



**Jersey Devil Press**  
presents...



The  
**All-Star  
Issue!**

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# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

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*There was an idea to bring together a group of remarkable people, so when we needed them, they could fight the battles that we never could.*

—Nick Fury

*There was another idea, to put together a special issue of some of our favorite writers to give you something to read while waiting in line for The Avengers.*

—Jersey Devil Press



## Editor's Note:

I was six years old and Han Solo had just fried Greedo. I turned to my mom and asked how much time was left in the movie.

"Why," she said, "don't you like it?"

"No," I said, "it just got really good and I don't want it to be over soon."

We remember those moments for the rest of our lives—and everyone, at least someone who reads *Jersey Devil Press*, has them. Sometimes they're nothing more than amusement; other times they sustain us through the hard times. The stories and characters from our youth are permanent and portable refuges. They can't be taken from us and we can take them anywhere.

When I planned to do a special issue in honor of *The Avengers*, I didn't realize it would also be our Thirtieth.

Thirty issues. A remarkable feat for the Warren Zevon of fiction.

But also a little sad. Not because JDP is still around, but because thirty is, frankly, a crap milestone in life.

Take it from someone who's been both south and north of the Wall, thirty is the worst of the age markers. It certainly has none of the youthful glory of twenty-one nor the solemn contemplation of the stately forty. There's not the inherent respect befitting a sixty or the fuck-yes-I'm-still-alive of an eighty. There's not even the well-it-is-half-way-to-a-hundred-so-I-guess-that's-something of the otherwise overrated fifty. Thirty sucks. It's a lame half-foot-in-the-adult-world-but-too-young-to-take-your-mortality-seriously-and-no-you-don't-need-special-vitamins-for-prostate-health-yet stinker of a way point.

And I wish it didn't coincide with the release of *The Avengers*.

But because segues have to work, Thirty is also the perfect issue for us to pull together some of our favorite writers to pen the

stories others dare not write. It's the age when the touchstones of our youth start to feel important again.

Personally, I spent a lot of my twenties running from the geekiness of my teens. For whatever reason, I felt compelled to pretend that I didn't know Captain Kirk's "Risk is our business" speech by heart, that I couldn't name all twelve battlestars, or that I didn't have a favorite Robin.

When I turned thirty, though, as life seemed both more fleeting and more permanent all at the same time, it suddenly seemed really important—and reassuring—to have a Batman screen-saver on my work computer.

In no small part my re-embrace of my inner geek was due to my love affair with a new show that had just come out. It was called *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. As much as any show ever broadcast, *Buffy* was a comic book come to life, one that combined tongue-and-cheek humor with deadly serious plots all the while following a consistent and dense internal mythology. *Buffy* didn't necessarily make it cool to be a geek, but it left one in awe of what genre could do when expertly crafted.

I said segues had to work, right?

So the man who brought you *Buffy* is now writing and directing *The Avengers*, which opens on May 4<sup>th</sup>, which also happens to be International *Star Wars* Day, not to mention a particularly special moment in the lives of JDP's founders, Eirik and Monica.

There are cosmic coincidences, my friends, and then there's being thumped with Mjolnir on the head.

And that's why—for Issue Thirty—we've brought together four of our favorite writers, new and old, to write about...animals.

(Look, superheroes or, well, "thirty" would've been the ideal topic, but the creative mind only takes so much direction. These folks know what they're doing and if they think it's important to tell stories about hoboes with alligator skin, bullfighters, a couple with an impaled dog, or lots and lots of birds, you just let them fucking go with it. Alright?)



So kick back against the metroplex wall, put your feet out (but not far enough that you'll trip someone walking by with too much popcorn in their hands), and dig into the new issue of *Jersey Devil Press*. Be sure to leave a copy on your seat for the next fellow traveler.

And enjoy the hell out of *The Avengers*.

– Mike Sweeney

# Cleopatra the Alligator Empress and What She Left Behind

Kimberly Lojewski

Coriander likes to ride possum-belly on top of cow crates, sipping ginger brandy from a flask, and letting the sixty mile an hour winds slough the chapped skin off her arms and legs. She has dusted the Mojave Desert with her scales. She has smelled the entire length of the Pacific Ocean travelling at 75 mph. Me, I prefer to ride inside the boxcars, with a brake shoe wedged into the door and a hammock strung up diagonally, watching the landscape speed past and thinking about what it might be like wherever we get off. I try not to worry about my sister clinging to the roof above me.

"Come on up Clarence!" she shouts, occasionally popping her head over the edge and peering in at me. "The view is better from here!"

Butterbeans usually sleeps propped up in the corner of the boxcar, his soft snores keeping time with the churning rhythm of the locomotive. No matter how deep his sleeps are he always starts up and jumps to attention like a marine when we arrive at our intended destination. Butterbeans is an antique. He has been riding the rails long before Coriander and I were ever born.

"Pocatello," he says with a crusty stretch as the train slows down enough for us to jump off. We always try to disembark just before we hit the rail yards. Beans loves to wax poetic about how much times have changed for a tramp. "The Yard Bulls ain't like they used to be," he is fond of saying. "They'll just as soon yank you and send you off to jail as they will catch sight of you. Used to be we all got along."

This means we always dismount on the fly. Coriander loves

this. She could be an acrobat. Her muscles are strong and limber and her timing is impeccable. Beans gets all choked up watching her perform a rolling dismount into the dust, curling her body around her backpack and landing in a scraggly patch of chokecherry. Even intoxicated she is graceful. I am much less so. I throw my hammock in my backpack and jump spread eagle like a salamander, hitting the ground with a painful thud that sets my ears ringing. Butterbeans follows a moment later. We all lay on our backs for a moment as the train thunders on past, before getting up to dust ourselves off. The sky in Pocatello is cloudless and blue. It makes me hungry for the scent of rain.

We are headed to Pocatello's hobo jungle to meet up with an old friend of Butterbeans' called Scudder. The jungles are a mixture of leftover tramp culture, disinfection stations, and sad stories. They are almost always in between a rail yard and a city. Close enough to let the tramps get around, and far enough away not to attract too much unwanted attention. In the jungles my eyes go first for the amputees. I watch them hobble around their campfires, mostly drunk, and usually ready with a story involving flipping cannonballs or train hopping on the fly. They love nothing more than to tell their war stories, usually making them as gory and horrific as possible. The jungle has been a classroom for Coriander and I. We do most of our learning around campfires from old men with names like Tin Cap Earl, Bluegrass Pendleton, Crippleknuckle, and Ransom Jack. Men missing teeth, and digits, occasionally a limb or two. In my opinion there are some more practical parts of education that we have lost out on.

"Pocatello is grand," Butterbeans tells us as we shoulder our packs and start walking down the tracks. "You'll love it here."

Coriander's eyes glitter. She is always a hit in the hobo jungles. My sister is a scaled siren. She has left a wake of broken hearts all along the Union Pacific Railway. She is something like our mother in this way. Back in the day, our mother was a showbiz act.

Cleopatra the Alligator Empress. Butterbeans says she was the most bewitching woman around.

"I can't wait to sleep under the stars," says Coriander. She's always a dozen steps ahead of us. I figure we're going the right way or Butterbeans would correct her. The last few nights have been spent in boxcars and flophouses. We are all eager to be out in the open.

There is a path worn into a forest of tall conifers. White pines with trunks as thick as three of us glued together.

"Smells free here," says Coriander.

She's always saying ridiculous things like that.

"Haven't seen Scudder in nearly twenty years," says Butterbeans. "He's a tough old tramp. Lost his eyesight in a desert sandstorm a dozen years ago and he's still king of Pocatello."

Of the three of us, I am certain that I have the most sense. Butterbeans is drunk most of the time and happy to ramble from town to town. He has passed these qualities on to my sister. She is enamored with the transient lifestyle of a tramp. It's not uncommon for the two of them to wake up and start swigging whiskey, moonshine, cheap rum, brandy... whatever is around. I do my best to moderate them but it's tough. Beans is too set in his ways. Coriander is bullheaded. She thinks she is invincible.

When the path becomes littered with broken glass I know we are near the jungle. Coriander skips ahead. She loves to make an entrance. She's like a creature of the past. Slanted lidless eyes, gypsy skirts and tiny tops, and a scaly muscular body.

"Coriander," Butterbeans calls. It's no use.

Although it is only mid-afternoon, the jungle is littered with castoffs. They are staring at Coriander in surprise. There is a fire smoking under the shade of spicy trees. There are a dozen or so flapping tents scattered about. Scudder is immediately recognizable. He's sitting in a makeshift throne built from old crates and draped with blankets and sleeping bags. Both of his eyes are shut tight and his face is wrinkled like an old apple. His hat is

decorated with fishing lures and rusted pins. There's a bowed out banjo by his side. The trees around him are decorated with empty bottles speared on the low hanging branches. It has a sparkling, magical quality.

"Scudder," Beans says, in a heartfelt, guttural croak. He wrenches himself forward to embrace him.

As Coriander introduces herself to the community of curious tramps, I stand awkwardly. I receive some stares. My scales itch. My pack is heavy on my back.

"Boiling station over there," says a kind, cross-eyed tramp with a limp, maybe seeing something familiar in my discomfort.

