

JERSEY



PRESS

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Editor's Note:

I know, I know. Just the other day you were saying to your best friend or partner or spouse or veterinarian, "When in the hell is JDP going to do an issue focused on ambiguity?"

Okay, no one in their right *goram* mind has ever asked that, but...um...sometimes it's the literary magazine's role in society to give its audience not what it *wants*, but what it *needs*.

Or, maybe we just got some really cool stories that are a bit amorphous in terms of what exactly happens and decided to throw them together into a single issue to better mess with you.

Because you loved the end of *Inception* when you weren't sure if the top tipped over or not. Or the way *The Thing* ends without telling you definitively if the monster is in Childs or MacReady.

Yeah, I hated that too.

But I *do* really like the stories we've assembled here.

And we haven't gone completely crazy.

There's one with cat entrails.

Plus, a few ghosts show up toward the end.

At least, I think they do.

– Mike Sweeney

Inside the Ellipse

Robert P. Kaye

Ethan stepped outside on the morning of the third day of the Incident, circumnavigating a wad of damp blankets and cardboard, the shucked cocoon of a denizen of the street and a reminder that a mere shrug of the earth could reduce an entire population to similar wreckage. The faint bite of urine tingled in the cool air as he made his way to the far edge of the portico. A gust of freezing drizzle sprinkled his face as he approached the plastic ashtray positioned well away from the back door of the Emergency Operations Center—the EOC—the city’s high tech cathedral of disasters. Breaks like these allowed him some perspective; the cloud-shredded views of distant mountains proof that each individual constituted an infinitesimal molecule trapped in a vast ocean of events.

He lit the last of the three cigarettes allocated to each twenty-four hour period, more than three the reputed threshold to addiction. This one tasted of fine burgundy aged in smoky barrels, the neurotransmitter rush a peek into the abyss. Sleep deprivation contributed to the not unpleasant hyper-reality reminiscent of college experiments with acid.

So far, the Incident comprised no more than a series of practical jokes that nobody could guarantee did not emanate from some obscure Fed agency fucking with them. A “penetration test.” Or, as somebody called it, “foreplay before cyber rape.” So far, Ethan was having a blast, though it wouldn’t do to admit this inside.

“Mind if I bum one?”

Ethan stifled his startle reflex. Nobody had joined him on the sidewalk for days, even the grizzled old cops converted to nicotine patches, energy drinks or yoga, unwilling to leave the bunker for

fear of missing something. Emergency junkies one and all. “Sure thing,” Ethan said, shaking out a coffin nail—he loved the archaic lingo.

The man selected a cigarette as if they might vary in size or taste as Ethan scanned him for a badge, detecting not even a lanyard. On the second day, an alphabet soup of outsiders—FEMA, FBI, HSD, NSA—had descended upon the EOC. This guy looked like one of the grey suits who’d evicted Homeland Security from the secure conference room, sealing the doors, creating a bunker within a bunker. The man’s grey disheveled hair, rumpled suit and loose backwards-twisted tie set him apart from the rest of the team, all apparently twenty years his junior and capable of running a marathon in formation while juggling knives betwixt them. This man looked desiccated and brittle. The Boss. “So—how’s it going in there?” Ethan asked.

For the past three days, an unidentified “Bad Actor” —Ethan used to laugh at the term, picturing some hapless *Saturday Night Live* alumnus butchering *King Lear*—had sent untraceable text messages calling their shots:

19:00, lights out on Broadway, two minutes. Upon the hour, bang! the designated neighborhood darkened. Power restored 120 seconds later.

08:30, rush hour break, Spring to Pine, ten minutes. In mid-commute, traffic lights gridlocked for 600 seconds before resuming normal cycles.

21:00, Sesame Street + Playboy Channel, twenty minutes. At the appointed hour, Big Bird and Oscar replaced the image of a panting threesome, observed by the fine men and women viewing porn together on the gigantic plasma screen. Ethan erupted in laughter in appreciation of the intruder’s comic timing, but he chortled alone, everyone else’s sense of humor evaporated.

“You want to know how it’s going?” The grey man lit up, squinting and baby coughing at the first bite of smoke. “Read the

press releases." He aimed two fingers at Ethan's chest and leaked smoke through lips thin and puckered as an old scar.

"I write the press releases," Ethan said. He had since the second day, when a FEMA high rafter bat asked him to sleep on site instead of rotating with his less creative Public Information teammates.

"I know." The suggestion of a smile said, *I'm messing with you.*

The thrill of recognition almost misdirected Ethan from the adroit avoidance of his question. He decided to take another run at it. "Any closer to ID-ing the perp?" he said. *ID-ing the perp?* Ethan groaned inwardly at the lingo marking him as a civilian TV viewer instead of an insider. He chose not to react to the man's cocked head and bemused smile. The best way to cover a gaffe was to move forward. Never look back.

He held his breath.

The man shrugged, drew another puff. "I shouldn't." He raised the cigarette as evidence and examined it as if posing for a circa 1954 ad in *Life* magazine. "Those guys would give me no end of shit," he gestured to the glass, "if they weren't working their asses off. You're a bad influence, my friend."

My friend. Ethan waited. He'd heard an ex-special ops guy say that time and silence constituted the best interrogation technique ever devised. The plastic ashtray, cabled to a support pillar, had a design like an upside down hypodermic needle. Butts inserted into the small hole in the neck dropped into the locked base to frustrate scavengers—effective, if mean spirited. Ethan missed old fashioned ashtrays with raked sand, like tiny beaches, which lent an air of luxury to the act of smoking and facilitated the recycling of used tobacco.

"I'm a fan of your work," the man in grey said. "You've got some chops."

"Thanks." Pride unclenched within until he recalled Twain's observation about the only three types of people susceptible to flattery being men, women and children. "Not a lot to write about,

is there?"

"Therein resides the art." He stabbed the ember of the cigarette toward Ethan's chest like a practice stroke toward a dart board.

"This you know."

Ethan took a chance and extended his hand. "Ethan Solvanger."

The man craned his head to peer through the building glass, which admitted light, but did not permit its escape. They shook—a brief catch and release. "Call me Laramie," he said.

"You from Wyoming?" Ethan asked.

"Not really."

On the fourth day, the under-edge of downtown felt post-apocalyptically deserted. It took Ethan a moment to recognize the steady state of a normal Sunday afternoon, not the aftermath of some unnoticed disaster visited upon the land while the attention of those inside remained hyper-focused elsewhere.

The spillways on a dam upstream from the metro region had opened six hours before, the dispatched crews requiring thirty-three desperate minutes to find the right manual shut off valve—three minutes after the automated floodgates closed under unauthorized remote control. Things had tipped serious, the unnamed bad guys demonstrating virtuoso mastery of a portfolio of threat vectors. Legions of Chinese, Korean, and Ukrainian hackers flailed against firewalls day and night to no avail, while these characters had their god-like fingers poised above the right buttons, driving the cybersecurity gurus inside nuts.

Laramie stood in his usual spot.

"So how'd you get into this particular branch of show business?" Laramie asked after they lit up.

"The 2004 Pacific tsunami," Ethan said. "Working as a dive instructor at a resort in Thailand. I was twenty meters down with a party of tourists and the wave lifted us maybe five meters in a big

ellipse and set us back in the same place like puppets on strings. Wiped out most of the town, but the resort was OK." He recalled the feeling of suspension from a tether bent around a point in space, plucked by a force deep within the earth and hundreds of miles away. The wire still resonated. "The power—you know?"

"Yeah." Laramie shrugged. "I know."

"I stuck around to help out." Ethan made sure he curtailed any blather about Rachel, his girlfriend at the time and a fellow dive instructor. She'd run to the roof of the two-story guest house and watched the water rise almost to the top, the walls shaking like paper in a typhoon. The surge subsided, leaving her unharmed but unable to trust the world even on a sunny day. "Guess I got hooked."

"Emergency management is like crack cocaine," Laramie said. "Irregular intervals of intense stimulation surrounded by vast spells of boredom. Hard to quit and hell on the personal life." He took another puff, lizard eyes narrowing against the smoke and chuckled. "If you've still got one of those."

"Love it," Ethan laughed—he wasn't sure why. Maybe in appreciation of Laramie's exquisite detachment. "Any progress?" He gestured inside.

"All under control."

"Really?" Ethan's spirits lifted in a way that revealed a surprising level of desperation.

"Yeah. Just not *our* control."

