentacle wound its way around his neck and up to his quivering, colorless, spittle-covered lips.

"Plea--"

It buried itself deep inside his mouth.

With a great, gurgling, crunching groan, the writhing member forced itself deeper and deeper into the man's swelling throat. His spasms grew more and more violent, and his eyes, which already looked fit to burst from his skull, rolled back into his head. The tentacle curled itself into a final deadly twist and withdrew from its victim's limp and broken form. As quickly as it had come, it went, dragging behind it a string of intestinal scraps and shrinking back between Lily Temple's creamy thighs.

She took a long moment to catch her breath. A post-mortem shudder ran through the body. The girl who wasn't just a girl looked quietly at it. Then, in a swift motion, she flipped the corpse onto its back and straddled it, her raven hair falling in rippling curtains around her face. The mask of composure cracked. Her previously unclouded eyes brimmed with unbridled, animalistic lust. She was a starving beast and dinner had arrived. She leaned in close, so that she could smell the bile and the freshly congealing blood painted across his lips. Bearing her gleaming ivory teeth she...

This time the roar was deafening. It shook the closet door in a tremendous bellow of hunger. Lily Temple's head snapped around to face the sound and snarled in frustration. Tonight, he was hers. It would not take him from her.

The thing in the closet replied with an even louder groan. Once again she rebelled against the unholy sound and once again it responded, this time with such menace that she was forced to cover her ears.

Silence.

It had won. Defeated, she slipped off the bed and begrudgingly hauled the swollen body behind her with a strength far beyond her petite size.

The closet door seemed to vibrate with anticipation. Almost ceremonially, Lily Temple deposited the corpse in front of the door. She looked very broken and frail: a beaten child. After a second of composure, she turned the rusted handle.

Behind the door was a kind of tangible darkness. It seemed to sit perfectly still and simultaneously whirl in a manic dance that was sickening to behold. All feeling was sucked out of the air around it with a gluttonous glee. Whatever it was, it was very much alive.

The stench was awful: a putrid mixture of human excrement, rancid fish and the unmistakably metallic smell of blood. Lily Temple reeled back and thought only of dark places and running and hiding and burying herself underground. Instead, gasping, she stood against the footboard of her bed.

The darkness in the closet began to form itself into long, spidery tendrils. They reached out blindly from the doorway, quivering, furiously searching. When they found the body on the floor, they coiled around it, eerily maternal in their grip. Slowly, the corpse was drawn into the closet.

What followed was the terrible ripping sound of flesh separated from bone. Then, absolute silence, interrupted only by a soft dripping sound.

Lily Temple looked gaunt. Her face was smeared in a cold sweat that was not wholly her own. There were dark rings around her eyes, the worst of runny eyeliner and lack of sleep. She couldn't remember the last time she had eaten. The night was consuming her. Soon, she would be fed to the thing herself.

Still leaning against the footboard of the bed, she let herself slide to the floor. Her delicate chin rested on her knees. She was hungry. She was so very hungry. Her eyes began to shut. Sleep was the only, meager escape. That thing in the closet ate every night, thanks to her. That thing in the closet was alive, thanks to her. And she got nothing.

The soft dripping continued.

Drip...

So...

Drip...

Very...

Drip...

Hungry...

**THUD!**

Something slammed against baseboard beside her head. Her eyes flew open, frantically searching for the source of the sound. Glimmering in the moonlight was a severed human hand.

A gift! Her eyes wide, she gazed up into the darkness of the closet with humility and gratitude. As if in reply, the door creaked gently shut. No sooner had the bolt clicked into place than Lily Temple scrambled for the bit of flesh. She sank her teeth into the tender scarlet meat. Again and again, she tore and swallowed, and again and again she felt her feeble sinews filling up with strength. One by one, she sucked the last drops of remaining blood off the hand's digits and, finally, tossed the skeletal remains of her meal to the floor.

And a most curious feeling overcame her. Despite the thing inside her and the meat in her belly and the thing in her closet, Lily Temple felt wonderfully, wonderfully human.

Tomorrow was another night. And beyond that was another and another. It didn't matter what else there was. She would survive. For now at least, she would survive. Wasn't that what it meant to me human? Surviving.

So, she sat, naked, in the twinkling moonlight, her mouth stained with the blood of a man, and wept.

The exquisite Lily Temple wept.