I take all of our packs and head over to the row of pots set up to boil the lice out of clothes. Coriander and I rarely have issues with any kind of insects, but Beans picks them up constantly. There's a kelly stick leaning up against the row of boiling pots. I fill the pots with fresh water and soap and light the makeshift burners beneath them, waiting for them to get hot enough to soak our clothes. I use the stick to swirl them around in the soapy suds until the dirt begins to come free. There is something calming in the ritual. The steam from the boiling pots soothes my dry hide. I unroll a length of clothesline from my pack and stretch it tight between two trees. I arrange our clothes neatly on the line after wringing them with a well-learned efficiency.

I can see us clearly in the line of hanging clothes. Butterbeans favors overalls, camo fatigues, and heavy button down shirts, scuffed and worn, threadbare in places. There is barely an article of his clothing that has changed for as long as I can remember. I could make a map of the holes in his only coat. My own clothes are flavorless. Grey t-shirts, jeans, and hooded sweatshirts. I am so meticulous in my care of my own clothing that Coriander and Beans both tease me about it. I scrub at the dirt stains and mend the rips and tears as seriously as if I am performing a surgery. Coriander's wardrobe consists of ridiculous things like silk scarves

and long dresses with trailing hems. She likes bare sleeves. She flaunts her scales. Sometimes she ties the scarves around her head like a gypsy. Her row of wispy, bright-colored garments contrasts against my own drabness.

The cross-eyed tramp has come up behind me to inspect my progress. "You'll have to watch those," he says, indicating the silk scarves that are tasseling about in the breeze. "There's been some goose-berrying around here this past week. Hard to say who's doing it. We've got a few fruit tramps staying at the moment who seem kind of shifty. At least they say they're fruiterers. They claim to be waiting for apple season in Washington."

The threat of Coriander's clothes getting goose-berried is enough for me to decide to set up my hammock close enough to keep watch on things.

"Thanks," I tell my informant. "I'm Clarence."

He holds out a hand for me to shake and only hesitates for a moment when he looks at my scales, before pumping it up and down enthusiastically. He gives me a wide, gap-toothed smile.

"I'm Lonely Lenny," he says. "Got fixed up with a job here in Pocatello, so I've been here for a while. It'll dry up soon and then I'm headed east towards the ocean."

"Think I'll take a nap," I say.

"Scudder told us you were coming. The Alligator Twins. Our haybags are fixing a big feed, collar and shoulder style. You're our proper guests. You let me know if there is anything I can do for you. Scudder says we're to treat you like royalty."

This is because of our mother. She was a legend in the old hobo community. Only the ancients truly remember her anymore. She died not long after Coriander and I were born.

"Thanks," I say again. But this is not enough to deter him. He follows me to my hammock and leans up against a tall pine.

"Tobacco?" he asks, rolling himself a cigarette and handing me the pouch.

I hate taking things from other hoboes but I feel like I owe it to

Lonely Lenny. I roll a cigarette and sprawl out, staring at the blue patches of sky through the trees. I pull a book out of my pack and Lenny stares.

"Whatcha reading?"

Before I can answer he continues. "My parents were big readers. I have trouble with letters. They gave me up when I was young, you know."

This is not uncommon for a jungle. Hoboes love to tell their own stories. This is why I like books. It gives me an alternative to the constant expulsion of sad childhoods and even sadder adulthoods. I avoid anything that is too heartfelt or depressing. I like romance novels. I know this is strange for a guy. This is not something that I am willing to share with the others.

"Where do you get your scales?" Lonely Lenny asks, as if I purchased them somewhere. "I've never seen anything like you and your sister."

Ichthyosis is what it's called. I don't tell Lenny this. "It's hereditary," I say. "Our mother had scales. We have no sweat glands. We have no pores. It's just a skin disease."

At his alarmed look I say, "Not transmittable. You get it at birth."

Lenny nods. "Sure. All kinds of crazy stuff in the world."

We smoke our cigarettes in silence.

"You want to do something to help me?" I ask.

He nods again.

"Keep an eye on my sister."

I have been worrying more and more about Coriander lately. She has grown distant from me to the point of hostility. She hates my advice. She despises my help. She is determined to live as large as our mother.

I hear the whir of night birds beginning although the sun has not even started to set yet. The shade beneath the trees turns a cool green.

Lonely Lenny pulls a bottle out from one of the pockets of his shirt. He replaces it with the tobacco pouch. "We've got beavers and bluebirds here. You'll see them in the morning at the creek. But I do miss fireflies this time of year. Back home we always had fireflies."

I pass off his offer of whiskey. I watch the blue patches darken until I am sure that the most lightweight of Coriander's clothes have dried. Lenny has fallen into a light snooze against the tree. I gather up silk scarves in my hand and push them down into my pack. I'm not too worried about anyone lifting anything belonging to me and Beans. While Lenny is still asleep I oil my skin. The itchiness abates a tiny bit. The good thing about evenings in Pocatello is that even though they are dry they are cool. Intense heat makes my eyes tear. With no sweat glands our eyes leak in hot weather. Coriander usually covers her own with a pair of giant, Jackie-O glasses. I wipe mine with a hankie.

I nudge Lonely Lenny with my foot a little as a politeness.

"I'm going to look after the others."

There is the unmistakable scent of hobo food in the air: indeterminable meat, root vegetables, smoky campfires.

"Yep," he says, as if he has been awake the whole time. Tramps have great reflexes. He springs to his feet and pulls out his tobacco pouch, rolling a cigarette as we walk. "Grub time for sure."

I can hear harmonica and banjo melodies. I also hear Coriander's voice as we approach the main fire.

"Here comes Clarence," she says with a flourish that makes her scarves ripple out behind her into the gloaming. One of them brushes against Scudder's cheek and I can see him inhaling the scent of her. Her green eyes are glowing with moonshine.

There are a dozen or more tramps now scattered around the fire. Butterbeans is propped up beside Scudder's throne looking misty-eyed. I know they have been reliving their exploits as young tramps. I don't need to hear about them, I already know. Dodging yard bulls, the kindness of strangers, and the companionship of the



jungles. If they have talked about beautiful women or lost loves then I know my mother has been a part of their stories.

"Clarence," says Scudder, in his booming and kingly way. He has turned his face towards the sound of my footsteps. "Your sister says you are a musician."

I give Coriander a look. I don't bother smiling since I know he can't see my face. "Not really," I say. "I can play music."

Coriander and I have a musical act for when we are out busking. I play a tin whistle and she dances, slow and sinuous. The appeal seems to be that it conjures up the image of old time snake charmers. It was Beans who thought this gig up. He is an entrepreneurial old codger. When I was a child he had me wrap towels around my head for effect. I don't do that anymore. I am resigned to tramping. But I draw the line at being some sort of sideshow circus act. Coriander doesn't mind as long as all eyes are on her. She gets drunk off the power of hypnotizing people.

"Let's do a song before supper," she says.

I don't want to. All eyes turn to me and I have that curious feeling of owing them something. My scales itch. My eyes begin to burn. Nearby, a woodpecker begins tapping out a wild rhythm in the tall pines. That is what I latch on to. I suppose nights like this are made for music.

I pull my tin whistle from my pocket and play along to the sounds of the forest. I synchronize myself with the spitting of the campfire, the burps and belches of the tramps, the rat-a-tat-tat of the solitary woodpecker, the uncertain shimmer of new stars. Music always moves straight through me. Out to in to out again. I don't know what it sounds like to other people, but I can feel things synchronize within myself.

Coriander begins dancing, serpentine and slow. This is how my sister and I are connected. Whenever I play something she hears it immediately. She understands it and her body responds. Aside from our scales, sometimes it is the only way that I know we once

shared the same womb. The other hoboes are entranced. Scudder looks blissful. I don't know if it is the sound of my music or the pattern of the breeze from Coriander's dancing that whispers to him. Butterbeans has tears welling up in his eyes.

There is dead silence when we finish, not even a smattering of applause. The tramps stare at us open-mouthed, as if they have just seen something from another world.

Lonely Lenny is the first to recover. "Well knock me down with a sack of potatoes," he says. "What a splash of magic you two put on."

"Amazing," says Scudder. He passes his banjo over towards me. "You're something, kid. Now give us a song we can all sing along to."

It is not that I don't like to play. I do. I just have a silent resentfulness about singing for my supper. It's a problem. There is no room for personal pride in a hobo jungle. I play for them. I pick and roll and strum a litany of Union Pacific work songs. I play shanties and folk songs and spirituals. The tramps hoot and holler and dance around the fire in their spastic and uncoordinated way. Lonely Lenny moves like a cross-eyed accordion. Beans dances like a broken marionette. The others jig away, resembling drunken pirates and clowns.

I'm relieved when the haybags start bringing out the food. If there is one thing I am not picky about it's a steaming plate. I don't need to know what it is, where it came from, or how it was prepared. I am not even bothered that a few of the haybags give me gummy, rot-mouth smiles of seduction as they pile the slop on my plate. We all begin to eat, no dainty manners or false pretensions. We are hungry people. We are grateful for food. The haybags watch us happily as if they find something nurturing in our distended bellies.

I always have a soft spot for these women. In every jungle they are at the bottom of the hobo hierarchy. Too old or used up for work or rail riding anymore, they take on the role of preparing the

food for the rest of the tramp community. Their lives have ended here. They look the same in every jungle. Plump, ragged, and dirty with no dreams left in their eyes.

Our feast however, is delicious. There is an abundance of boiled cabbage. There is succotash and fresh string beans, as well as a slightly chewy smoked brisket and loaves of bread spread with grease. I know this is a real feast. Hoboes chomp and owls hoot. There is some kind of beauty in it after all.