"Yeah." Ethan laughed, trying to sound convincing. He'd continued the dive, enjoyed the tropical fish and the coral though he'd seen it all many times before. The shifting plates of the earth seeming to fuse the reef's beauty into supernatural clarity. Nobody had ever asked why he hadn't headed back right away, perhaps assuming that he hadn't identified the nature of the wave. But he knew from the instant it passed through him.

* * *

On the fifth day, at 02:33 hours, Ethan contemplated lighting his fourth cigarette. The filtered air inside the high tech womb of a building had turned septic with frustration. Ten minutes before, he thought he heard the soft echo of somebody crying over the snicker of keyboards and crackle of keyed radios and it sounded too much like Rachel on the other side of the bathroom door.

At midnight, the Bad Actors—they still had no better handle—shut down the regional power plant, as declared via text message, which, for the first time, omitted a resumption deadline. The plant remained offline for an excruciating forty-three minutes and thirty-seven seconds, while debates raged over what kind of ransom note they'd receive—piles of money or release of prisoners or withdrawal of troops or whatever. No such demand arrived.

Ethan's press release blamed the outage on a fictional substation fire and cascading computer-triggered shut downs—not his best work. A few bloggers speculated about possible connections between recent incidents, but nobody added things up correctly. The situation had become too absurd even for the conspiracy freaks.

A couple strolled down the sidewalk slicked by rain, the rail-thin man clutching a bottle in a paper bag, supporting a woman in a beret and quilted purple nylon coat like a walking upright sleeping bag, the two giddy and unstable as young lovers, each step a near miss at tipping over. A disturbance of shadows indicated a deal in process under the steel bridge where little crack vials crunched underfoot in the mornings. The air smelled of ozone, stoplights reflecting off puddles like broken glass. For a moment, Ethan felt submerged in a giant fishbowl, awaiting a shake. He thought about how anything suspended in water describes an ovoid in response to a shock wave, returning to approximately the same place it started. Unless something impeded the transmission of force.

"You gonna light that?" Laramie said, materializing behind his

shoulder.

"Haven't decided," Ethan said, striving to project calm.

"Mind if I bum another?"

"Be my guest." Ethan handed him the pack and watched him light up, Teflon coated and bullet proof. "Laramie" had no personal stake in this city, as far as Ethan knew. But then neither did he, though he'd lived here for half a decade. He'd taken this job because it involved disaster management, the nearest ocean over a thousand miles away. He could walk away at a moment's notice.

Two men rounded the corner of the building, rolling swaggers indicating they'd forgotten this was a cop shop. One wore a watch cap and puffy coat, the other a jean jacket and blue bandana with a fringe of greasy hair and an overgrown goatee.

"Hey man," Bandana Man pointed a crooked finger to the pack in Laramie's hand. "You wanna give me one of those?"

"You wanna fuck off?" Laramie asked with a slouching grin.

Bandana Man drew himself up to full height, his pockets big enough to contain a knife, or a gun. And if they did, all the cops inside wouldn't do them any good. The air seemed to offer resistance, as if strained through a regulator. Ethan had the urge to bolt down the street.

Bandana Man inspected Laramie's slumped frame and grinned, thoroughly unintimidated. And then something—perhaps a shadow swimming in the depths of the blank glass—caused his predatory leer to fade. "Jeez, dude," he said. "I'm just asking. You don't have to be rude."

"I don't have to be anything," Laramie said.

"Let's get the fuck out of here, man." The guy in the watch cap plucked Bandana Man's sleeve. "These dudes are probably cops."

"You didn't have to be so goddamned rude," Bandana Man said over his shoulder as they hustled away. "It's uncalled for."

"I wouldn't have minded if you'd given him a smoke," Ethan said after the pair cleared the end of the building.

"You're running low and we just received another candygram."

Laramie handed back the pack. "They're shutting down air traffic control."

"Christ," Ethan said. "Can they do that?"

Laramie deployed his universal shrug. "How can they do any of this shit?"

"What's the plan?" Ethan said, the gravitational tug of panic testing its grip.

"Ride it out." A bemused smile arrived on Laramie's face, as if he'd hooked Ethan up to a galvanic response meter, watching the needle. "Same as always."

Ethan allowed the moment to pass. "I'm supposed to fly to LA over the holidays," he lied. "Maybe I should drive."

"Maybe you should." Laramie laughed and tapped the ash off his cigarette, which broke apart as it fell toward the cement.

The threat ended as suddenly as it began, the predictive text messages ceasing without a moral, explanation or parting comment, like an experiment concluded without the scientists sharing their results or showing their faces. Flights resumed, traffic lights functioned and power remained steady. River levels remained constant. Technically, the Incident lasted another day as Ethan scanned news outlets and blogs to see if anyone connected the dots. Nobody did.

The NSA pulled out first. The doors to the conference room remained shut.

Ethan barely puffed to make the cigarette last, knowing Laramie and his crew might have already departed. The morning light already felt a little warm. After this he would quit once and for all. Back away from the edge.

Laramie exited through the door—the only time Ethan had observed him doing so. When offered the pack, the older man raised his palm. "They'll give me a ton of shit as it is. You should

quit too.”

“Why’s that?” Ethan thought of Rachel, who’d taken a flight back to the States about a week after the tsunami. They’d never really talked, not that they’d had much chance as Ethan threw himself into the recovery in large part to avoid facing her. They’d discussed marriage just a month before, how many kids they’d wanted, that shit. He had no illusions about who had abandoned whom.

“Weakness in any form is frowned upon,” Laramie gestured to the blank glass walls, “if you want to work for us.”

Ethan recalled the instant of the wave, the instinct to panic, bolt for the surface, risking an embolism or whatever. But he’d hesitated and the energy swung him up and around like a hand rocking a cradle, the wave only dangerous as it rose up out of the sea like some quick monster, impeded by the edge of the continent. If he’d been in the guest house with Rachel it might have hit him full force. Scrambled his DNA. Wrecked him.

He’d finished the dive, pretending not to have recognized the obvious. Remained at sea, disconnected, and somehow been OK, then and ever since.

“I just quit anyway.” He shrugged, drew a last puff and dropped the cigarette down the neck of the skinny plastic ashtray. He wadded the pack into the hole, but it did not stop the thread of smoke from within. He had the odd sensation of return to a beginning, waiting to be lifted.

ROBERT P. KAYE’s stories have appeared in *Monkeybicycle*, *Per Contra*, *Staccato Fiction*, *Green Mountains Review*, *decomp*, *Cicada*, *Danse Macabre*, *Snake Nation Review*, *Pindeldyboz* and elsewhere, with nominations for Pushcart, Best of the Web and Story South prizes. His novel *Taking Candy from the Devil*, about failure, coffee, Bigfoot and trebuchets, is published online. Links to these appear at www.RobertPKaye.com together with a blog about the collision of technology and literature.

Body

Aimee DeLong

Andre's question smacks of shocking reasonableness. Why *do* I come here? As I stare down at his feet I feel like a fool. Andre's feet make me feel foolish. The contrast between who Andre is as an idea and who he is as a reality.

"It's important to remember to let yourself be touched once in awhile," he says as he massages my shoulders.

Every muscle in my body is terse and awkward as Andre's invisible layer of mystique seems to collapse like a fallen shroud around him. Coming to Andre's studio is a pilgrimage to a post-industrial Mecca. The genius of ubiquitous archetypal images invading the failed attempts to overthrow itself. Incestuous and interchangeable advancement cycling. The aesthetic revolving the mechanical.

He lives in Red Hook off Smith and 9th, where the F train emerges above ground. It's an hour to his place. Once off the train I have to walk under an overpass that hangs like an eye of exhaust ivy over a mundane underworld of fast food and gas stations. On the other side stands a funnel of old warehouses all along three long desperate blocks that stretch toward the water like rain gutters of polluted sweltering tar. The last one on the right is Andre's studio, where I am now sitting between his legs on his napping cot as he speaks to me of touching and being touched. And, in this moment, I still don't know if he means literally or figuratively. My idea of Andre suggests that it's figurative, but my feminine instinct says otherwise.

His hands cascade down my shoulders, cinching my arms with repetitive groping. I look around his studio, feeling like a young girl being inappropriately touched by a cult leader. His hand-

sculptures hang decapitated from their wrists like omens of base humanity which dangle from ceiling beams. Andre loves hands. He has likely constructed thousands of hand sculptures. Some of them he keeps in glass boxes like pieces of jewelry in a case at Tiffany's Macabre. Some float in the air, lingering like impotent stuntmen from wires in a Broadway play with faulty mechanics. In this moment it's as if Andre's hands were channeling all the hands in the studio. Hands everywhere, running down my back, fingers rooting through the fabric of my sweater as if they were searching for skin.