**GEORGE R. KOVALENKO** is the offspring of a cossack and a viking. He enjoys finding earwax in surprising places and participating in weekly boar-wrestling matches. He currently resides inside of your mind.

## Like I Say

NE Skinner

This is what I say, real low and dignified, to my dolls, right where they are sitting with their little backs up so straight against the wall, and their little feet sticking off the end of the shelf, like it's so cute, and their eyes just staring like they've already noticed everything before.

"Until you have seen the summer moon gleam on the water-slick back of the boy you love, you can't possibly understand what it is to be alive."

Very quick then, they all act like they are having important other thoughts and what I say doesn't matter not one slight bit to them. Well, I know them well enough to know they are thinking very hard about how to somehow turn around what I said, you see: they have been trying to be the bosses of me for a long time, my whole life, practically, so I know they aren't going to swallow my words quietly. Xavier, especially (my only man doll) acts so high and mighty and all that I know he has to be burning like a red-hot coal inside, because of course no doll has ever seen the moonlight at a lake at night, least of all him – he is so stodgy.

"You all can just sit there and suck on that," I say because I have to get out of here before they can come back at me, "while I go get me some supper."

And that is the final straw because if you know them like I do, you just know they cannot absolutely tolerate me stepping out without so much as looking back at them, let alone leaving them behind when I go down to the dining hall.

\* \* \*

Back before all the folderol, it had been completely different; the dolls were my most intimate confidantes. Childhood romances, you see, seem trivial to many people, but I say it is a fact that some people just know their very own soulmate from an early age, and the dolls understood that Reggie and I were that exact variety. Daddy and Mother, on the other hand, thought I was a silly thing for thinking Reggie would go with me, him being a Bechtel and me just the grocer's daughter; but I, in my heart of hearts, knew better, and the dolls saw it my way.

Every year, Reggie and I were in the same class, our school being so small; his blonde head always up with the "B's" near the front of the classroom, me with the "W's," at the back, but there was a shining golden thread that bound us – invisible. For many years, it's true, Reggie went about with his friends and all, sailboats and parties and what not and also went with a foolish girl – Marguerite Bledsoe, a "B" and also blonde – but I let him, since we (the dolls were in total agreement) counted it all as no more than a matter of youthful frivolity. Girls may come and go, I always say, but only true love weathers the sands of time.

High school finally came to an end, which we had agreed was the fitting time for Reggie to settle down. It was on the exact night of our high school commencement, in fact, when some of the boys said, "Let's us all go out to Limestone Lake for a swimming party," and of course I had no choice but to go along. Jalopies of all types creaked and rattled their way down the quarry road, and in the dark I lost track of Reggie's car what with pushing away the flask of smelling rot-gut the boys kept pressing on us girls. Kids went bad that night, very bad, on that clear, precious night at the quarry lake. Laughter and whistles echoed off those sheer rock walls as boys *and girls* went right down past their delicates to step off the ledge into that bottomless lake. Marguerite Bledsoe shall be forever burned in my memory – those white arms flashing, and that mouth just laughing and calling out to Reggie whose shoulders shone blue under the moon. Naturally I didn't so much as step a toe in that



black water in mixed company, so it was me the others appointed to tend the rope ladder, to keep it safe while they splashed and carried on; it being the only way out of the water.

Only I am left to know how completely simple it was – just the tiniest movement of my foot – to slip that ladder from the pipe where it hung, as if it'd been *wanting* to go; and what with the water so dark, you couldn't even see it sink away, neither hear it amid all that laughter.

Parents and everyone got so worked up in those days afterward, when the children's empty clothes and their silent jalopies were discovered at the edge of the quarry. Quick as you can say Jack Robinson, then, everyone in this whole entire town turned against me, including the dolls, which I say shows lack of depth, so I agreed I would just come stay at this place a while.

Rooming here with the dolls is a bit cramped and tedious what with them always harping at me, as they do now, but all the same, it is a blessing to be where people look out for my every need; and so I have all the time in the world to decide what I will do next. Someday, you watch, I will up and leave these dolls completely; like I say, they have no earthly idea what it is like to be alive.

**NE SKINNER** lives with her family in a green and leafy part of New Jersey, and spends healthy doses of time in NYC. Her work has appeared in *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *wtf pwm* and *Larks Fiction Magazine*.