I watch Coriander getting chummy with a group of young rail riders. Punks. Kids with nose rings and faux mohawks and tatty dreads. Bad news, these types.

"I'm bringing out the alligator bones," Coriander says. She wears them in a pouch on a leather string around her neck. "This is my real gift," she tells them. She's showing off even more than usual. "I can see the future in these bones."

The haybags clear our plates away and the night turns solemn and witchy. The moon is a crooked smile between the trees.

"Coriander," I say. These bones are special. Not a traveling sideshow gypsy trick. These bones belonged to our mother.

She doesn't listen to me. "Watch here," she says, and they all watch. She clears out a patch of dirt beneath a layer of pine needles and shakes the bones out of her pouch and onto the forest floor.

The young rail-punks are crowded around her. One is touching the back of her neck in a caress. Even Lenny has moved in for a closer look.

The bones that she uses to predict the future are from the tail of an albino alligator. Small and sharp and delicately pointed they stick into the dirt like reluctant soldiers. Coriander swirls them around once with a scaled finger. Her eyes are glazed but it is not the bones doing this. She has been swigging from Scudder's moonshine bottle.

The bones are the one legacy that our mother left for us. She died not long after we were born. Butterbeans gave them to

Coriander when she turned fifteen. They were our mother's good luck charm. They were her freak totem.

This is enough for me. I reach out and scoop up the bones and the sand, surprising everyone with my action. I can't stand to watch her make a mockery of us and our mother.

"No," I say with enough force to make even the punk rail kids sit back a little. "That's enough, Coriander."

She's good and drunk. She looks at me through slanted lidless eyes, her pupils black and glossy. Even in the firelight I can see that her skirts are streaked with dirt and trailing twigs. Her headscarf has slipped to one side.

"Time to sleep," I say. "We've been traveling all day."

"Time for you to sleep," says Coriander.

It is a very familiar argument.

I usually try not to go to bed until Coriander is in her hammock. Beneath the music and dancing there is a darkness to the jungles. I have a terrible fear that if I let my sister out of my sight I will never see her again.

"Let's go," I say, standing up and holding out my hand to her.

She battles me silently with her gaze for a moment before stumbling to her feet and following me. Lonely Lenny, Scudder, and Butterbeans call out goodnights while the rail punks boo and jeer at me softly. The one who was caressing her neck gives me a vicious look and I square up and glare at him with a throaty hiss.

"I hate you," says Coriander, as we head over to our hammocks. I hold her up while she stumbles. She stinks of cheap whiskey and peppermint schnapps, a horrible olfactory combination. We stop once on the way for her to be sick in the bushes and then I settle her into her hammock.

"I want my bones back," she slurs. "I can't sleep without my bones."

She is unconscious before I can answer.

\* \* \*

That night I sleep with the alligator bones pressed close to my heart. I dream about my mother, Cleopatra the Alligator Empress, all lit up in the neon glow of show business, her scales glistening, her gown glimmering. I dream about the jungles, faces flickering in firelight, haggard and full of stories. I dream about smooth skin, and the sensation of smooth upon smooth. I dream about people who aren't hoboes or alligator boys, the kind of people I read about in my romance novels. I dream about a train headed far away. I can almost smell the destination. Not quite. Earthy and damp. I dream again about my mother, but this time her image is transposed with the flames of the hobo fires. I watch as she melts into a pile of glowing hot scales that gets stoked among the burning embers.

When I wake up I've been goose-berried.

I suspect this is less because my clothes are coveted by anyone and more because I forced Coriander to leave last night's campfire.

It will be a while before my sister wakes up. She has a scarf pulled over her face to block out the morning sun. One leg dangles from her hammock languidly. Butterbeans is splayed out flat on the ground snoring like a rummy buccaneer.

I stick the alligator bones in my pocket and go for a walk. It's still very early. I can just smell the haybags starting to fry up slabs of bacon. I don't see any of Lonely Lenny's bluebirds or beavers, but the sunlight filtering down through the tall pines is nice. I find a small stream to wash up in. Then I head back to camp to oil my skin. I leave a note next to Coriander's hammock with directions to the stream and then make my way into the jungle where tramps are slowly coming awake. Fires are burning, pots and pans sizzling.

Lonely Lenny finds me immediately and directs me to an enormous woman with tangled black hair, who heaps bacon and beans onto a tin plate for me with a big, gappy-toothed grin.

"I think Trick-leg Trixie is sweet on you," he says as she winks at me from her frying station.

I smile back politely, trying not to shudder.

I barely hear Lenny talk as I stare at the flames of Trick-leg Trixie's fire. I see my mother's face again. Or is it my sister's? They bleed into one and then fade away, licked up by heat and crumble into the ashes.

"So what do you think?" Lenny asks. "You want to work today? Foreman needs another set of hands."

"Sure," I say. I touch the alligator bones in my pocket. I hate to leave Coriander alone, but I've been trying to gather a small stash of money.

Lenny and I return to the jungle before dark and already the festivities are in full force. Coriander is drunk and nuzzled up to the young rail punk. Butterbeans is dancing around with the seedy fruit tramps while Scudder plucks at his banjo. The entire scene makes me nauseous. All day the sun has been beating on my scales. All day the men on the construction site have stared at me as if I'm some kind of animal. All day Lonely Lenny has chattered on about going east, oblivious to our complete ostracization.

After a quick oil, I go down to the stream and in the fading light I pull out the alligator bones. I scatter them gently in the sand and search them for some kind of meaning. I sit there for a long time, staring and rearranging. Staring and rearranging. The evening darkens enough so that they are only glowing points on the sand. Finally, I know what I have to do.

I've made up my mind. Coriander and I can't stay in Pocatello.

When I don't show up for dinner, Lonely Lenny comes to find me with a plate of corned beef hash and biscuits from Trick-leg Trixie.

"Listen," I say. He seems surprised to hear me initiate any kind of conversation. "I'm worried about my sister."

"Aw, it's just the moonshine," he says.

"I have to get her away from all of this. What's it like out east?"

"Dunno," Lenny says, shrugging his shoulders and sinking

down to sit beside me. "Oceans and swamps down south. Mountains and forests up north."

"My sister needs a new life. I need to help her. The moonshine's the problem, you understand?"

Clearly he doesn't because he sits in stumped silence. The words start pouring out of my mouth. I don't know what they are. All of my unspoken thoughts and worries. How I'm afraid Coriander will end up like our mother. How she shakes if she doesn't have liquor in the morning. How after a couple of swigs she likes to ride possum-belly on the tops of freighter trains and try to walk over the coals of dwindling fires. How she could be a ballroom dancer. How her life is unfair because she is a scaled, train-hopping orphan raised by tramps. How she's the only person in the world I have.

Tears are pouring out of my eyes. Some of it is the release of sweat that has built up all day in the heat, but mostly they are real tears. Alligator tears. I'm crying for my sister.

I needn't bother being embarrassed because Lonely Lenny is crying too.

After a while, my tears dry up, and Lenny calms down and rolls a cigarette.

"Maybe you'll find what you need out east," he says.

"Well, I won't find it here."

We smoke together in silence.

In the morning I shake Coriander awake. She tries to kick me away, but I'm persistent.

"What do you want, Clarence?" she asks.

Butterbeans is in his usual position snoring loudly. The sound makes her wince. I pull the scarf off from over her eyes. She is angry and reptilian.

"We're leaving," I say.

She puts the scarf back in place. "Shut up. What are you talking about?"

"We're going somewhere new."

"Beans didn't say anything about that to me. Besides, we just got here."

"Well, we're leaving. And Beans isn't coming with us."

This time she lowers the scarf herself, and peers at me with the slanted eyes that have bewitched so many hoboes.

"What are you up to, Clarence? You're not making any sense."

I look at Butterbeans lying in the grass. I feel a pang of disloyalty, although I know we have to leave him behind. I care about him, but I care more about getting a new life for my sister. I have written him a long letter explaining that we need a fresh start. We will always be able to find each other by rail stories and monikers. We will always be grateful that he took us under his wing and that he loved our mother.

"This isn't the life she would have wanted for us," I say.

Coriander immediately knows what I am talking about. "Of course it is. The old days are gone. There's no money in being a freak anymore. No glamor. She left us with Butterbeans because this is where we belong."

At one time, Cleopatra the Alligator Empress was famous across the country. Her name was lit up in bright lights. She had her own act for a while before traveling with the carnivals. And then the circuses. And then the sideshows. And then finally falling in with the transients who worked the events. Rail-riders like Butterbeans. Folks who didn't consider her an outcast because they were outcasts themselves.

"He's not our father, Coriander," I say.

She rolls away from me. "Tell me something I don't know."

I tell her the rest.

Our mother baked to death in the front seat of beat up old station wagon with the windows rolled up and empty bottles of grain alcohol in the passenger seat. It was one of the hottest days on



record and she was unconscious and unable to move. She *baked* to death. Butterbeans swears it must have been an accident, but all I can think of is what she must have looked like to whoever found her. Scales swollen and split apart in bloody ridges, lidless eyes puffed open, and everything bursting and gushing from the relentless heat. She must have truly looked like a monster.

I've already got us all packed up. Coriander is shaking. She puts on her Jackie O sunglasses and ties a scarf around her head. We're headed east. I'm going to track the damp, earthy dream scent until we find the place that we're looking for. I'll read the bones each night for direction. This is what they were meant for.