"I don't know why I come here," I admit, finally answering his question.

"How long does it take you to get here? It's a long way, right?"

"Well," I continue as he pushes my head forward, rubbing my bare neck, "It takes over an hour on the train, and then it's about a ten minute walk."

"You seem unhappy every time I see you."

"What do you mean?"

"Often you tell me about William, and how you don't know if you should be with him."

"I like talking to you. And, I like being in your studio and around your work."

"I think you're looking for something when you come here."

"Maybe I am." I turn my head for a second as Andre's hands grip my shoulders. I can't read his blue placid eyes. Although, I feel his own sadness which seems to fill the room like bones in a tomb. I've been coming here for two years, ever since he wanted to hire me as a nude model. We became good friends right away. As a result the idea of modeling for him dissipated, yet I kept visiting him. Andre never once showed any signs of obvious attraction. He never hit on me or tried to kiss me. Many times we sat in prolonged silence, watching the light quality change from it's clear, crystal-lake omnipresence into its twilight schizophrenia, settling restless among the framed masterpieces and installations. He often asked

me questions about my situation. I mostly talked to him about his work. I see Andre as a holy man of visual art. He works and creates. This is seemingly all he does. If someone had told me that Andre never ate, and in fact didn't need food to survive, I would have believed it.

The moment he took his shoes off in a gesture of casualness I felt like an altar boy watching a priest disrobe. It was as if Gandhi put on combat boots. It was a perversion. I sit in shock, between his legs as he squeezes the sides of my lower back, staring blankly at his feet. They're horrendous. Andre looks like a more handsome version of Pablo Picasso, but his feet look as if they belong to a character in one of Picasso's warbled asymmetric figure paintings. Hammer toes. Peeling skin. Pallid and gray. Disjointed.

My eyes search the studio, reminding my pupils and irises of all the gorgeous, mournful wisdom in Andre's work. The paintings and the sculptures and the hands, diaphanous yet hearty just like Andre's hands, all of them coming to life through him against my body. Then I look back at his feet, sticking out around my knees while I sit stiff with my own feet firm on the floor.

"I have to go now," I tell him, standing with an abrupt and incendiary jolt. I walk quickly toward the door, attempting to stuff my arms into my jacket as he follows. I struggle with the sleeves near the entrance, facing Andre's authentic medical school grade skeleton, which always hangs lifeless and absurd and menacing near the door on its stand. Andre's skeleton is the first noticeable object upon entering his studio. He told me he acquired it while studying biology in grad school, before he realized that he would rather sculpt and paint.

"Allison, we did nothing...there was nothing wrong here. I just wanted to be close to you." I still have no idea what the hell he is talking about.

"I know," I say, watching the last slice of his face disappear, as I shut the door behind me. The warehouses shiver in their cold

bricks as I try to push Andre's feet from my mind. I never speak to him again.

AIMEE DELONG is a writer of fiction, living in San Francisco. Her work has appeared in such places as *3AM Magazine*, *Brown Bunny Magazine*, and *Everyday Genius*. More can be found at www.aimeedelong.com.

No Suits Allowed

Lauren Gorski

GRACE:

There is a hole in my brain that is very small and you could barely see it unless you had a very special magnifying glass with x-ray vision, which Ronald has and I find to be very lucky as he is the only nine-year-old doctor I trust. I had a slip in the middle of the green where we play games (like tag and candy monster) and Ronald was there to make sure that my head had not come loose. During his careful inspection, he pulled out his special x-ray vision magnifying glass and gasped as he noted that within the wrinkled worm of my brain there was a hole. A small hole, he assured me, but a hole nonetheless. I asked him where, and he said to the left, and then I asked what it meant, and he said it probably meant something big because the brain is the most important part of your body.

I told Ms. Fitz there was a hole in my brain, and that was probably why I wasn't very good at math or fractions.

"Gracie, sit in your seat and stop chewing gum," she said, as she licked her fingers and pulled at her bangs. My mother thinks she's too young to teach second grade. "And stop talking to Ronald." She didn't understand that I was Ronald's patient and not his girlfriend.

"But, Ms. Fitz, what if it gets bigger? I might not even fit anymore."

"You need to show me your sentences," she said and I didn't really understand, so I opened my mouth very wide to let her see them. She pushed a little on my forehead, and I wondered if she could feel the hole too. "The worksheet, Grace."

Ronald made me swear I wouldn't tell anyone else, because they would want to see it and he had only one pair of special x-ray vision magnifying glasses and they had cost a lot of money. Ms. Fitz was okay because a hole in the brain was very important for a teacher to know about, like allergies. I asked him if I could tell my mother, because she gets so frustrated with almost everything (like baby powder on the piano and pet mice) and I think if she knew about my problem she would not get so frustrated. Ronald said she probably knew anyway.

I wonder if this hole has always been there or if a piece of my brain fell out along the way, like when I ice-skated last December or that time I tried to walk my cat. Maybe it had slipped out my nose during a sneeze, or snuck away out of my mouth while I was sleeping. I tried to retrace my footsteps like when I lost my favorite pencil with the strawberries on it (I found that on the bathroom sink), but it is very difficult to retrace nine years of your life unless you had someone following you with a video camera. I found my baby books in the closet, but there was no evidence of anything strange except that it took me awhile to learn how to talk. But now I talk everyday, so it's okay if you're a little late talking sometimes because you might end up talking a lot later and people will say that it was like you had always been talking.

When I was five, I got lost in a giant department store where they sell clothes and water glasses at the same time. I could have lost a piece of my brain then, because I don't remember a lot of what happened except that I scared a woman in the dressing room and my mother was crying when they found me. When I was eight, my father left, and he took a lot of stuff like the desk and the blender and maybe he also took a little piece of my brain to remember me because he knew he wouldn't see me a lot. To be honest, though, I think it makes much more sense that I never had that piece of my brain. I think it has always been a hole.

* * *

FROM MRS. BURNHAM:

The doorbell rings, as I fuss with a wrinkled blouse, in our bedroom. It's missing a button, but I haven't done laundry all month. The dryer has been broken, so I only wash when there's good weather. I'm such a mess with this dark grey wrinkled blouse and my hair hanging on me like wet straw, dark and slightly snarled. Thinking about my tattered parts, the red lines below my belly and the sagged weight of my arms, reminds me too often that I don't look my age. Whoever is coming over shouldn't expect any Marilyn Monroe.

The doorbell rings again, and again. She knows it can't be, but just the same she hopes that it might be Jack. I mean, *I know* it can't be.

I'm hopping through the house, from the bedroom to the hallway and to the front door. The floor is freezing against my bare toes, and I worry that the house smells too much like burnt oatmeal. Gracelynn asked for oatmeal this morning and I didn't have the heart to say that I didn't quite know how to make it. She ate it, even though it was burnt, and I think that is how I know I love my daughter. She wrapped her small fingers around the spoon, and shoveled big bites into her crooked mouth. A piece of her sandy hair fell into the Elmo bowl, and even then she made a point to eat a little off the strands as if she could not bear to waste a morsel.

Someone is knocking and knocking. It makes the insides of my fingers sweat because I never usually have such urgent company. I open the door and there's Dorothy. Oh, god, Dorothy the perfect parent, who is already telling her child that he is going to be a doctor. She probably doesn't have a real job, but I don't know that. I only assume, because a real job would tell you that no one gets to be a doctor these days.

"Hello, Mrs. Burnham. I'm sorry to bother, how are you doing?" she says, and she's very prim with her curled red hair pulled tight

against her scalp. She is even wearing a matching skirt and blazer in a fiery blue that maddens her self-defined image as a classical homemaker. There's a dark nose hair hanging that distracts me.

"Fine, I'm fine. And, you?" I say, wiping my palm under my own nose. Her eyebrows bother me because they are so thin and they remind me of two little worms dying in the sun.

"Actually, I'm sorry to bother, but I'm a little concerned about Grace." Dorothy peaks her head around the doorframe, as if to ask – can I come in? I have to say yes and suddenly I'm very self-conscious about the missing button and its matching open hole.

She sits on the ratty loveseat in the living room. Cat hair from the couch catches onto her power suit, giving an orange hue to the blue fabric. I hate this woman now, looking around at my home like a parrot. It's nothing much, Miss Parrot, it's just a three bedroom with a kitchen and a living room and two bathrooms situated on a highway bypass that makes rent cheap and family picnics stressful.

"What did you want to tell me?" I stand across from her, clinging to my chest and pieces of my blouse. This is my day off, but she probably won't understand.