# SOCKS

Marina Rubin

i come to work with a duffle bag, sweatpants, running shoes, but the socks are missing. i ask my friends in cubicles, the Equinox, the Lucille Roberts lovers, if anyone has an extra pair. during lunch i splurge on K-mart socks, when i return a surprise pack of athletic four is sitting on my desk. i pick up food from the fridge, the strawberry crunch salad that i brought from home is bow-tied with cold Adidas socks. then a sudden intercom announcement - someone left socks in the ladies room. while i run to pick them up, another pair is laid out on my keyboard in the shape of a rose, pink nylon socks hang from the phone receiver. later an urgent delivery, box the size of HDTV, inside - one mickey mouse sock. all day long socks, socks, ankle socks, knee-hi socks, ventilator socks, some new, some worn with holes and smell of feet, spring up, everywhere, in conference rooms, in office supply closets, like snow balls, like ping pong balls. a running joke for the night, i leave the office with socks to last me a lifetime, but the joke is on them, my coworker-pranksters, next time i will ask for panties

**MARINA RUBIN's** first chapbook *Ode to Hotels* came out in 2002, followed by *Once* in 2004 and *Logic* in 2007. Her work has appeared in *13th Warrior Review*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Dos Passos Review*, *5AM*, *Coal City*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Jewish Currents*, *Lillith*, *Pearl*, *Poet Lore*, *Skidrow Penthouse*, *The Portland Review*, *The Worcester Review* and many more. She is an associate editor of *Mudfish*. She lives in New York City where she works as a headhunter on Wall Street while writing her fourth book, a collection of flash fiction stories. Her website is [www.marinarubin.com](http://www.marinarubin.com).

## Death Car Alley

Jennifer K. Oliver

The wolves are out in their death car again, a sleek, slow curb crawl, prowling cracked pavements for signs of life, for meaty flesh to make meaty breath, and they're hungry.

But this doesn't mean diddly-squat these days, because everyone's so damn hungry.

Even the food.

Evan's still digesting the curry he never would've had if he hadn't tagged along with his workmates (he doesn't do spicy), all in the name of not-quite-friends (yet). The trouble with being single again is you have to forge and rebuild on a weakened substructure, which is easier said than done when everyone around you is hunched and closed up tighter than a coffin. Single again, you realize there's hardly anyone left, and pretty much all your old friends are dead or reanimated, or vanished into the crumbling foundations like terrified woodlice.

There wasn't enough room in the taxi after the meal but Evan's trying to stay positive, clinging to the fact that there was a meal at all. Maybe a brisk walk'll be good for his system, ease up his pinching post-Tikka Masala beltline. There, totally positive.

A belch gurgles up from the depths and he lets it out as quietly as possible, but metaphorically, Evan's still a reasonably hungry guy. Hungry for respect, hungry for money—maybe not as much as some, but a smidgen more than others—hungry for security, stability, recognition.

Trouble is, in this city, you haven't a hope in hell of getting enough of the first, the second is easy as long as you don't

submerge in the mind-altering substances the government dispenses like sweets, and you usually get the wrong kind of the last.

Like now. Evan stops dead as the shiny black Shogun 4x4 creeps around the corner up ahead like some giant prehistoric insect, liquid-metal smooth shell glistening. Street light rebounds off the roof, dirty gold spilling down the bonnet. Headlights are two glaring predator eyes, picking Evan out of the rubble of broken-down skyscrapers and frozen shores of litter.

Evan squints. For two heartbeats, he stands still, hoping it won't see him if he doesn't move. But the engine purrs low, and even though the death car maintains a steady course down the deserted street, it's like the damn thing sniffs him through its grille.

Too late, Evan-lad, they've seen you. Probably smelled you from five streets over.

Crap.

The death car boys lick their hungry chops and shiver in anticipatory glee. They're not really boys, though—more men who refuse to get jobs. But that's not saying much, since there aren't a lot of folk who'll hire werewolves even if they did want to work. Which they don't.

Blacked-out windows roll down with a faint electrical *rreee*. Nostrils flare, sucking all those sweet, rotten city smells down throats already contracting at the promise of a fresh kill, a live meal.