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## Murmuration

Ryan Werner

We've got eleven pudding cups and zero dogs and I need to find the right way to bring those two numbers closer together. I go outside to bury the dog real quick and then hurry back inside to sit underneath the piano and eat as many of the pudding cups as I can. The trick is to not get a spoon dirty — no dishes — by taking the lid and curling it into a tongue shape. There is no trick for the dog thing.

Marie and I adopted the dog a few years ago from the shelter. She named it Trouble, after that stupid dog that stupid Leona Helmsley left twelve million stupid dollars to. Whenever I called out to it, I pretended that it was named after the Whitesnake album, which didn't necessarily make me feel any better.

We fought about it once. I yelled for the dog to get back toward the deck and away from the lake and Marie looked at me and said, "You're thinking about that dumbass band when you say that, aren't you?"

"What band?" I said.

"That fucking band you always made me listen to when we started dating," she said. "With that bitch dancing on the Jaguars and that guy who wanted to be the guy from Led Zeppelin."

I don't know how she knew. I stopped calling for the dog, then Marie called once. She told me to fix it, like we were dealing with a flat tire or the blown-out knee in a pair of jeans.

The dog came back that time, of course. This time it tried jumping over an old fence in the woods and mostly made it, which is about the same as telling a woman you'll only put it in halfway. There's no such thing as fifty-percent fucked.

Before Marie left this morning she looked at me and said, "Keep an eye on the dog and clean out the cupboards." Now I hear her jeep pull up into the driveway and when she walks in I've got a pyramid of empty pudding cups stacked next to me under the piano. There's one left.

"Where's Trouble?" Marie asks.

"Trouble impaled himself on a fence and now he's dead. I buried him in the front yard." I toss Marie the last pudding cup.

"Here, eat a peach."

"This is lemon meringue."

Then she punches the keys on the piano and calls the world names. I'm sitting on the pedals, so the notes keep ringing out after she lifts her fist off the keys. Marie is composing lyrics over the dissonance, some song called "Irresponsible Fucking Asshole Go Fuck Yourself and Clean Up All This Shit You Goddamn Prick." If Marie was Whitesnake, this is her "Here I Go Again," the tune that has to be last because, even though everyone's sick of it, really, what can follow it?

Marie's got a sister named Mary. Marie calls her Polly and everyone else calls her Nurse Diamond. She looks just like Marie except a few years older and covered in scar tissue all over her chest and arms.

She models for anti-drug campaigns. *My neighbor's meth lab burned down my house . . . and me. I freebased cocaine . . . and then it freebased me.* The middle third of her body looks like Freddy Krueger, but she's still a catch.

She's the KISS fan, and that's the real way she burned herself, trying to breathe fire like Gene Simmons. She and Marie saw some promo clips for their reunion in the 90s. Nurse Diamond tied an old sock around the end of a wooden stick, soaked it in gasoline, and lit

it on fire. She got a mouthful of gas, blew it across the top of the stick, and sent a perfect three-foot flame across their backyard.

Marie grabbed the stick, got a mouthful of gas, and started to gag before spitting it across the top of the stick and onto her sister, her sweet Polly.

Here's how Nurse Diamond tells the story: *Everything breaks.*

Here's how Marie tells the story: *Everything's broken.*

Nurse Diamond isn't really a nurse, but I called her anyways after Trouble impaled himself on the fence.

"What do you think, D?"

She walked up to the dog and lifted both his paws like they were about to start dancing. Then she dropped them. "I think it's dead."

When I called her she was taking notes on a true crime docu-drama. She showed up wearing her white jacket with the big red cross on the back. Aside from choosing her own nickname, it's really the only affect she indulges in, so everyone allows it.

She brushed her hands off in front of her. "Want to go for a ride?" I tilted my head down slightly and looked at Trouble. The fence didn't go all the way through his back. So that's good.

"Can I drive first?" I ask.

Nurse D tosses me the keys and we begin walking toward her car, a 1999 Malibu that was an old driver's ed car for years before she bought it. It's still got the brake pedal on the passenger side and everything.

Marie's never here when Nurse Diamond comes over.

Nobody can stand Marie when Nurse D's around, because she tries extra hard to not blame herself for the whole fire thing, and when she fails it's extra annoying, as if Marie is in an airplane that begins to nosedive only to eventually level out, climb to an even higher point, and drop once more for good.

Whenever Nurse D is over to the lake, we take turns driving around the backroads and in the open areas where lumber companies have started to gut the woods. Whoever is driving puts on a blindfold, and then they floor it. They have to maneuver around as far as they can. When they're about to hit something, the person in the passenger side steps on the brake.

The mix CD I made her a couple years ago was playing in her car when I turned it on, the one from when I was really into throwback rock and garage stuff with lots of distortion on everything. Drums, vocals, handclaps—all of it.

"If You Can't Give Me Everything" by The Reigning Sound was the song playing, and it's great because it's on an album called *Too Much Guitar*—which is true—and the first line is "You used to play the game when you were young, but you're not young anymore"—which is also true.

I got to a big field area and put the blindfold on. The Malibu spun-out and I turned the wheel back and forth a lot for the first five seconds. You think you can go for minutes when you're doing it, because driving for minutes is nothing. People drive for two or three just looking for good parking on a busy shopping day.

The first time I did it, I almost hit a tree. But that's the thing: you always almost hit a tree.

After I got sick of turning the wheel, I'd hit a straightway for a few seconds, do some donuts, and then go off on another straightaway.

Nurse Diamond hit the brakes and so did I and when I took the blindfold off, the lake was about two feet in front of me. I almost said to Nurse D, *Jesus, D, cutting it a bit close, aren't you?* And then I remembered that I was driving, that, really, she had saved my life, in a way.

"Thanks," I said.

\* \* \*

I guess I should say some things about the lake.

It's big and I don't particularly like it. People like to talk about living by the lake, though. If they already live there, they want to talk about how nice it is. If they don't live there, they want to talk about how nice it would be. Two of these people in the same room together is a good way to spend a root canal, link the two pains together so they don't have a chance to latch themselves onto anything worthwhile.

Marie and Nurse Diamond inherited the land and the house from their grandfather, who wasn't actually their grandfather and wasn't actually the owner of the land. The loopholes and legalities were never fully explained to me. Nurse Diamond didn't want anything to do with it, so she signed away her share to Marie.

I met their grandfather once, at a pawn shop, and I didn't even know it was him. I was looking at the records and he was looking at the guns. His hands were like a raccoon's in terms of size and shape, with a misplaced thumb like a fifth finger jutting up from the side. I watched him handle a few pistols and then give them back for whatever reason it is people decide a gun isn't the right gun. The only thing I heard him say was, "I'm more of a brass bed sort of guy." I thought *Me too*.

I found a couple Neil Young records from the 80s, the rockabilly one and the red and black one that looks like the cover of that James Taylor album. Their grandfather tipped his hat to me on the way out, which I later found out was because he treats most people like bartenders. When he died, Marie had no idea how she ended up with the property, but we figured that even after paying a good lawyer to help us get full rights to the land and the house and whatever chunk of the lake was considered ours, we'd still be better off financially than paying rent on a walk-up in the city.

So now there's a lake a hundred feet from my front door. People think it's nice. Me, I'm more of a brass bed sort of guy.

There are more songs about time than any other subject. More than love, more than heartbreak, fuzzy subjects for pretty much anyone. But time? Everyone knows what it is. Even if time isn't mentioned, it's always there. The musician is saying "This is how I feel now," and they either mean that it's how they feel right now or it's how they will feel forever, starting now.

Musicians mostly sing about going backward in time, not forward. That idea of a second chance is appealing, but I'd go the other way.

A few years ago near the end of autumn and the beginning of winter, a few years after Marie and I moved into the cabin, we saw a bunch of birds flying over the lake. They weren't in a V, though. They were a giant mass, almost like fog. They looked like the way a swarm of bees are portrayed in cartoons, the way they divided and then took dives toward one another only to join back into one unit. Marie told me that they were starlings. "A murmuration," she said. That's what a group of starlings is called, like a pride of lions or a murder of crows. I had never seen anything like it before, the way they worked together and the way that, if I looked close enough, I could see one turn its head quickly and watch the rest of them follow, like dominos. How did they decide who decided when and where to go? Is there really that sort of natural synchronicity at work in the world?

I never saw it again after it happened, even though I went outside and waited most days in the fall, just hoping they'd fly by again. It's getting to be that time of year.

The thing about the doldrums is that once they've fully set in, it's hard to tell until something from before their existence comes back for a spell.

\* \* \*

After the dog's been gone for a couple days, I've mostly heard the end of it. Marie is using up his food by mixing it in with the scraps we give to the stray cats. I took his toys and threw them into the lake one night.

We'll be getting snow soon, but until then, the grass isn't growing back over the mound of earth on top of the dog. I was in such a rush to get him buried after Nurse Diamond and I got back from our ride that I didn't go more than three steps outside of the front door and I didn't do a very good job of putting the dirt back. So there he is, every day. It doesn't bother me, but I stay inside a lot anyways. Marie's the one who walks past it the most.

She mentioned something about planting flowers in that spot in the spring, but I'd be surprised.

When that snow does come, we'll do the one thing we always do that makes people think we're doing something right, and have them all out to the cabin. It'd make sense to do something like that on the Fourth of July out here, in the nice weather. But every year it's been the first snowfall.

Our friends, Marie's friends, watch the calendar and the weather and get ready for it. It's the only occasion that will make them make the drive to the cabin. In a city, the other end of town is a long ways away, so to propose that these friends drive a half hour more than once a year is unfathomable.