"About Grace, yes. I love this rug, by the way. It looks hand tufted or something similar," she says, flicking her wrist. "My husband owns a discount furniture outlet, there are some great pieces that would really compli-"

"I'm expected somewhere later, so I don't really have any time to chit-chat," I say.

"Right, I understand. But, about Grace, yes... is she a little off? Jesus, I hope I'm not sounding blunt," she says and she touches her mouth, embarrassed.

"What do you mean?"

"Well... I know kids will be kids, but Grace is... I caught her trying to eat Ronald's goldfish. She had her hand in the bowl and she was making sounds like a cat-"

"Oscar Wilde."

“Excuse me?”

“Oscar Wilde, he’s our cat. She likes to pretend sometimes that she’s a cat, that’s not very strange. I mean, I’m sure she didn’t eat your goldfish.”

“She didn’t, but she tried to. I just don’t know any nine-year-old that would try to eat someone’s pet, even if it was just a goldfish.”

“I don’t see any cause for alarm,” I say, and I fake a smile.

“I just was wanting to know, because, you know, her and Ronald get along so well and I worry.” She crosses her hands in her lap, because I just don’t get it.

“Gracelynn is fine, she’s normal. She’s not very good at math, but lots of kids aren’t.” Now I am even more exposed beyond my blouse. If Jack were here he would be smirking behind his fist and think, I told you so. The new Jack, that is. The new Jack with his fancy office job and polished hands who left us here to rot.

“Right, okay. I’m sorry to bring it up. She just says some off things too, and I know it isn’t any of my business. But I thought, from one mother to another, you might appreciate my saying something.” Dorothy stands up and she is so much taller than me again. The air is stiff against my skin and my strangled hair.

“I’m a good mother,” I say, though I don’t know why I should defend myself. Dorothy is an awful mother, who tells her kid to be a doctor, and pretends that only my kid says strange things. She should know, I am a good mother.

GRACE:

My mother tells me I should never get married, because she says it’s painful and it hurts and once you are married, the boy you love stops loving you, which is why all the good romance movies end with a wedding and not with the day after. I try not to worry about it too much because I’m not going to be married for at least nine more years and most people don’t get married until they’re

older. I don't tell my mother, but I really want to be married because I like how the word "missus" sounds.

My mother thinks I don't understand her sometimes when she talks about marriage and weddings, but I do. I asked her if I could just marry myself so I could still wear the pretty dress and get presents when it wasn't even my birthday or Christmas. She told me that I couldn't because that wasn't proper and she sounded offended, like I was my father and we were talking about work.

I've tried to talk to Ronald about the future and stuff, but I think doctors are all one-sighted about everything because he can only see that one single future. We were sitting under our tree on the green, the last tree in a line of twenty.

"Do you think you'll ever get married?" I asked, picking clumps of grass out of the ground and rolling it into meatballs.

"Maybe when I'm old, but not right now," he said.

"Duh," I said and I smacked his arm. "I mean, really though."

"I don't know, you?" He poked the ground with a short stick and it was turning into splinters and dirt at the end but he kept poking.

"I think I should, but I think it might be awful too," I said.

"Yeah?"

"Let's say I'm the wife now, okay? That makes you the husband."

"Okay." He threw the stick off to the side. "What now?"

"Drink some of this," I said and I handed him one of my grassy meatball clumps, "and I'll pretend I can't see you."

FROM MRS. BURNHAM:

I talk to the old Jack constantly throughout the day. As I'm changing the sheets of room six, in my dull grey uniform and disgusting shoes, we discuss things.

Are you watching me? I say. I fold the tangy orange bottom sheet into quarters.

You fold exquisitely, he says.

Oh, yes? I tuck my hair behind my ear and try not to seem desperate.

Yes, I always love watching you straighten up.

I've been a maid here for too long.

You should quit then.

I can't. It pays for things. I still need food, and clothes, and then there's Gracelynn, I say. I take out the trash bag in the bathroom and my face flinches to the smell of piss.

How is she? he asks.

She's all right, she's the same. She likes school.

How strange.

I remember when you were working at that factory, what was it... Toyota? It sure helped us a lot. I throw the red and white striped towels on the floor into my cart.

I miss it; I wish we were all back together.

What do you think you're doing now? I ask. I'm rinsing out the coffee mugs in the bathroom sink.

Probably sitting alone, thinking of you.

And Gracie?

Just you, I'm sure of it.

I'm sure of it, too.

I don't like to tell him that the new Jack is much different than the old Jack. I haven't seen the new Jack since he left. I remember that last day he was clean shaven and was wearing a plain business suit. It offended me. When you leave someone, there should be dishevelment. No suits allowed.

GRACE:

It was a late Saturday afternoon and I was in the backyard looking for my orange tabby, Oscar Wilde. My mother said she hadn't seen him, as her arms pumped against the batter, but he

could be in the backyard. I checked the trees and the bushes and my mother's flower garden (though not very hard because of the thorns) but I couldn't find him. In the front yard I had worse luck, but not because I couldn't find him, because I did find him in the middle of the street and he had been run over. Our house is near the highway bypass, which makes it cheap, but people speed and sometimes there are large trucks and I think Oscar got hit by someone speeding or in a truck. His insides and entrails were hanging out of his tummy and the blood was leaking out.

I tried to save him, I really did. I just wanted to save him. I thought about Ronald, and how much I wished there could be a good doctor around for this. I tried to push his insides back in, and to hold his skin back together and to make him whole again. I picked him up, and his fur was scratchy with dried blood but his eyes were open so I didn't really understand if he was alive or not. Usually when things die on television, they close their eyes. I held him close to me and rocked him a little, but I couldn't feel his heart beat so I tried squeezing the rhythm into him. Pump, pump, pump. He was warm still, so he must not have been very dead at that time because dead things are cold, but he still didn't have any heart beat no matter how hard I squeezed. Pump, pump, pump. It was useless; I just got his blood all over me.

FROM MRS. BURNHAM:

I am pump, pump, pumping against the cake batter. The heat from outside crawls through the window and puts more effort into the bowl. I always make a cake on the first day of summer, and I won't stop it now. Not for new Jack, or Dorothy, or anybody. Gracelynn will be out of school for two and a half months soon, and I want her to remember that her mother is gracious before vacation starts.

Today it is a chocolate cake, and secretly it is for the old Jack who would sit as still as a picture if he were to smell chocolate cake.

He would tease me, and say it was his Kryptonite and I believed him.

Gracelynn is looking for Oscar, and a moment ago she practically turned the house inside out looking for him. How many times do you have to explain to a nine-year-old that cats don't play behind mirrors? It should be a simple enough idea. Now I hear Dorothy in the back of my head with her curly nose hairs, reminding me that I don't have a normal daughter.

I pour the batter into a funnel cake pan. The dark gooey chocolate looks anything but delectable at this point. It smells more like plastic than chocolate, very off brand. Gracie won't notice, she's a good girl. She may say strange things from time to time and in front of other people, but she probably got that from Jack, and how could I be blamed?

The pan goes into the oven, and besides the awful mess (a powdered bowl of old flour, three different mixing spoons, and excess batter around the counter), everything seems to be going all right. There is normalcy in these actions; this is what I always do.

I should find Grace; I should help her find Oscar.

GRACE:

I dropped Oscar back onto the road and his head rattled oddly when it landed, like a baby's toy. I half expected Oscar to jump up and scratch me like he did sometimes when I dropped him too hard. But he just lay there, with the sun glaring down on his skin and bones. I knew I was supposed to cry, but I couldn't because the red and the orange swirled together were very mesmerizing. The blood stained on my blue dress also seemed beautiful and with my white shoes, it was like I was a picture of the American flag.

A long, slender piece of flesh was splayed below Oscar, it must have fallen out when I picked him up. It reminded me of a soft noodle and I remembered Ronald had taught me about intestines

and this is probably where Oscar kept all the mice he caught. It was lighter than I expected, especially since Oscar had been such a heavy cat. I wrapped the intestine around my neck, much like a boa, and I imagined myself as a glamorous girl at a ball. The air felt oily with Oscar's insides floating on my shoulders, and I enjoyed the strong scent of metals and it reminded me of the times I used to go with my father to the car factory. I began to dance in the street and for a moment it was like Oscar and I were playing again and he was there and he had never died. I swung the bloody boa around my body and twirled to the sounds of birds and airplanes.

The sun was beginning to cool under us, as the afternoon began to set for evening. I wondered if my mother would let me keep Oscar like this. I heard a scream from the kitchen window, that overlooked the front yard, and next I heard the screen door slam and my mother's heels hit the pavement. I looked up at her, confused by her reaction, and then started searching to see if there was a truck coming which was why she usually yelled at me from the kitchen.