"Here, kitty-kitty," sings Rodge, his gelled brown spikes quivering in the sultry breeze as he shoves his head out the window like a puppy on its first car ride. He catches scents on his tongue and his body shakes like a junkie's, pupils dilated black moons. His full name's Rodger but he dropped the 'r' that first transformation, feeling it too nerdy, plus he likes how the new handle rhymes with 'Dodge'.

Evan should be dodging about now, only, his feet are cemented to the street. Urban natives might say too much chewing gum and not enough road maintenance, and they'd be right. Nobody will do the job any more, not on these streets.

But that's not why Evan can't move. Everybody knows a death car when they see one, since all monsters and ghashlies have wheels these days. Evan remembers a time when vampires flapped, and werewolves loped, and zombies shuffled, and ghouls—well, nobody's clear on what ghouls do, or what the point of them is—but nowadays...

Nowadays they just can't be arsed. The undead and reanimated, the possessed and feral and inexplicably inhabited Can. Not. Be. Bugged. So they drive or hitch.

Or, in zombies' cases, get run over by vampires and werewolves a lot. Evan heard a rumor at work that there's a society now—The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Zombies Through Motorized Terrorism, or, in its abbreviated form, RSPCZTMT, although frankly it's easier just saying the whole thing. Cost the city a lot clearing up all those twitching, dismembered limbs, plus the incinerator expenses.

Yeah, what's the world coming to?

"Kiiitty!"

*Run, Evan-lad, run!* The only memories Evan has left of his father are of him bellowing embarrassing encouragements at school sports tournaments. Even now, that booming memory-voice bears enough weight to wrench Evan's feet from the ground and give him that spring he needs.

The sprint lasts all of ten seconds before it slows to a desperate hop-skip-jump of indigestion (the curry sits pretty). Life's tough on the streets, especially after a three-course meal preceded by poppadoms.

Evan wonders if the reflective tick marks emblazoned across the backs of his running shoes will flash like beacons to his whereabouts. They're vintage. Tonight's the first time he's taken them out of the box, although he's not feeling so stylish any more.

"Oh, kiiiitty!"

Crap.

André grins wolfishly and grips the steering wheel, fingernails denting long, thin quarter moons in the leather. The kill's nearing the end of the street, but they can still see the logos on the backs of his shoes kicking up and down and catching the headlights. He tugs his eyes off supper just long enough to stab the stereo playback button. André's of the ilk that believes life needs a soundtrack, which is why the CD changer—located beneath his seat, now whirring faintly as it shifts the disc into place—is always stocked with the latest sounds from the underground.

Rodge leans halfway out the passenger window and laps at the city air. The kill's scent trails in wafts, a sweet panic-and-sweat combo that builds with the rumble of the Shogun. Casey snakes an arm between the front seats and, silently serious, gives Rodge's butt a vicious tweak. Rodge's yelp, half-bark and half-giggle, dies behind them as the kill disappears down a side street and André steps on the accelerator.

Drums hammer, drowning out the engine noise; a crash of cymbals, the banshee shriek of an abused fretboard. Distorted keyboards groan out atmospherics, electronic wails and screams. André licks his lips, the bass vibrating the car like a galloping heartbeat.

I'm Going To Rip Off Your Head and Shit Down Your Neck's lead singer spits down the microphone, his screech transforming into a reverberating explosion of sound through the sub woofers in the back. André lives for the music because it's relevant to him. It's like he doesn't even have to say anything, just play the latest nu-

hip-thrash track, and if people still don't get where he's coming from, it's no big. He simply eats them instead.

As André swerves around an open manhole, through which a yellow tentacle is protruding and waving around for something to grope, Rodge is nearly propelled out the window.

"Hey!" Rodge kicks his feet inside the car.

Laughter scrambles up André's throat, and soon his voice mixes with the nu-metal, making wolf-metal, and as the car jerks and revs on the road, he and Casey grab Rodge's flailing legs.

The werewolves are closing the gap, hot on Evan's Air Walk Classics™.

Many and varied final scenarios dart through his head, popping up with each thud of his feet like pages in a flip book. Death by claw, death by fang, death by lash and rend. With any luck, the indigestion will kill him first.

But Evan's rarely that lucky.

The soles of his running shoes stick to the grimy concrete, a rhythmic rip-rip-rip like sticky tape pulled off paper or skin torn off bones. There's something about the buildings as he weaves down a sullen grey alley, a weak spark of familiarity Evan can't place but has a feeling he will soon.