I have nothing to show off in the house. Nobody wants to see my baseball cards, which is the only thing I brought with me when I moved out to the cabin and decided to become an adult. Now I have a responsible party once a year where nobody gets drunk enough.

I woke up this morning and there was an inch of wet snow that will be lucky to survive the week. The cars start coming in later that day. It's already dark at 5:30 and by midnight the house is packed with people I don't particularly like. I start ranking them in the



order of how much I dislike them. Hawaiian Shirt Guy is the worst. Woman With Too Much Lipstick is somewhere in the middle. I'm still not sure where Marie fits in.

Nurse Diamond is off on a photo shoot and, besides, she knows when the invitation and the sentiment behind it are both made out of paper.

The lake is preferable at this point. I walk out here and kick over the rowboat into the water. I don't grab paddles. The snow has not only survived the night, but is starting up again. Flakes of it are clumped up heavy enough that the wind can hardly blow them, and they fall straight down onto the lake and me and everything.

Without the paddles, I have to push off shore with my feet while leaning as much into the center of the boat as possible. When I finally lift off and start drifting, I hit the floor of the boat. It's cold but nice. My jacket is thick, and I pull the hood up over my head and tighten the drawstrings. I doze off, and it's hours or minutes later when I wake up somewhere else. Behind me is the cabin, and it's a pinprick fuzz of yellow, lots of bad lighting busting through the snow. In front of me is more lake, more than I've ever seen.

How different it all looks from the middle.

**RYAN WERNER** has got a body built for sin and an appetite for passion. See him work his magic, turning songs into other stories, over at [Our Band Could Be Your Lit.](#)

# The Last Bird

y.t. sumner

There's a place called The Factory where they sell stuff.

Mili's mum went there when she was a kid, but they screwed up her order and she got Mili instead. She always sighed nicely when she told this story, but it was obvious that the years of litigation had worn her down. Most people just took what they got without argument. You only get one trip to the Factory. They mark your order on a little card and say thank you and goodbye. And if you bothered to read the fine print on your receipt, you saw that they meant it. Mili always said there's no way she'd ever go to the Factory. Except that once when she did.

When she got the bird home, it started a conversation Mili had been needing to have for a while.

*You know you sort of look like a bird.*

It wasn't a rude bird, just the kind that called it as it saw it. They say that after a while people start to look like their pets, and Mili did have those hands that could never keep still. They fluttered about her body like a hummingbird looking for nectar. Her high forehead was the same shape as a parrot's, probably made worse by the scraped back ponytail she always wore.

*I mean, your nose isn't that hawkish, but your nostrils do pinch in a bit and make the tip look sharper than it is.*

The bird and Mili talked on a shabby balcony barely big enough for one person. Mili filled it with potted ferns and squat succulents so that stepping onto it she could pretend she was in a green elevator.

*So you gonna kill me or what?*

Mili wobbled atop the painted white rail of her balcony and almost lost her balance. She found the cage in an antique store that smelled like her aunt, it had thin gold bars, so dainty they transformed the cage into more of a beautiful jewelry box.

*I mean, it's not technically murder, but you'll kill me for sure if you jump. I'll starve.*

The bird swung on the delicate perch like a trapeze artist. It twitched its beak at a few dusty feathers that Mili could never bring herself to remove. Mili shook her head. The seed bell alone would last the few days it would take for someone to notice she wasn't at work. The man at the Factory with the beard promised her a week even. She didn't usually take the advice of bearded men, but he had such kind eyes, and it was more of a goatee really.

The bird looked at the seed doubtfully.

*I don't wanna eat that crap for days. Why don't you just let me go?*

Mili remembered the pet store she went to before the Factory. The smiling Pet Guy went out the back to get a box and was gone for a long time. When he came back, his expression was different. Behind him was an older man she recognized.

-Good Morning, Miss, the older man said.

The word sounded mean directed at her.

Mili felt like a terrible prank was being played when he said he couldn't let her take the Kakariki, a little parakeet from New Zealand with a real sweet trill.

At her expression, something snapped in the older Pet Guy and he spoke harshly like he was reading from a list.

-The Ringed Neck Parrot. An African Grey Parrot. The two Lovebirds. The Cockatiel. The Parakeet. Three Budgerigars. Have I forgotten anything?

She lowered her eyes and spoke to the floor, like a child being punished.

-The Lorikeet.

-Yes, of course. The Lorikeet. And what happened to him?

-He flew away.

The old Pet Guy sighed and said that it was his duty to make sure these animals went into safe homes.

Mili nodded, tearing up, backing away.

The young Pet Guy said that she doesn't look like she was doing it on purpose, maybe she just needed some advice.

-Like when you clean their cages you should maybe do it inside...

But Mili was already on her way to the Factory.

*Why did you let all the others go?*

Mili looked down the thin strip of alleyway.

-I had to know if they would come back.

The bird hopped onto the cage bars, clutching the gold in its tiny talons.

*Hey, they were jerks for not coming back, but that's no reason to jump. Maybe a nice little aquarium would do the trick out here. And you'd get to see Beardy again. I think he likes you.*

She shook her head and smiled a droopy smile that nearly broke the bird's little heart.

-You don't get to go back. And it's not because they don't come back, silly bird. It's the look in their eyes... they look so free.

Her hair slipped out of the scraped back ponytail and framed her face. The bird thought, *hey, she really is kind of pretty.*

The bird hopped back on its perch and swung for a little while, quite put out. But it didn't hear the thud of her body splattering on the pavement. And as it began to get dark, it began to think that maybe she'd flown away after all. As the bird nibbled on its seed bell, it thought that whatever had happened she was right about the look in those eyes.

“The Last Bird” originally appeared in print in the Melbourne literary journal *fourW* and online at the late, great *BananaFish* (which we still kinda miss.)

**yt sumner** likes words and people that write them. People that listen to them. People that read them. Eavesdroppers. Stutterers. Silvertongues. She was born in the UK, raised all over Australia and settled happily in Melbourne. Her short stories have appeared in various literary journals, anthologies and magazines and she’s currently coaxing a motley group of them into a collection. Visit her at [lambeatswolf.wordpress.com](http://lambeatswolf.wordpress.com) and then send her a postcard.

# The Artist and the Asterisk

Hilary Gan

In the town of Guell, in the province of Calana, lived a young bullfighter by the name of Victor. He was of average height but he was very handsome, and when he went striding through the city streets beneath the power lines all the women looked up at him through their eyelashes and smiled heart-shaped smiles. But when he smiled back he used only his lips, and kept his own heart to himself.

In the arena Victor rode a grey mare with black stockinged feet, and he shined his shoes before every bullfight. He worked in close to the bulls, and when he killed one, which he always did, he would cut out its heart with his sword and tear off a ventricle with his teeth and grin a savage bloody grin at the first row, where the Mayor sat, squinting and shivering in the sun. Victor always remembered to wipe off the blood before the Mayor honored him at the ceremonies, and then he smiled with pearly teeth, and all of the women sighed.

During the day Victor managed the local stable in exchange for lodgings for his mare and a pittance that paid for a cheap apartment above the bar across the street. In the evenings he went down to the bar and drank rum and played cards with the waiters from the Guell Inn and Alphonse, the town drunk. At midnight, exactly, Victor would push his chair back, say goodnight, pay his tab, and go to bed. The waiters and Alphonse knew better than to try to encourage him to stay, although sometimes this routine was interrupted by other bullfighters or ranchers who had been passing through town and wanted to talk bullfighting all night. But Victor would politely refuse, and in the morning he would get up in the dark, go down to the stable, and take his mare out to the practice

ring and work her for three hours before tending to the stable's business. There were always three or four early-morning risers who would stop on the bridge over the arena and watch, but Victor never seemed to notice.

In early spring every year, in the hours before Victor retired from the bar, the waiters and Alphonse would get drunk enough to forget what they knew about Victor and try to convince him to enlist in the official bullfighter lists in the capital city, Veparda, for bullfighting season. Victor would smile and smile and say nothing at all, and the encouragement would turn to offers of ludicrous financial backing and nebulous "connections" in the ranks of judges and trainers in exchange for cuts of Victor's theoretical winnings. The piles of cash that were lost to Victor's stubborn insistence that he did not fight to compete were a constant source of torment to all of the patrons of the bar, although less so than the piles of available women that Victor did not bring back to his room in the evenings. On more than one occasion, irate potential business investors had made insinuating remarks about the widow Lyssor and her continual attempts at sponsorship, or about women in another town, or about no women at all. This would make the waiters laugh uproariously. "Haven't you seen how particular he is about his shoes?" the youngest one, who had gone to grade school with Victor, would invariably say. "He's that way about his women, too."

The Mayor of Guell, who presided over the local bullfights, was an old and feeble man who was Mayor in name only. He had a secretary named Emmanuel who did all of the work for him and did not resent the Mayor's title. But one day the Mayor, who was, after all, old and feeble, did not wake from his slumber, and the Baron appointed a new Mayor, a family man and lawyer by the name of Kantigo, from the capital. Kantigo had a son, a daughter, and a wife who was still beautiful and wore all of the latest fashions. The son, Edward, was honorable and handsome in his

own right, but the daughter was a vision, a fluttering swan in silk dresses and scarves and delicate bracelets, and her name was Annabelle. They came to town in an open car in the high heat of summer and the Mayor waved at his new constituents as they paused in their work to stare.