There wasn't, so she must be yelling because she misses Oscar but I told her it was okay because Oscar was just missing his heartbeat but he could still be fun. She told me to drop it, and she used bad language because she was angry. She had a little bit of brown batter on her fingertips, and as she cried, it got all over her face. If only I hadn't gotten so much blood on my blue dress, maybe she wouldn't have been so mad, because I know blood is hard to clean.

FROM MRS. BURNHAM:

The hot pavement is burning through my socks, but I can barely feel a thing even in all this heat. There is a madman inside my daughter, and he is standing at the edge of the road wearing sinister streaks of red and black. Gracelynn's thin, sandy hair is strung in knots around her face and I can barely hold two thoughts

together. I'm folding my flour stained fingers into my cheeks, and there are words pouring out of me but I'm not sure what the right thing to say is.

"Oh my, can you stop! Oh, shit! Stop it! Put it down, now!" I try to control myself, but it just won't happen like it's supposed to. And she smiles at me, smiling as if everything was all right, and it was okay to be a monster. The smell alone was enough to make vomit crawl up my throat. A horn from the distance blares, and blares again.

I can imagine Dorothy behind me, pitying me, because what else is there for a mother in this situation? Jack is standing across the street, and I know the new Jack would be egging her on. *Go on, Gracie. Drive your mother mad.* The blaring horn sways closer to us. The madman is swinging pieces of Oscar around the edges of the road. The old Jack is watching me, and he knows what to do.

We can change it back.

You should have been there, you should have seen her, and then you would understand what it was like for me to see her.

GRACE:

She was so loud and angry, and the blood was so red that it was like I saw her anger in everything around me as I heard it. The noises merged together, to make a nauseous sound of shouting and blaring. My head started to pound and I felt the hole in my brain, I mean I REALLY FELT IT. It was like a loud vacuum sucking the outside through my ears and gobbling the earth up into my stomach. There was a piece that was missing and I needed it now and my mother needed it now but neither of us had it and while she was yelling I started yelling too, saying "There's a hole! The hole!"

I know my mother loves me, I know it was hard for her to be alone after my father left because it was hard for me to be alone and

I think my mother is the same as me but a lot worse sometimes. I never thought she would push me so hard into the ground, never ever ever but then again maybe those thoughts come from a part of the brain we don't all have. I fell onto the dark red stained pavement on Oscar's tail and I started screaming and screaming until nothing mattered at all only the sounds of the truck swallowing me whole.

LAUREN GORSKI is a recent graduate of UC Irvine with a bachelor's degree in English with Emphasis in Creative Writing. In 2011, her script "Roulette" won the award for best screenplay during UCI's 19th Annual Screenwriting Festival. She grew up in the Bay Area of California, and has little to no plans on returning. She currently teaches classes on public speaking and leadership to young people in Orange County. She loves horses, tacos, and most films starring Christian Bale.

What's Yours Is Yours

Gregory J. Wolos

The pregnant woman with the pixie haircut seated across from me on the Red Line was giving me the eye while I scanned my notes in the margins of Thomas Cahill's book, *The Gifts of the Jews*. I'd be delivering a lecture in half an hour. I taught Jewish Studies classes at three different colleges, though I'd earned my degrees in English Literature. The Dean of Humanities at my first job interview told me the Elizabethan Drama maternity leave post had been filled, and my first thought was to apologize for the Bell's palsy leer twisting the left side of my face. Before I could tell him I'd been promised the paralysis would soon fade, he asked if I had a background in Jewish Studies—they had an unexpected opening there.

"I'm a lapsed Episcopalian—" I said, which wasn't exactly true—it was my parents who had lapsed, before I was born; I'd been raised in a religious vacuum. "—but I'm well read." The dean was satisfied. Jewish Studies my specialty, I became an aficionado of Cahill, a Catholic, and his book about the legacy of God's chosen.

The young woman held her Buddha belly against the subway's jostle. Her dark eyes, as large as Spielberg alien's, caught mine as I peeked above the book I'd gotten used to hiding my face behind: it had been years since the doctor said my features had returned to normal, but I didn't believe him. I was sure something was off. Uncharacteristically, I played eye tag with the expectant woman for a string of heartbeats, until her cheeks dimpled and she blushed.

The train jolted to a stop, and she pushed herself to her feet. "That's a silly-book," she chirped like a cartoon cricket, then handed me a business card, pink on one side, blue on the other. Maybe for a plastic surgeon, I fretted.

“Call me,” she said before waddling through the sliding doors onto the platform. The pink and blue sides were the same: “Janie Johnson, Surrogate Child Bearer—professional, experienced. Specializing in implants—*What’s Yours is Yours*. References provided on request.” She’d circled her phone number.

I called that night. “Why me?” I asked.

“You have a wise face,” she said. “Almost kind. There’s something else about it I can’t put my finger on . . .” The ghost of my palsy, I thought.

“What’s silly about my book?”

“It’s a God-book, which makes it as much about endings as beginnings. My business is only in beginnings. For me, it’s always spring.”

“How many times have you done—what you do?”

“This is my second time. First was on the West Coast. Listen, do you want to go to a movie or something? I’d say coffee, but I’m off caffeine. I have a whole list of things I’m ‘off’ and I’m ‘on.’ The clients are very particular, and it’s their money. Decaf is okay, I guess, or a fruit juice— we can’t really talk at a movie. But I’m antsy. Tomorrow labor’s going to be induced. The clients like to control whatever they can.”

Starbucks it was, on Commonwealth Avenue across from the university dorms, though I still didn’t like to eat or drink in front of people: what if I leaked down my chin without knowing it? I was grading papers when she toddled in, wearing a suit jacket patched at the elbows over a pink dress with yellow daisies that strained against her belly. I waved her over, and she deposited herself across from me like a sack of grain. She glanced about as if she were counting customers.

“I really shouldn’t be doing this. I’m not supposed to—I could forfeit *everything*—” She tried to lean forward, and as I bent to her over the table, she gasped, then whispered in her cricket voice, “Can you believe I get horny? But I’m under contract. ‘No physical

intimacy.” She threw another look at the entrance. Whether she was after sympathy or a flirtation, I’d already succumbed to both.

“I don’t want to get you in trouble,” I said. “Economically.”

She sat back. Her hands sculpted her stomach as if her torso was made of sand. “There are gray areas.” Then she froze. She winced, welts of rouge suddenly obvious on her pale cheeks. She snatched a breath, but couldn’t blink away her pain or frustration.

“Believe it or not, I’ve got to go to the hospital,” she said. “If you could just help me get a cab—but that’s all. No noble gestures. You’re just nobody, if anybody asks.” She bit her lip and pretended to look at a wristwatch. “Induced-shminduced—it’s like a damned sitcom!”

I helped her into a cab and returned to my apartment, where I failed to distract myself with students’ answers to the day’s free-write: “Why religion?” Two students had submitted blank papers, and I slashed a minus next to their names instead of the automatic check I gave everyone else. When my face was disfigured, I worried I would accidentally see one of the sketches I was sure students were doodling during class. These blank papers were worse—as if the culprits were winking at my insecurity, daring me to imagine my own self-portrait.

I waited nearly two months before calling the number on Janie’s card, reasoning that she would need private time for recovery, but by then it was no longer in service. My life moved along—the year ended, summer flew by, and in the fall I was still an adjunct at three schools, though I’d picked up a fourth course. From time to time—when I saw a pregnant woman or a mother carrying a baby or pushing one in a stroller, I thought of Janie, and wondered if she’d taken whatever sum she’d earned for her surrogacy and found greener pastures.

Then, one evening, late, in the middle of Letterman's top ten, my phone buzzed.

"Hey, stranger—" A child-voice—something melted in my chest. "—it's Janie Johnson. You're a hard one to find."

"You never had my number."

"Right. I called a lot of colleges. They don't like to give out information. The first two wouldn't release a thing. I told the secretary at the third I was your wife—that I was pregnant, and that it made me forgetful, and that I couldn't remember your phone number. She gave it to me. You'll probably get congratulations and questions. I hope I didn't make things hard for you."

"Are you?" It didn't matter about my number. Adjuncts live in their own sunless universe. I knew my students and nobody else. Administrative details were handled through email.

"Am I—?"

"Pregnant?"

"Back in business," she said. "Coffee? It's not on the 'off' list, this time. Sex still is, though. But—"

"And your last— situation?" I asked, to fill the awkward pause.