The engine purr sounds farther away now and Evan knows the wolves are dawdling to wear him down, but he keeps moving, and the alley begins to fold its shadowed cloak tighter around him. He passes a gated doorway, a boarded up air vent, but it's the graffiti scrawled across the wall in fading neon pink loops that clicks his memory:

VAMPIRES SUCK, UNLIKE MY GIRLFRIEND!

The words were a point of amusement last year when Evan first saw them, back when the warehouses were converted into apartments. He re-reads the graffiti, heaves oxygen into his lungs

before they collapse, and ruminates on how freakishly fast time flies.

Wood squeaks just behind him to the right and he spins round.

"Evan? Oh my God, Evan, is that *you*?" A disembodied head appears through the wall. Evan didn't notice the window at first, but he can see where a grey curtain has been drawn back.

"Susannah," he pants, blinking hot sweat out of his eyes. "Hey, Susie."

"Evan!"

Now names are firmly established, Evan hobbles to the open window, during which time he remembers Susannah is an *ex*, which means no matter how hard they try not to, they'll inevitably revert to ex-speak where everything is "Great!" and "Good, yeah!" because nobody, no matter how long separated, wants to admit the grass isn't greener on the other side—that it is, in fact, crusty brown.

"Wow, it's so great to—" she says, and shakes her head. Her long blonde hair is damp and Evan's brain supplies images of her grinning at him through shower steam. "I mean, wow!"

"Yeah, totally," he says too loud.

"Amazing, really! How are you?"

"Great!" he yells. "Good, yeah!"

"Oh, Evan. It's really been too long. We ought to—you know. Some time. We really should."

"That," Evan says, nodding, "sounds great."

She smiles, and the place in Evan's chest that he's been carefully mending for the last year fractures again. Susannah tips her head to one side, substituting a frown for that amazing sunbeam smile.

"What on earth are you doing out this late by yourself?"

"Meal with the guys from work," he says. "Followed by a slight taxi malfunction."

"Oh dear, not another breakdown?"

"More me not fitting in it."

"Ah," she says, looking down at the peeling sill. She's sharp;



she knows he was just a spare wheel, invited by his co-workers to share the cost of the table. It's the first time today Evan's been able to admit it, too, and his gut clenches as the truth of it twists inside him worse than the indigestion.

Susannah diplomatically picks at a splinter. Evan grinds his teeth, wishing his life wasn't so obvious.

"Yeah, I thought I'd jog off the food," he adds, awkwardly feigning nonchalance. "Best to keep fit these days." In the distance, twin lights open in the dimness like a hunter's eyes across a prairie. Evan shifts his weight from one leg to the other.

"But Evan, you know this alley is a dead end, right? You can't get home this way."

"I, uh," Evan brushes his fingers through a damp fringe of black hair. "No, I didn't know that."

Susannah leans a little farther out the window, showing him the tantalising vee of her cleavage. Evan unhelpfully remembers what it was like to squash his face into that cleavage. "Do you want to swing around the front for a cuppa? I'm out of coffee cake, but I still make a mean pot of tea."

He wants to say yes—oh, how he wants to say yes—but once a wolf has your scent it doesn't stop until it's had the rest of you, and Evan doesn't want to put Susie in danger. They might've split up but it's still Susie, the woman he fell in love with the night she decked a zombie using only the four inch stiletto heel of her favourite shoes. Susannah's still a glimmering slice of the past before the rise of the army of darkness, and Evan wants to keep it that way.

"Thanks. Really. But I'd better get on. You know, it's late and all."

"Oh. Okay." She smiles again and Evan wants to kick himself. "Well, take care. The streets are so dangerous nowadays." Susannah pulls her head back inside and Evan bids an aching farewell to her hair and mouth and cleavage. "We definitely have

to. Some time."

"We definitely will," Evan says, even though he's in no position to go making promises. "Night, Susie."

"Bye, Evan." The window clicks and, after a moment's pause, the curtain swishes shut.

Evan looks up to find the gold headlights staring him down, and chooses not to die in front of Susannah's window in case she hears the commotion and looks out, or worse—decides to come out.

That minute's rest is a blessing, and he finds there's still juice in his legs, just enough to reach the end of the alley where he'll face the pack.