In honor of the new Mayor, a special bullfight in the old tradition was proclaimed. Bullfighters from far and wide came in trucks with horse trailers to take part in the tribute to the new Mayor of Guell, who had been in the army and was known to be on good terms with the Baron Toldo. Bullfighting had been the favorite art of the royalty of the province for hundreds of years and had in the last century degenerated into a terribly subjective competitive sport, each bullfight judged by the local authority, whether or not he knew anything about bullfighting. The fights took place with one man, mounted on an armored horse, leading the bull through traditional passes, called “gateways.” In the old traditions the event had been more like theater, with different combinations of gateways executed to bring about different aesthetic and emotional effects; however, the competitive bullfights were scored on a point-per-gateway scale, and evaluated either on the artistry, the entertainment value, or whatever other qualities the judges felt like including. There were no national or regional regulations by which said local authorities could judge the sport; this lack of structure meant that in every bullfight there was a chance that even the worst bullfighter could win, or die, which delighted the audiences even more than a wonderful exhibition by a true bullfighter. The love of the traditional art, however, had managed to survive, somewhat underground and preserved in the hands of historians, philosophers, and other patrons of the country’s arts.

The Guell Inn had never hosted such an array of eligible and roguish men, and the young ladies of Guell who hadn’t succeeded with Victor invented excuses to go downtown in their best new outfits to parade back and forth in front of the Inn as though they



had forgotten to run errands on both sides of town. The little girls and boys sneaked back to the barn behind the arena and stared longingly at all the beautiful horses, black and brown and white and gold and chestnut—an earthy rainbow of well-brushed coats.

And Victor shined his shoes.

The day of the bullfight arrived. Only Alphonse was missing when the procession started; but even Alphonse arrived in time for the first bullfight. The noise of the arena could be heard for half a mile outside the city limits, and everywhere among the crowd was the flash of sunlight on jewelry and the smell of beer, sweat, hot dogs, and blood.

Victor went last in the arena. When his horse stepped out of the fighter's chute to reveal him in his brown uniform with the golden braids, his teeth flashed and the crowd went still. By then it was hot and the bull was steaming; Victor met it casually, slowly, taunting it through all of the gateways, coming at it from the outside walls in strange little curlicues, keeping the bull in the center. His mare never missed a lead. The bull was white and dotted with brown and its flesh shook as it ran. It made no noise but rolled its eyes at Victor and tossed its head in annoyance at its slowly shrinking confinement to the center of the ring.

The fight went quickly but to the crowd it felt like forever before Victor's sword sliced through the tendons of the bull's front shoulder, and its blood was redder than that of the other bulls. Some of it splattered Victor's shoes. He dismounted and cut out its heart cleanly, neatly, a square chunk of flesh lifted from its side. His horse waited patiently behind him. Victor held the heart with its sheen of fresh blood to his lips, and then, for the first time, he saw Annabelle in the Mayor's box, her dark gaze fixed upon him and her breath held suspended. The bull's heart fell from his fingers and landed with a final thump in the dust.

The crowd knew what had just passed between the pair; the silence of the stands seemed interminable before all the voices

erupted as one. And the bull bled and Victor stood, entranced, and Annabelle stared, until the Mayor's wife pinched her and whispered in her ear, and the first of the roses landed in the bowl of the arena.

At the ceremony the Mayor gave Victor the bull's left ear, brown with blood and dirt, but Victor knew nothing except Annabelle. Men clapped him on the back as he walked through the streets, and women stared more openly than ever, but he went, clutching the ear like an illiterate with an important letter, home to change his clothes and wash. Out on his tiny uncovered balcony he smoked the cigars he'd found tucked into his uniform's lapel. At dusk, he stood up grimly and put on his hat and went out into the evening.

Behind the Mayor's house was a garden, filled with red-leaved maples and irises and daisies, all of which were folding in on themselves in the night; and there was a bench by the stream that ran past the house and through the town where Annabelle sat and waited. She had lilies in her hair, and a different outfit than the one she had worn to the bullfight—her shirt was golden and simple and set off her dark hair, and her jeans were dark and perfectly fitted. Her feet swung impatiently over the damp grass. Victor came through the yard with fevered eyes and a slow gait and the stub of a last cigar between his thumb and first finger. Annabelle saw him immediately and pretended she hadn't by adjusting her shirt, but then she gave it up and smiled at him, and graceful Victor, who fought bulls and never stumbled, tripped over a rock, and Annabelle laughed and held out a hand. Annabelle's brother Edward turned out the light in the sitting room.

The Mayor caught Annabelle in private the day before her engagement to Victor was to be announced in the newspaper. He suggested they stop at the Inn for lunch after her daily review of the city reports, and they walked the two blocks together. The walls

of the Inn were covered in flamboyant blue and gold wallpaper, and cheap gold-painted electric sconces graced each dining area. But the napkins were always clean and the waiters reliable and polite, especially when their patrons included the Mayor.

"Annabelle," her father said carefully, "are you sure you know what you're doing with this bullfighter?"

"Hmm," she said, chewing her roll thoughtfully. "I think I'm...wait, no, that can't be right. Maybe I'm...? Oh, no, I'm marrying him! Yes, I do know what I'm doing."

"What a relief," her father said dryly. "You know what I mean. You don't know him very well."

"Everything you need to know about Victor you can learn in the arena."

"Annabelle, that's hardly a rousing endorsement—he's a small-town hack who relies on cheap tricks to please the crowd," the Mayor objected.

Annabelle regarded him with a raised eyebrow. "Father, you're a wonderful mayor, but you know absolutely bollocks about bullfighting."

"Occasionally I regret raising you to speak your mind," the Mayor said through gritted teeth. She ignored this and returned to her salad as she spoke, punctuating her sentences with vehement stabs at various vegetables. "Before the formal boundaries were established for our province and its neighbors in the sixth century, the aborigines who inhabited the high plains used to run down wild game on foot to the point of the prey's exhaustion, over many miles and sometimes over whole days, until the game simply gave up and lay down and waited for death. Then, in a tribute to the animal's endurance and as an honor to the gods, the heart of the beast would be cut out and shared between the hunters before the thing was skinned."

The Mayor frowned, and Annabelle continued; she might have sounded like one of the Royal Historians if she hadn't been so

indignant—it made her voice go slightly squeaky. “What is largely *not* known is that the same ritual continued when cattle were introduced to the region in the eighth century, only with the liver rather than the heart, as a thanks for allowing the cowboys and their herd to arrive safely on their journeys between grazing lands and the market. It also most likely survived as a natural way to curb the vitamin deficiencies experienced by men who were constantly traveling. The practice was outlawed by King Homer in 843 and denounced as barbaric, as part of his campaign to crush the revolts of the aborigines against the crown and to better control the profits of cattle-raising. As I’m sure you do know, it was the cowboys who first began the sport of bullfighting on horseback around 1050, and as our cattle became a continent-wide export, the aristocracy rapidly adopted it as art and introduced elements of the Perclusian Renaissance, such as the lone figure in the arena and the black cape representing mortality. This aesthetic became the main tenet of bullfighting and stayed that way until the last century. Victor’s heart-eating, and the way he positions himself on the outside of the arena to make it look like he’s chasing the bull, all while observing the Perclusian customs, are an homage to the roots of bullfighting and also a mild political statement to remind the crown of its responsibilities to the aboriginal blood of its working classes.”

Her father was grinning by then. “Alright, Annabelle. I still say you should have gone into the Academy.”

“Ugh, and wear pearls to my defense ceremony in an attempt to tempt some Philosopher-Vicomte into making sure I never have to lift a manicured fingernail again?”

“Yes, I’m sure you’ll be so much happier shoveling manure for the next fifty years,” said the Mayor abruptly, throwing his napkin onto his half-finished house special.

“Better to shovel manure than to have to sleep next to it every night,” Annabelle said.

“That’s enough.”

"And tell mama if she wants somebody to marry into money so badly that she can do it herself," Annabelle said. "Please excuse me." She stalked off to the bathroom; her father sighed, and the waiter, trying hard to be unobtrusive, brought him the check.

Three days later the Mayor's wife hosted a celebration dinner and invited all the important town officials. New candles were unwrapped and the silver was polished and all of the rooms were aired and vacuumed and dusted.

The Mayor's wife placed Victor between Annabelle and Emmanuel, and Emmanuel next to Mayor Kantigo. "The whole town is delighted by your romance," Emmanuel told Annabelle and Victor over the roasted lamb. "I think if everyone could attend your wedding, they would."

"Well," said Annabelle brightly, "let's invite them."

Victor, normally inscrutable, hastily swallowed his mouthful. "Everybody?"

She turned her sweet face to look up at him. "Just the whole town, dear."

"Annabelle, light of my eyes," said her father, splattering the tablecloth with sauce from his fork, "that seems vaguely excessive."

"Where could we possibly fit three-thousand people?" Emmanuel asked, glancing at the Mayor's face. "Not practical. The chapel is much too small."

"Why, the arena, of course," Annabelle said. "I think Victor would feel much more at home there, anyway, wouldn't you, Victor?"

Victor looked her directly in the eye. "I will be at home wherever you are," he said, and his intensity made even Annabelle flush.

"It would be a wonderful spectacle," said the head of the Chamber of Commerce, and all the heads at the table swiveled to

look at him. "Just the kind of publicity we need. With the Mayor's own daughter marrying a bullfighter, we could establish Guell as the new bullfighting capital of Calana."

"Oh, don't talk about Victor so crudely," said the Mayor's wife, in a charming tone which both Edward and Annabelle recognized as dangerous. "He's above all that sporting nonsense—he doesn't even compete! You're not a bullfighter, are you, Victor? You're a very sensible businessman."