"Resolved," she said. "Everything was fine. I'd rather not talk about it."

She beat me to Starbucks. I thought I spied her through the window as I approached, but it was another young woman with short hair and big eyes who caught me staring and scowled. I found Janie toward the back—she'd grown out her pixie hair to shoulder length. She wore the same elbow-patched jacket and a skirt cinched around her slim waist. An over-sized mug of coffee steamed in front of her. I signaled her and she smiled and sat up straight. I ordered my coffee at the counter, then stood by our table.

"I tried you, but your service was disconnected," I said.

"I was away. Halifax. Visiting friends." She looked tired—but I'd never seen her thin.

“It’s nice—”

“—To see me with a waist? It’s only the first trimester—it’s supposed to be bad luck to tell anybody yet, but—” she shrugged, “—it’s not mine, right? I’ve got a guarantee clause. Fifty percent for a miscarriage in the first or second trimester, full price for a third semester stillborn—on account of my effort.” She tossed her hair. “God’s a tough one. He doesn’t give up. Things keep ending—” She paused and took a swallow of her latte, and I watched the muscles work in her throat and the flutter of her lashes.

I stepped away to pick up my coffee, which came in a paper cup instead of the mug I’d asked for. It burned my fingers, even through the cardboard sleeve. “So, Halifax,” I said as I sat. “Never been. Nova Scotia.”

“Yes, mm-hmm.” Her eyes shone, and when mine met them, they dipped to something next to her mug. Lying on a black silk handkerchief was a tiny figure. It looked to be an infant Christ from a nativity scene. It was swaddled up to the neck in white and had a pink face and brown hair. If there were facial features, they were too small to see.

“Jesus?”

“Once.” Janie was grinning. “‘Eye-no,’ now.”

“You know *what* now?”

“No—his *name* is *Eino*. He’s the unknown *Titanic* baby. He stands for all the babies that were lost when the ship went down. He’s buried in Halifax, under a monument. Eino Viljami Panula. They knew the unknown baby was one of three, and they did a DNA test, and the lost baby turned out to be Eino. His family came from Finland all the way to Halifax after almost a hundred years to pay their respects. I was there. And I want you to hear something.” From her jacket pocket Janie pulled a phone, which played a scratchy melody. “Shh—” She put a finger to her lips. “It’s called ‘*Songe D’Autumne*.’ This is an old gramophone recording.” She stifled something that might have been a giggle or a sob. Her head

bobbed. "One-two-three, one-two-three, one-two three . . . It's a waltz, listen."

I nodded along, but squinted an inquiry.

"It's what the orchestra played while the *Titanic* sank. I thought it meant 'Song of Autumn,' but it doesn't. 'Songe' means 'dream.' 'Dream of Autumn.'" She poked the ceramic baby with her little finger. "It would have been the last thing he heard."

I let my head sway with the waltz rhythm, but when I cleared my throat, Janie's eyes flashed. Had I made a face? In an instant she'd pocketed the phone and whisked the baby, wrapped in the black handkerchief, from the table.

"So—" she began, as if I'd just arrived. Her gaze roamed the Starbucks. Halloween decorations—pumpkins, witches, ghosts—were taped on the walls. "Tell me about some of the costumes you've worn, you know, for Halloween parties. Okay," she said without pause, "I'll start. I wear the same costume every year. I have a dress—a gown—and a while ago I covered it with shellac. Then I drape some plastic wrap over my arms and legs and smear clear gel on it. I over-condition my hair, so it hangs straight down." She fingered a curl. "It works great when it's longer. Can you guess what I am?"

"Wet?"

"A drowning victim! I'm that folklore prom date, you know, the one that begs for a ride home at midnight in a rainstorm, and it turns out the girl died years before. Drowned. And what are you?"

I'd never been much for costume parties even before my palsy issue, and after . . . October's a bad month for the disfigured. The closer Halloween gets, people stop looking away—they study your face, admire it, and smile with a nod, as if to say, "Good job!" I lied to Janie. "Once, in college, I wore a suit. I made a ring out of foil and kept it in my pocket. When I was asked who I was, I said, 'a best man.' Where's the groom? 'I'm holding this for him.' And I showed the ring."

"Why weren't *you* the groom?"

I shrugged. "A groom would have empty pockets. It wouldn't be a costume. I would just be wearing a suit." Then I remembered something: "That song—the *Titanic* one—I thought the orchestra played a hymn when the ship went down. Not a waltz. A hymn—that would have been appropriate, right?"

Janie's brow clouded. Her chair screeched back, and she hugged herself. "Survivors gave different accounts," she hissed. Her voice was so low I had to watch her lips. "You have to make a choice sometimes. You can't always have it every way. You have to pick something and believe it. I have to go." Without another word, she was out the door. The only evidence she'd shared my table was a half-empty mug.

Seven months later, on my first free day after a school year busy enough to crowd out all thoughts of Janie, she called. She was crying—her slight, quivering voice chilled me. It was about the *Titanic* baby. There had been more sophisticated DNA testing. Eino Viljami Panula was no longer the unknown child.

"They say now it's Sidney, the English baby. He was on his way to Niagara Falls with his whole family, who all drowned. But I don't believe it. Niagara Falls? That doesn't sound true. That's for honeymoons!" She choked, and I searched for words of comfort, but found none. More sobs. "Eino's *family* came. I saw them. We honored his memory together. We stood in the rain. You wait and wait to reunite with your family, and then, it can't just be gone, can it? Science can't do that. What happened to *faith*?"

Of course I offered to drive her to Halifax. What else did I have to do? It didn't matter that the trip would take at least fourteen hours and that Janie was only a week from her next induced delivery.

"If we don't show Eino the respect he deserves, who will?" she asked.

She met me in front of our Starbucks, wearing sweatpants and an orange hoody that made her look like a pumpkin. As I pulled up, she wrapped her arms around her belly and loaded herself beside me.

“Once a thing is found, and you come to love it, it can’t be lost again, right?” It sounded like a Disney cartoon moral, but I agreed. She pulled her little Eino out of her hoody’s pocket and let it lie on her palm, as if she were showing the infant where he was. Then she tucked the figurine back, tenderly—it might have been a newborn marsupial burrowing for the nipple hidden deep in her pouch. Janie’s hair now swept past her shoulders in waves that collected in her hood. Grief and a full-term pregnancy had reddened her eyes and face.

While I drove us out of Boston, she produced an iPod, and nodded toward my car stereo: “*Songe D’Autumne*,” of course. Soon, my pulse beat along with the waltz, and we didn’t bother to speak. Our private sorrows flooded together and time seemed suspended. We drove and drove. The sun arced above the windshield visor, only to sink to my rearview mirror hours later. But the weight of the blue sky never lessened. We stopped for Janie to pee at every other service area, and we bought sandwiches and coffee and ate them in the car. “*Songe D’Autumne*” played over and over, and Halifax got closer and closer.

As we neared our destination, the shadows of oaks and pines pointed forward: the trees were lit by the low sun into brilliant greens. Everything in front of us glowed—the broken white lines, the double yellow ones, the blues, reds, and yellows splashed across billboards, the black lettering announcing exits and speed limits. The only muted color was the violet of the sky beyond Halifax. Far enough out, we knew, was the sea.

We entered the city limits. Janie directed me to the Fairview Lawn Cemetery, where more than two-hundred *Titanic* victims lay buried among three-hundred years of Halifax dead. It looked like all other cemeteries. We passed through the gates. Blue gravel

crunched beneath the tires. The grass around the white and gray markers was shaggy with late spring growth.

Janie filled her lungs, her breath shallow because of the baby nestled beneath them. “You can’t see the harbor—but smell the ocean.” The briny air unsettled me. I had to remind myself we were on solid land. “It’s just ahead,” she said. “They’re all together.” She arched her back for a better view, hoisting her belly up with her hands. I pulled up behind a blue car with New Jersey plates. We’d passed other parked cars, but had yet to see anyone. When I stopped, Janie rocked herself onto the grounds, and I followed—our first walk together. She paused after a few steps, and I thought we had arrived. She pressed one hand to her belly, her other arm out to the side, either for balance or to signal me to stop. For a panicked moment, I thought her contractions had begun. But she wore a sad-sweet smile. “Do you want to feel the baby kicking? I don’t know if it’s a boy or girl. This time it was in the contract for me not to know. Did you ever try not to wonder something?”

I had never touched Janie before I lay my palm on the tight orange fabric. I had to remind myself that what I was feeling for belonged to somebody else. But before I felt anything, I saw the couple looming before us and lifted my hand.