Casey wolf-whistles out the window, his face tipped up to the strip of navy clouds between the high-rise buildings. There's not enough room to swing a cat, and the Shogun sends out a comet trail of blue-white sparks behind them as it scrapes the walls with a metallic squeal.

"Nowhere left to run, little kitty," Casey whispers, softly banging his head to the distorted drone of the music. "Except into us."

The alley releases the death car, space widening as the warehouse apartments give way to abandoned, skeletal factories. Dark windows gape like hungry mouths, broken panes the jagged teeth. This couldn't be sweeter, Casey thinks, as André brings the car to a stop.

The kill quivers in the twin beams, a rabbit on a night road.

"Go get him, Case," Rodge says, "and bring him back here."

Casey frowns. "I got the last one."

"Yeah," says Rodge with a shrug. "But *I* don't feel like doing it tonight."

"Enough," André grumbles. "We *all* go."

They stare at him.

"When was the last time you bastards set foot outside this car?"

André shoves his door open and slides out. Rodge tosses Casey a hitched eyebrow over the back of the seat as they follow.

The kill watches them through squinted eyelids, his hands fumbling about him for something to grab. This whole thing's gone on way too long, in Casey's opinion, and now he just wants to eat.

"Dré?" he breathes, stalking toward the kill.

"Let's chow down!" André's command is a barely coherent growl, but even if they hadn't understood the words, Casey and Rodge would still catch the meaning; "kill" and "eat" share one sound in wolf.

Rodge's snarl becomes a moan as his nose bone snaps, gunshot-loud in the still. André tears at his jacket, head thrown back, neck bulging, mouth open to allow room for his fangs to bleed down.

Casey feels the first bite of pain in his lower back, a jolt contorting his spine, his skin stretching to accommodate the change. It hurts, every damn time it hurts like a bitch, but Casey revels in the pain, because like Pavlov's dogs and their bells, the pain always precedes the meal.

Wind whistles through a chain-link fence at Evan's back. If not for the razor wire wrapped around the top, he could probably climb it.

But really, what difference would it make? There'd only be another night, another meal, another too-small taxi. More wolves, or maybe he'd score some vamps.

Bugger that.

Mouldy boxes and waste bins litter the alley, discarded, charred remnants from the factories, surrounding Evan in dirty drifts. An ammonia smell rises up his nose, zinging; he wets his mouth and tastes it on his lips, but he doesn't cringe—it's vague, like an out-of-body experience. Detached. Evan brushes his fingers over rough surfaces hidden in the shadows, searching for something sharp.

The trio of wolves wail in disharmony, their bodies folding

down like robots in a cartoon Evan remembers as a kid, before the world changed and TVs stopped broadcasting anything but ads and the news. There are no friendly big rigs or Chevy Camaros, though, just blazing yellow eyes and so much coarse fur sprouting through ripped seams. The wolves' nostrils flare. Rumbles reverberate on slick walls. Evan feels the seismic vibration of their growls through the ground.

"I don't suppose you'd consider—" he begins, and the biggest wolf snaps its jaws. The other two snuffle-snort like they're laughing and, for a second, a burst of irritation chases off the terror and surrealism. Evan grapples blindly, comes up with a box. The label reads LITHIUM-ION LAPTOP BATTERIES, and there's a big red X warning that these materials should not be punctured or exposed to excessive heat. They've got to be years old, from a time when people communicated via computers and you could send emails about life, love, and terrible movies, before emails became messengers of death, doom, and evil overlords. Before there was no connection at all.

One of the wolves stalks forward, huffing breaths, hackles raised and arched nails clicking on the concrete. Muscles ripple beneath fur, and black lips peel back to display teeth so long and white and sharp they're like tusks.

Evan shuts his eyes, swings his body to and fro to gather momentum, and then lets fly the box.

"I'm not a spare bloody wheel!" Oh yeah, that helps a little. For a moment.

The damp, ancient cardboard disintegrates in the air, raining brown paper flecks. With it spills a bunch of thin black oblongs, which start exploding the nanosecond they come into contact with the claws of the wolves that try to bat them away.

One wolf leaps six feet in the air, catching a couple of batteries in the chest. When it lands, its fur is speckled with bright orange stars that aren't stars at all, but tiny fires. The fires twinkle and catch on the coarse fur, which erupts like thousands of ignited

fuses. The wolf's eyes bulge and it hops side to side, crashing into one of the other wolves which has, up until this point, been watching with dumb surprise. The second wolf yelps and hops backward, crashing into the third, which crashes into the death car's bonnet.