Edward muttered, "*Mama*," while the rest of the table examined their wine glasses very closely.

Victor eyed his future mother-in-law with the same patient and curious gaze with which he sized up bulls in the arena. "Of course. And as a sensible businessman I know better than to try to refuse a wife whatever it is she wants." The Mayor flinched at the look on his own wife's face; Victor glanced at his fiancée. "If it is an arena wedding you want, you shall have it, and a bullfighter husband too."

Annabelle stared down at her hands, and her emerald engagement ring, and then looked up at her mother. "Just think, *mama*," she said, in a voice as delicately dangerous as her mother's, "if everyone who came brought lilies and tossed them at our feet after the ceremony. A touch of barbarism, for a bullfighter's wedding." She laid no stress on the title but it seemed to the table she had shouted it.

"We might run into a shortage of lilies," Emmanuel said, eyeing the Mayor's fork, which was threatening to splatter mint jelly even more emphatically than sauce, "not to mention funds."

The chaplain, frowning, added, "Weddings should take place in a church, in the sight of God."

"In that case," said Annabelle, "We'll just have to invite the Archbishop, too, so he can bless the arena beforehand."

The Mayor opened his mouth to speak, but Emmanuel cut across smoothly. "Why don't you come to the office tomorrow, Victor? We can discuss business during business hours." The

Mayor pressed his lips together and relaxed his shoulders into the backrest of his chair.

Edward leapt at his opportunity. "Papa, did you hear about the protests in the eastern provinces?"

The Mayor's wife signaled to the hired waiter for another bottle of wine.

The next morning Victor stopped at the bank on his way to the Mayor's office. When he knocked he heard the Mayor's voice call, "Come in," and he pushed open the heavy wooden door and stepped into the sunlight of the great round window behind the mahogany desk where the Mayor sat with Emmanuel off to the side.

"I assume," Victor said without preamble, brandishing his bank envelope, "that the difficulty here is one of finances."

"Well, yes," said the Mayor. "I admit that is my main concern." He paused. "And not just regarding this...wedding idea."

"I'm aware of the large discrepancy between my current income and that which Annabelle is used to having at her disposal," Victor replied. "As is she. We have discussed it."

"And I'm aware that Annabelle will do whatever she damn well pleases, like always," said the Mayor, rubbing his forehead.

Victor laughed a little at that, and Emmanuel smiled.

"Yes, I'm sure that's true," Victor said. "I do love her, you know, and I have no intention of putting her in a position where she won't be able to pursue her own talents."

"That's a relief to hear, Victor, and truly it's my only worry."

Victor placed the envelope on the desk. "I've just been to the bank," he said, "and after this meeting I'll stop at the post office to send off my enrollment for the Veparda lists. I was saving for new armor for my horse, but it will cover my entrance fees for the qualifier and the Equinox." The Equinox Fight was the biggest

competitive bullfight in the country, with a substantial fortune and lots of glory for the winner, and smaller compensations for the upper ranks: a small fortune and almost as much glory for second place, and glory only for third.

Emmanuel said softly, "Are you sure about this?"

Victor just looked at him. "There are thirteen fights before the Equinox qualifier in September," he continued. "Small pots, mostly, that should cover my living expenses in Veparda. But with any luck I'll be able to fund the wedding after the Equinox." He made a face. "The judging is fairly subjective, you know."

There were going to be lilies, delivered on wide flatbeds filled with earth, still planted so they would stay fresh until the very last moment. The Baron would accompany the delivery in his personal car, with his daughters and his wife and the Archbishop of the province, who had agreed to bless the arena for a religious ceremony; arriving the day before the Baron would be the troupes of acrobats, musicians, and fire-eaters the Mayor had hired for entertainment. And because the wedding would take place on Annabelle's birthday, every baker in the surrounding area had been commissioned to provide birthday cupcakes for the guests.

The Chamber of Commerce made a gift of Annabelle's dress, which her mother insisted she have made by her old tailor in the capital. The local tailor was incredibly offended by this decision, and at the local bar he announced his intention to boycott the wedding to scattered applause. Edward and the Mayor came in the next day and ordered brand-new suits for the occasion, because, they said, that tailor from the capital couldn't make a sensible men's suit to save his life. Thus the tailor was placated, and everyone in town could attend the wedding with a clean conscience, not to mention have their own attire mended, taken in, or cleaned without having to listen to his grumblings.



The wedding dress itself would be turquoise—the Mayor’s wife had objected, and wanted to put her in pink, and three days of fights had ensued over the breakfast table until the Mayor put his foot down and told them that if they didn’t agree in the next ten minutes the wedding dress would be pumpkin orange and covered in sequined butterflies. Annabelle said that was fine by her as long as it wasn’t pink. The Mayor’s wife consoled herself with pink invitations and three-quarters of a mile’s worth of white satin ribbon to decorate the stands.

Victor was charged, in addition to his duties in the ring, with seeing to the arrangements for the Baron’s journey, delivering the invitations, and picking up the dress. Emmanuel went with him as an emissary of the city’s financial department, or, as the Mayor said, “To keep the casualties to a minimum.”

The capital was a two days’ drive from Guell. In the early afternoon on the second day they reached the outskirts of Veparda with its ancient stone wall and vestigial guardposts which surrounded the numerous small houses, modern skyscrapers, and lazy Veparda River that cut straight through the city. Victor went immediately to the lists to enroll in any bullfights with open spots. He came back with a printed schedule on which he had circled the dates and times of thirteen bullfights, and then he met Emmanuel in the bar on the first floor of the hotel and went over the venues and competitors and looked at the results of the bullfights over the past six months.

In the high society of Veparda that fall, word spread about a bullfighter whom, the philosophers said, was the best in the country, who took the traditions apart and put them back together in ways no one had ever witnessed before: a man who made the killing a part of the art, and took bloody bites out of the heart of the beast he had fought. They called him a barbarian, and meant it as a compliment; they called him an artist. He was from a small town, a

nothing town, in the backwoods of the already backwoods province, Calana, and his name was Victor.

In Veparda the judging was a little more worthwhile, simply because most everyone who knew anything about bullfighting lived in the capital and the backlash against a bad judge was immediate and ruthless—at least, if he chose against popular taste. And all of the judges kept handing Victor the bullfighting titles. He won his first seven fights, and ticket prices for the ninth one, an Equinox qualifier for which the arena masters had secured a wildcard judge, went astronomical. People began trading Victor and Annabelle's wedding invitations as currency.

But in a city there are many more people than just the high society; there are people who clean bathrooms and wash dishes and run irrigation systems for twelve hours a day, every day. The lower classes did not know what to do with Victor. On the one hand they loathed him, because the high society loved him; but on the other they knew him, with his cheap ties and dark features, as one of them, the lucky one, who had escaped dishwashing on pure talent. After his third fight, with an ancient, nasty bull who had just gored another popular bullfighter and who went down to Victor's sword like a fish on a hook, it became apparent that his habit of eating the bull's hearts was not just a gimmick. After the third fight the general populace began attending the bullfights with fake blood smeared across their faces. The muttering about the Baron and his deputies—which had always held at a low roar—swelled. When Victor left the arena after his fourth fight, there was a crowd waiting at the exit, and as he passed the men and small boys saluted like soldiers to their brother. The Baron, when he heard about the fake blood, began having the sporting reports sent directly to him each morning.

\* \* \*

In the eighth fight Victor's horse got hamstrung by the bull.

It was an ugly fight to begin with; the bull, a dun with a crooked right horn, charged the holding-pen gate and escaped before the bell, and Victor was sent into the arena with only one foot in the stirrup and his scabbard unbuckled, while the enraged bovine bucked across the dusty floor. His horse kept them away from the bull's flinging back legs while he settled into a good seat, but he steadied himself only to find he was at a distinct disadvantage tactically: towards the center of the bowl, caught between the bull and the large overhanging box seat where the judge sat. He turned the mare around and backed her, slowly, towards the long wall of the oval arena and pushed against the bull in a series of defensive, though rather aesthetically lacking, gateways, which were more difficult because he was moving the wrong direction for the intended execution of half of them. He had to completely invert one, which voided the movement of his arm of its bird-like effect and looked clumsy and unprofessional.

He reached the wall, and, desperate for the points he knew he had already lost, began his first offensive gateway to his right, where he thought the bull was headed; but the bull, still furious, kicked itself almost completely around its own right hind flank and then swerved left, towards them. The mare sidestepped, but the bull's straight horn caught her at the back edge of her armor where it had rusted slightly from an old dent, and the horn sank through into her hind leg. She screamed and bucked forward on three legs, out of the path of the bull, who swung around widely to come at them again from the other side. Victor pulled his sword, twisting in the saddle, and shoved it like an axe through the lower part of the bull's jugular.

It was tradition in that country that nobody knew a bullfighter's horse's calling-name except the bullfighter himself (the pedigree

name was the one published in the lists); the idea was that it would then obey only the rider in the arena, although often it just led to the horse becoming confused about its name. Victor's horse, which he had raised from a foal, knew her name perfectly, and while the vet pumped her full of painkillers and examined her leg, Victor murmured her name in a low voice like a charm while he stood by her head and stroked her neck.

"Nothing broken," the vet said, straightening up to reach for antibiotics and solvents to clean the gaping wound. "But the muscle is totally severed, and some tendons. She'll heal, but she won't fight again."