The failing light flattened perspective, and the man and woman appeared as a tableau: he wore khakis and a red sweater over a white shirt, she a denim jumper and a yellow jacket. They were about my age, and they held champagne glasses. The bottle stood on the plinth of a blunted obelisk no taller than my shoulder. They had neat brown hair and features like catalogue models, including identically clefted chins. Brother and sister, I guessed.

“You missed most of the toast,” the man had a trace of an English accent. “And we only have a pair of flutes. You’re welcome to what’s left, if you don’t mind drinking out of the bottle.” He nodded toward the monument, and I read its inscription: “Erected

to the Memory of an unknown child whose remains were recovered after the disaster to the 'Titanic' April 15th 1912."

Nobody had brought flowers. I shook my head. Janie's contract would have prohibited alcohol consumption. And who knew who or what the couple toasted, though I had a suspicion. I shielded Janie, but felt her heat behind me.

"To Sidney," the man said, catching my eye and tipping his glass toward the monument.

"Eino," I murmured, so Janie wouldn't have to.

"Of course you do," the woman said. "Everyone knows." She dabbed her eyes with a pink tissue. The pair stood like plaster statues.

"Do you know the words to 'Nearer My God to Thee?'" the man asked. "I can hum the tune, but I'll be damned if I can remember anything past the first verse."

I shook my head again, vigorously, and the woman stared at me, cocking her head: it had just dawned on her that I might be dangerous. The doctor said no, but I was sure that when I was tired my face shriveled, and I wanted to touch it, but instead reached back for Janie's hand. I half expected to feel the little ceramic Eino, but warm fingers joined mine. The man began to hum. The melody was familiar in the way of all hymns. Maybe I *was* dangerous. Smashing the plaster couple would be as easy as smashing the bottle at our feet. Then my hand was empty, but I didn't turn. The man had fallen silent and was also eyeing me uneasily. I smiled — an expression certain to exaggerate my grotesqueness.

A car door slammed, distant, as if the dwindling light couldn't support the sound. Janie had retreated. The couple was safe — whatever emptiness they hoped to fill was their own. When I stooped to pick up their bottle, both flinched; the man spilled some of his champagne.

"Thanks," I said. I weaved through the tombstones back toward the car, and I pictured Janie waiting inside. Maybe she'd taken out

her figurine, set it on her belly, and watched it tremble with the kicks of the child she'd promised to others.

"Go forth," Abraham heard God command, and he led the Jews to Canaan, and so, according to Cahill, launched Western religion. Why not a road trip for me? I had a champagne bottle and my car was ripe for christening. The summer lay before me, and maybe all of Canada, depending on which direction I drove. Maybe I'd have company. Maybe we'd get somewhere— at least to the other side of something.

GREGORY J. WOLOS writes about mysterious and troubling matters from his home on the Mohawk River in upstate New York. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Los Angeles Review*, *PANK*, the anthology *Surreal South '11*, and many other journals. Visit his website at www.gregorywolos.com.

Awful Gods

Eric Magnuson

Until eleven months ago, I'd seen what I'll hesitantly call ghosts on seven occasions, beginning at age four and returning sporadically through sophomore year at the university, nearly two decades ago. Eleven months ago, however, I met a bearded, copper-haired man named Alexander Pennings.

Pennings came with much notoriety. He'd written a small library of books on others' experiences with the paranormal. He regularly appeared as an expert on ghosts in numerous film and television documentaries of dubious nature. There were the newspaper articles—usually local publications or laughable magazines about the supernatural that featured spectral women in period dress or “haunted” houses on their cover pages—but he did somehow warrant a *Times* profile when these naïve ghost-chaser programs became strangely popular, even among the college-educated. The legitimate papers invariably documented the little respect he received from his colleagues at our university, especially noting their disdain for his tenured professorship and continued funding for work they deem “unserious” and “lowbrow entertainment.” Then there are details that are often included merely to give readers something shocking—and most likely apocryphal—to believe he's a madman: the somewhat mundane event that Pennings experienced as a child at his grandfather's Iowa City soybean farm, which led him into these studies; the allegations that he's drugged a handful of the people he's interviewed; but most absurdly, there is the rumor—which is taken far too seriously, even among my own associates in the history department—that the man himself is a ghost.

Despite working for the same public university since I arrived here four years ago, I'd never met the man. Nor had I even seen him in person.

Not that I wished to meet Pennings. I am, by most accounts, I believe, I hope, something of a reasonable man. I've written the first extensive history on the Battle of the Red Earth Reservation. I've published in all of the important journals, *The Journal of American History*, *The American Historical Review*, *WMQ*, and so on. In other words, I've done what I can to become a tenured professor at the university—though the internal politics on this campus keep holding me back for whatever inane reason. Perhaps it's the peculiar relationship that this university has with the state's Native American population—more specifically, the Takota, from the Red Earth Reservation. But that's something else entirely. I don't think this—I'll call it an "oversight"—has anything to do with my embarrassing ghost stories. I stopped telling even my friends about these unexplainable experiences of mine not long after my undergraduate studies concluded. I then avoided telling them as a PhD candidate and during my post-doctoral research as well. My wife knew nothing of them when we were married—she's since only heard them on nights where we've been slightly, well, incapacitated. But even as an undergraduate, I only elaborated on them to my closest associates, those who would go on to be my closest associates more than ten years after. So it was those decade-long friends that proved detrimental to my entire well-being so many years later:

Because, well, I suppose I should elaborate a bit more on what I mean by "incapacitated." I'm afraid to say that there are times when it's late at night, and the cocktail party's grown quiet and we've drunk far too much—at least I've drunk far too much—and we're at the point where everything is poured straight over the ice without mixer and everybody's gotten perhaps a little too loose with whatever is on their minds, and I might be coaxed along by

one or two of these old friends to divulge these paranormal stories as something of a party trick—to playfully frighten others when the lights go down. Or perhaps I just let myself publicly believe in them when I'm drunk. Either way, the last night that I detailed these experiences was—somewhat obviously—at the end of a cool and late October evening.

By the beginning of the new year, Pennings had learned that a reasonable man on campus believed he'd seen ghosts.

Pennings first emailed me in January. I immediately wondered which of those inexplicable friends of mine relayed my strange history to Pennings but rather than turn annoyed or angry, I realized that it must have been one of those strangers at the party. I'll assume this anyway in order to avoid a fracas. No matter. I brushed off his first request to meet. Then a follow-up email arrived, which I not only disregarded but deleted before finishing. And in February there was a voicemail, which I promptly erased. And then a second, and somehow we'd missed each other's paths so often that there was a third and fourth. Ridiculously, I began considering the rumor that Pennings truly was a ghost.

This continued until the first week of this past April, when I opened my history department door and was taken by surprise by Pennings himself. He stood at least seven inches taller than I. His copper beard was somehow both natty and unkempt. His skin was sickly pale. And he likely had freckles but they were difficult to discern from behind the beard. He also wore a ridiculous black overcoat that hung off of him like a cape. He was, in many ways, a caricature of himself.

Pennings told me that he was happy to have finally bumped into me, which was laughable considering that he was standing outside of my door, waiting for me to exit. Knowing immediately who he was, I did what I could to appear busy. I hurriedly walked down the musty university hallway, saying that I was running late and that, perhaps, he might try calling or emailing me later in the week. I told him that email was best but he immediately called my

bluff, saying he already tried for not just weeks but months to reach me. "Do you have a class to teach right now?" he asked.

"Mr. Pennings," I said, "I'm really not interested in talking about ghosts with you."

"So it's true then," he said. "You have had these experiences."

"Mr. Pennings."

"Please, call me Alex."

"Mr. Pennings, whatever I saw happened so long ago. It could have been anything, which was probably nothing."

"I know Dr. Witting," he said. "I'm actually good friends with him."

And I stopped at this odd detour to my department chair's name.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Despite the reputation you might think I have, I have a good standing with Dr. Witting. He secretly likes the work I do. He's a closet connoisseur of the paranormal—at least if it has historical context, like the Confederates still haunting Gettysburg for instance."

"I'm still not following you."

"I'm told that you've had some trouble getting tenure here."

"I barely remember what I saw, Pennings."

"I don't believe you."

"But I thought you believed everything that people told you."

"And maybe you just get drunk and tell lies."

"Excuse me?"

"A man who invents stories when he's drunk because he lacks the ethics or wherewithal to abide by the truth."

In twenty minutes I was sitting with Alexander Pennings in the quietest corner of a shabby Mediterranean restaurant off campus.

* * *

Pennings rested a digital recorder on the wooden table and said, "Do you mind if I record our conversation?"