Evan sees the three hulking grey bodies engage in a weird jitterbug, and soon all are alight, fur puffing wispy grey tendrils up into the darkness. The smell reminds Evan of the time his sister left her hot curlers in too long, and he's sure that any other day it would be funny. He hopes he gets the chance to tell Susannah.

God, Susie.

But soon follows the rancid stench of burning skin and Evan winces, tries to hold his breath.

The wolves writhe and yowl and twist, burning as nicely as a Guy Fawkes effigy in November, and the more they roll in the grime on the ground the harder their fur fires burn. One leaps, skidding over the car, and the second convulses, bushy tail whipping. It drags itself up the bonnet by its claws, destroying the paintwork before it vanishes over the side.

The third, biggest and angriest-looking wolf pauses only a moment, then winds back on its flaming haunches.

Evan cries out as the monstrous shape takes flight, a juggernaut of fang and fire. He makes a mad dash out of the way and sprawls to the side, the wolf sailing over him, flailing into the litter, burning bright. Then the screams start, and the smell kicks in for real.

Evan crawls away to throw up.

"Christ!" he coughs. "Oh God!" he hacks. It's bad enough when he only half swats a fly and has to listen to it do the Break Dance of Death on his windowsill. This is a zillion times worse, and no matter how hard Evan holds his hands over his head he can still hear it. The wolf tears at its face as Evan pulls himself over the Shogun and topples to the ground on the other side.

Shoving at the bumper, he launches himself up and stumbles

back the way he came, side-stepping clumps of burnt fur and wondering what on earth just happened—something people find themselves wondering a lot these days.

Susannah's window is dark, the curtain undisturbed. Good. She's been surviving here long enough to know not to open windows when there are howls outside. There's a good reason she's still alive and still looking incredible.

Evan limps to the sill and stares up at the blank porthole, for the moment unconcerned that he's still out at night, that he's alone, and that he really needs a piss.

By rights he should head home to his empty shoebox of a flat, open a beer, take a bath, maybe take a bath in a tubful of beer. But he doesn't move. Can't. The adrenaline flow ebbs, leaving him trembling, aching to see her, to touch her and assure himself he truly survived, she's really real and not a spectre his brain made up to deal with imminent death.

The curtain twitches; Evan just makes out the faint, curvy silhouette of a person. A second later, the curtain lifts and the window squeaks again.

"Evan, are you all right? I heard a commotion. Are you hurt? Was it gargoyles? There've been a lot of gargoyles lately."

It's dark, but Evan tries smoothing back his hair. A pinch of bloody fur comes away in his fingers and he winces, flicking it aside. "Um, fine, I think. Not gargoyles, no. Werewolves. Look, Susie, I'm sorry to bother you. I'm a bit of a mess here. It's probably best if I—"

"Do stop, Evan, and come around the front," Susie says. "I'll buzz you in." The window closes before Evan can explain that he wouldn't want to get blood and grime all over her sofa, even though he's secretly relieved.

Dazed, with puke on his knees and sweat hot on his face, Evan heads out of the alley, thinking about how making new friendships in this city is a drag. But since the dead are bent on resurrection, it seems only fair that old relationships are given the same chance,

and for the first time in his memory he's not left with the same sense of inevitability he often feels after a near-miss with creatures of the night.

He checks the street for signs of smoking fur, then makes his way to the front of Susie's building where he jabs her doorbell and spends a frantic eight seconds trying to straighten his shirt, wipe his face with his cuff, check whether his breath still stinks of curry. A drain cover rattles behind him, but it's not fear that makes his fingers shake, his stomach twist this time. The click of fortified locks finally comes, and Evan pushes through the door thinking about Susie and what the night may yet hold, not about how he narrowly escapes the rabid-looking tentacle that makes a grab for him through the drain.

**JENNIFER K. OLIVER** is a British writer and freelance web designer who requires regular doses of speculative fiction to function properly. She has also been known as a belly dancer and kick-boxer, and once died in an extremely low budget zombie movie. She blogs at her [Livejournal](http://Livejournal) about writing, publishing, movies, music and other sundry topics. A bibliography is available at her website, [www.jenniferkoliver.com](http://www.jenniferkoliver.com). She can also be found on Twitter @jenniferkoliver.

## Red and Blue Makes Purple

Elif Alp

I'm writing this in my head on the way home from seeing a movie with him, the first time we've laughed alone together in a while, since I can remember actually. Felt how much I love him traipsing through a movie theater parking lot on a chilly winter evening, just outside Chicago where you can hear the prairie winds in the morning despite the clutter of cookie cutter houses and the formulaic three trees per front yard. It's Thanksgiving weekend and dammit sibling affection can be so volatile and impossible, and then so simple and pure. Snuggling up against him I take his arm in mine, skip some, everything is light and golden. D asks if he can get a slushy, and I say, red or pink I mean no blue or red? We laugh, both D says and I say that just makes it purple, and we laugh more. Or maybe it's the same laugh and we're just talking through it.

Of all the flicks D picks *Puss in Boots*, insists on 3D. To see a movie, a *fun* movie, the kind we never see anymore he says. Dammit life is serious enough he says, why not have some fun in a movie for a second? And just like that we're kids again, kids at a movie theater that looks like it did when it was built in the late 90s, the Barnum-and-Bailey inspired new old movie house plush. The same as it looked when I had last gone to a movie this enthused, but then not because this time we're laughing and the theater looks the same but we look different. We shy away from the arcade room, glowing and flashing on and off, games lined up against all the walls with an air hockey table triumphant in the middle of it all, even though I love air hockey and D probably does too or at least he'd say he did if I'd asked.



A young guy sits at the end of the concession stand behind a sign that says "TICKETS SOLD HERE." I say to him what do you got here, tickets?, and D laughs and so does the guy. Ever the older sister, a touch of swagger in front of the kid, his giggles validating, fueling my fire. I want to make him laugh forever. The guy says which movie are you here to see and I make like I'm a little embarrassed and whisper *Puss in Boots*, in 3D?, and D giggles more. The guy tries to make like it doesn't matter, great he says, tapping away at the screen in front of him, here are your 3D glasses. D says oh my god, his jaw drops at the cheap plastic glasses on the counter, feigning his real excitement and knowing it's funny because we're painfully self-aware like that. Look I say to the guy, if anyone asks this never happened. Oh no he says, mum's the word, that sincere Midwestern sarcasm.

Snacks D says, and we slide on down the stand. He gets a hot dog, and when he asks for that blue and red slushy the guy doesn't even blink or think it's weird. Holy shit I say, we are having so much fun and everything is so funny and D says so funny you couldn't even write it, and we laugh. Until I do I say, and we laugh harder. Did you say butter the guy says, bag of popcorn in his hand, so funny you couldn't even write it.

We walk into the theater right when the movie starts and everything feels too perfect, the laughs, the snacks, the timing, me and D. There's hardly anyone there so we sit up and center and we're giggling and then I realize while the movie is rolling that it's not too perfect it's just perfect enough, and that nothing has been funny all night except how much I love D and how much he loves me despite all the distance and space of being siblings as adults.

Now on the way home some soft sensual bossa nova is playing on the radio and it's perfect too. I'm trying to find out what recording it is with some music recognition app to no avail, and then I have another realization. It's frustratingly appropriate, a sign, like the gods were smiling down on me and nodding,

watching it dawn on me how many strings they pulled tonight,  
glad I was recognizing. Silly naïve mortal:

The song only plays once so listen hard. Turn the volume up  
roll the windows down breath in the moment and remember it,  
dammit.

**ELIF ALP** is a documentary filmmaker and beginning level banjo player in New York City. She is also obtaining a PhD in Sociology from Columbia University. Her creative writing can best be categorized as exaggerated and glorified journal entries, building off personal experiences with an explicit attempt to make her readers laugh. Or at least smirk. Come on, no one? Oh no, not the crickets on a warm summer evening sound clip. Jesus, tough crowd.



## On the cover:

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### "Untitled"

Dena Rash Guzman

**DENA RASH GUZMAN** is an author and the editor of the Portland, Oregon arts and literary journal [www.unshodquills.com](http://www.unshodquills.com). Her photography and writing can be found in various print anthologies and in journals worldwide. She works as a regular contributing author and as Managing Director North American for Shanghai, China based independent English language publisher HAL Publishing. ([www.haliterature.com](http://www.haliterature.com)).