I was obviously apprehensive. I didn't trust the man. But I felt somewhat cornered. To give myself some traction, I said, "Not quite. Let's talk a little bit first. I'd like to know why you're so intent on speaking to me."

"I'm eager to speak with anyone who's had a paranormal experience. They can be difficult to find," he said. "Many people are like you. They don't want to return phone calls in these matters. The ones who immediately call you back, or seek you out first, often saw their doors blown shut by the wind. The people who truly have these experiences often hide it. They begin pretending it never happened. But as they bury this down deeper and deeper, the more they actually believe it did happen. They torment themselves. I'm sure you've had many frustrated nights in the dark. It's common. But I find that when people finally do open up with these stories, they feel somewhat relieved."

The introduction sounded oddly rehearsed, as if he'd said the same thing over innumerable lunches.

"So you think you can set me free from my personal demons?" I said. "I didn't know that you were also a psychologist."

He laughed. And while I tried building this wall between us, the thought of speaking did sound appealing. I hadn't told these stories while sober in more than a decade. I didn't know what would happen if I did tell him about my experiences.

"But what do you plan to do with my stories?" I asked.

"Right now," he said, "I don't know. It greatly depends on what you have to tell me."

"Will you tell anybody else about them?"

"Do you want me to tell anybody?"

"Of course not," I said.

"Then I won't tell anyone we ever met."

Pennings's surrender seemed oddly swift. Somebody in his field surely needed a name attached to their subjects. To have no name

only made it easier to discredit the stories that made him so infamous. But then again, he already lacked so much credibility within the academic community.

“What if I also say ‘no’ to the recorder?” I asked.

“Then it won’t be recorded.”

Again, very peculiar. What could he be getting at? I wondered. He held no notebook nor pen that I could see. And he never maneuvered to pull one from his ridiculous overcoat.

“Tell me, Pennings. What’s the real reason you sought me out?”

And for the first time that afternoon, he began to look somewhat uneasy, as if his script ran out. He reverted to what he already said: “I try speaking to anyone who’s had these experiences.” And he thought for a moment, collecting what he may. “This will be a casual conversation between us. If we choose to, we’ll have a more academic study later on. But for now, we’re having a conversation that will never be heard again.”

After thinking to myself for a moment and sipping from my water, I began to tell him what I believe I’ve seen.

First: “When I was four-years-old, I awoke to see a large Native American man standing at the end of my bed. He did not speak. Nor did he move. He then disappeared.”

Second: “Months later, my mother and I heard voices in our basement. They were foreign. Or, more likely, indigenous. Years later, when I asked my mother about them, she said, ‘Oh, you mean the Indian ladies? They had a good time in that basement, didn’t they?’”

Third: “At five-years-old, I was alone in my grandfather’s basement. A light flashed off and on in front of me. A chair in the next room moved.”

Fourth: “At ten-years-old, I heard furious typing at the computer keyboard in the next room as I studied. I peeked my head inside to find the room empty.”

Fifth: "Standing outside of a friend's house when I was sixteen, I saw an old man staring at me from a second-floor window. He was bearded. I later asked my friend if her dad was home. She said no. I said that I'd seen a man upstairs. She told me, without humor, 'You saw one of the house's ghosts.'"

Sixth: "During freshman year at the university, I awoke in my bedroom with everything bathed in a foggy teal glow. I turned over and saw a young girl looking out my window. She smiled. I somehow fell back to sleep."

Seventh: "I was violently shaken awake from a nap at my parents' house. When I opened my eyes, I saw an orange blur floating away from me. Then I saw nothing."

"That should be everything," I said. "Will that be good enough?"

"And you believe, without any doubts, that these were paranormal experiences?"

"Off the record?"

"Of course."

"Off the record to the point that this lunch never happened?"

"Sure. Sure."

"Then, yes, I suppose I do."

"Why do you have no doubts?"

"Because they're the things that I saw. I don't doubt my memory. Especially when it's something mildly traumatic like this."

"And you consider yourself a reasonable, logical man, correct?"

I was slightly offended by this. Of course, I did. "Mr. Pennings, I didn't come down here to eat a soggy gyro and be offended by a man in a cape."

"I meant no offense," he said. "I'm just asking in order to piece everything together."

I gave in to this. He seemed sincere.

"Then, yes," I said. "I consider myself reasonable. Logical."

"And I assume that you trust in science?"

Admittedly, this is not where I predicted his line of questioning would run. I assumed that I'd regale him with these stories that by then were cheapened by the fact that I'd told them so many times that I didn't even need to think about which words to put emphasis on anymore, and that he'd be happy and we'd be on with our days never to speak again. This was turning far more philosophical than I believed Alexander Pennings ever ventured to be, especially considering that the last television program I saw him appear on utilized a smoke machine to almost comic effect.

"I don't even bother asking most people that question," he said, leaning back into his chair. His long coat wrinkled on the floor. "When I meet them I generally see that they fear God in one way or another. So instead, I ask them, 'Are you a religious person?' And they invariably say, 'Yes, they are.'"

He sighed and let the conversation hang there, as if I knew where to pick it up. My mouth was full of lamb meat. Fortunately, he continued.

"So after my line of questioning is through," he said, now leaning over his untouched plate, "I go around the house and I basically tell them, Well, I'm sorry, but there appears to be a breeze coming through here. Or we have an electrician come and the problem is fixed. I'm basically an overseer of handymen. As long as we're off the record here, I'll leave that off the table as well. As for the incidents that you may have seen on the television programs I've hosted or appeared on, those are merely the cases that couldn't feasibly be witnessed by an unbiased party. They are the things that we cannot prove or disprove, meaning: We do not need any real proof of them. So we recreate them for television with actors and special effects. It's obviously not something that I'm proud of, but does anybody actually make money from something that they're proud of anymore?"

It was over the course of our conversation that I realized that Pennings was completely unsure of what he was studying. He told

me that nearly everything he'd found in the past three decades could be explained in one way or another. Faulty wiring. An undiscovered breeze. Plumbing so old that it now made the pipes speak. Most of the people he'd interviewed over the years were likely to believe anything they'd heard, and a great percentage of those merely liked the idea that it was ghosts that produced their little oddities. Pennings, it turned out, was looking for a reasonable man to tell him that he was not wasting his life on a ludicrous search for the paranormal. But like the good academic nobody any longer made him out to be, he would not part with a false positive. He began to ask questions that made me feel uncomfortable and, for the first time in years, somewhat infantile.

"Do you believe in God?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Sometimes though?"

"Not really. If I do, it's brief."

"And you take it back afterwards?"

"I suppose so. If I actually think about it."

"So you'd consider yourself an atheist?"

"I generally tell people I'm agnostic."

"But you're not so sure?"

"Is any agnostic?"

"Funny. Humor. I'm glad we're moving along. But tell me, does your agnosticism believe in an afterlife?"

"Well," and this was the perplexing thing that I didn't wish to think about. Because, frankly, I didn't believe in an afterlife. But I also honestly believed that I'd seen these things, felt these things that are popularly believed to be the lore of what only happens after death. "No," I said. "I do not."

"So what do you think happens after we die?"

"I don't know. I have no idea. Most likely nothing."

"Is that worrisome?"

"Not knowing?"

"No. That it could be absolutely nothing?"

"It's not a great feeling," I admitted. He stared at me inquisitively across the table.

"Is it more than a worry?" he asked. "Do you fear it?"

"I really don't know how this matters to your work."

"Please. It matters a great deal, actually."

I still didn't answer.

"Do you fear death?" he said.

"Sure. I suppose. I think I'm allowed that from time to time."

"But tell me. How do you reconcile your belief in ghosts with your belief that nothing happens after death?"

"I don't know. None of it makes sense to me, really. I know what I've seen. My memory's never failed me. But I also have no hard evidence that anything happens after death."

"Do you think it's possible that you conjure these ghosts and hold onto their memories because you fear death? That perhaps you let your mind imagine them because you want there to be something to come after life?"

I stopped eating and looked at Pennings for a long time, not saying anything while I considered what this meant to me. We had very little else to say during our lunch. We left knowing that we'd likely never see each other again.

And now, everything is ghosts.

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“Devil Smile”

Crystal Elerson

CRYSTAL ELERSON is a technical communicator with a strong interest in design and language. When Elerson isn't teaching, writing, or reading, she enjoys creating logos and advertisements for products and events she appreciates. Elerson spent two years as Managing Editor and Art Editor for *American Literary Review*. At present, Elerson is completing her PhD in English at the University of North Texas.