"Are you saying that because she won't fight again, or because the Equinox is in three weeks and you don't want an idiot bullfighter putting an ideal fighting horse back in the arena before she's healed?"

The vet smiled, pressing his lips together. "A little of both. It depends on how it heals, and I like to be proven wrong by a good outcome as opposed to a bad one. Either way it will be six months, at least. There may be a fear factor, as well. She may not want to fight again. Odds are not good." He patted her good hind flank. "She is an ideal horse. They shouldn't have sent you in there to fight an escaped bull."

"I shouldn't have been an idiot."

"That was a perfect storm, man. Even the best captains can't predict those."

"The best captains don't have to," Victor said, "because they're not idiots." He stroked his horse's nose. "I'm sorry, Selah."

The two days' drive to Guell took Victor one-and-a-half days by rail; when his train reached the town limits it was dusk, and the walk from the train station with the package under his arm felt long. He kept getting stopped by old acquaintances in the street. Victor was glad to see them and to be home, but anxious to see

Annabelle, and he kept his exchanges as short as possible. When he reached the Mayor's house he started around back, changed his mind, and then rang the front doorbell.

Edward answered the door, and grinned widely to see Victor. "Annabelle's getting her hair worked on," he said. "But come in and sit down."

"I brought her dress," Victor said, holding the package out with both hands. Edward took it, yelled up the stairs for Annabelle, and set the package on a sofa in the sitting room. "We'll give it to them later," he said, "otherwise it'll be another three hours before you see Annabelle." He sat down, and Victor did the same. "I saw about your horse in the paper," he said. "You won't be able to fight her in the Equinox?"

"No," said Victor, "which is what I came to speak to Annabelle about."

"Oh, well, I wouldn't worry too much about it," said Edward, smiling a little, and Victor had to ball his hands into fists to prevent his first response. "This wedding is turning out to be very entertaining. They're both too stubborn to back down now. It's like watching a tiger fight a pit viper."

"Which one's the pit viper?" asked Victor before he could stop himself.

Edward laughed. "Your guess is as good as mine."

Just then they heard Annabelle on the stairs—"we've tried thirteen different hairstyles already and they're all equally awful and if I'm subjected to any more hairspray I'll probably lose half my brain cells"—She came through the doorway and saw Victor, who had gotten to his feet. Her eyes lit up and she launched herself across the room at him. He picked her up and kissed her soundly. "Hey now," Edward said lazily. Victor set her back down but she did not let go of him. His whole body relaxed in something like relief at the feel of her hands.

"Oh, goodness," said Edward, "look at the time." He got up and headed through the swinging door into the kitchen.

"I'm so glad you're here," Annabelle said out of the side of her mouth as Victor went to kiss her again. "I have something to show you."

"It can wait," Victor said, and caught her up again, and she kissed him quickly and said, "No it can't! Even you'll think so, when you see it. Come on!"

"I don't think I will," Victor said, but permitted himself to be dragged by the hand out the back door and towards the garage, where the Mayor's car was parked outside in the drive.

"We were going to send it by rail tomorrow," said Annabelle, producing her housekeys and heading for the side door, "but this way you can take it with you." She flipped the outside light on and opened the door; the sudden light outside made it difficult to see when he stepped into the garage, until his eyes adjusted.

It was a horse. A stallion, small and red and obviously bred to fight bulls; Victor felt that if it had been able to wear its lineage on its coat, it would have. With training, it would be a better horse than his had been, and it had probably cost more than he would earn in his entire life.

"For you," Annabelle said simply, grinning. Victor didn't know what to say and so he said nothing, only pulled her close and stared at the horse.

"How...?" he began.

"I didn't," she said. "It was a wedding present, from the Baron Toldo." She made a face. "There's a letter for you in the house, along with his pedigree."

"From the Baron?" Victor asked, but he was already moving towards the horse with a hand outstretched. He patted its neck and looked back at Annabelle. "You want to be the first to ride him?"

\* \* \*

On the train back to Veparda, Victor opened the letter from the Baron. He read it twice, then crossed his arms and sat back, the letter on his lap, staring at the floor, until a pair of feet and a cane stopped in front of him. He looked up to see a thin, crooked man with a small grey beard and sharp blue eyes.

"You are the bullfighter-artiste, are you not?"

"I am Victor Plebesan," Victor admitted.

The man smiled slightly. "Very modest of you. May I sit down?"

"Yes," Victor said, surprised. "Of course." He sat up and rearranged his possessions to make room in the seat next to him.

The man sat quietly for a moment and then said, "It is a very good thing, what you are doing in the ring. It is good for this country."

"You are a fan of the bullfights?"

The man laughed. "You could say as much. I am a professor at the university in Veparda."

Victor nodded. "You study the art, then."

"Yes, I study the art. I have not seen a bullfighter like you in, oh, forty years. Since I was a boy. I saw Leopold Krakar fight in '24."

"You saw the '24 Equinox?" Victor's voice was full of longing.

"No, the qualifier. My father couldn't afford the tickets to the Equinox. But even his work in the qualifier was exquisite. He understood the weight of the connections between art and history, and the people and their leaders. It was in every movement of his arm. That was a beautiful time; we had just won the Nine Years' War, but the people were hungry for another great purpose, and bread. They found it in art, in the bullfighter's ring, and in scientific progress." The professor smiled again, sharply. "I spent the rest of my life studying these connections. You do not forget the things that enlarge your heart when you are a boy."

"No," said Victor softly. "You don't."

"You know about the protests?"

"A little."

"The people are hungry for purpose again," said the professor, "and they will find it in art and progress, or in war." He sighed. "I am glad there is another bullfighter to remind them which is better." He stood up and put his hat on. "Good luck, Victor Plebesan," he said, and ambled away down the aisle.

Victor watched him go, and then picked up the Baron's letter for a third time.

*Dear Victor,*

*Please accept my congratulations on your impending marriage, and the gift of the horse, Atlas. There is no horse with a finer pedigree to be found. I was sorry to learn about the loss of your own horse, as I have always been a fan of the bullfights and of the artistry involved, and a friend of the Kantigo family.*

*I have been thinking much of the unrest in the provinces and the lower parts of Veparda, and of the upcoming Equinox, and so it is with these thoughts that I offer my support in the form of your horse and partner in the bullfights. I expect you are a man aware full well of the connection of the hearts of the people with the hearts of the bulls and the long history that lies in that connection. I hope you are a man aware full well of the consequences of action, of leadership, and of art.*

*Again, my most sincere congratulations and best wishes for your success. I plan to be in attendance at the Equinox, and will be pleased to find you there with Atlas should the qualifier favor you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Baron Toldo*

Victor folded the letter carefully and tucked it into his jacket pocket, where it stayed for the remainder of the journey. A small boy across the aisle who had been staring looked away when Victor finally glanced up.

\* \* \*



"The Baron," Emmanuel said. "Gave you a horse."

"Yes," Victor said shortly, slamming the door to the truck. "And expects me to stop eating the hearts of the bulls, or so I think I gleaned from his political meandering."

"Will you?"

"I don't bloody know," said Victor. "Look at the *horse*."

Emmanuel eyed the beast through the slats of the trailer. "It's a hell of a horse."

"It's the best horse I've ever seen. It's the best horse in the *country*. His great-grandsire was The Luthier, for God's sake."

"You seem upset."

"Of course I'm upset!" Victor said, and kicked the truck wheel viciously, scuffing his shoes.

"You can't afford a horse, and now you have the best horse you've ever seen. Why are you upset?"

"Because I can afford this kind of horse least of all," he spat. "The kind that costs something other than money." He slumped to the ground and put his head on his knees.

"Ah," said Emmanuel. "But can you afford to refuse it?"

"What do you mean?" said Victor, his voice muffled.

"Well," Emmanuel said apologetically, "the Baron is *very* close with the Kantigos. Close enough that a potential member of the family refusing his gift would be a terrible insult."

Victor groaned in comprehension. "And the Mayor hates me already."

"Mayor Kantigo has reason to...doubt the wisdom of this particular match for his very beautiful and talented daughter, yes."

Victor smiled ruefully and looked up. "Are you ever not a diplomat?"

"Only in my secret heart," said Emmanuel. "When nobody who pays me is looking."

"What about Annabelle?"

Emmanuel thought for a moment. "Annabelle is a wildcard in many ways, and she often plays the devil's advocate for the Mayor's political decisions, which is why he values her input so highly and wants to see her succeed politically, as well. But they are her family, and she loves them, and would not want to cut off ties with them, I think." He frowned. "She does love you very much. I don't know about Annabelle."

"What do I do?"

"I suggest that you qualify for the Equinox using the temporary loan of this magnificent horse. Remove yourself from other matches to continue training it for your personal preferences, thus giving yourself time to think it over while not appearing to lean too heavily one way or the other."

"Very diplomatic."

"Quite."

Victor qualified for the Equinox almost without effort; the qualifier took place in a small suburb on the edges of Veparda and the judge was a local soldier, previously a farmer, who had recently been given a title for deeds in service to the king. The crowd sighed collectively when Victor rode into the arena, his brown uniform and the red coat of Atlas shining in the sun; he spied the tops of small boys' heads peeking over the walls to watch and dozens of men in the cheap seats with their faces painted in fake blood, and his stomach tightened at what he was about to do. The bull, white and grey in ugly splotches, was lazy and fat and old, and Victor had to pull a series of aggressive gateways to make the bull charge. Atlas responded to every touch of Victor's knee and pull on the reins, sometimes to their detriment; once or twice Victor shifted his weight for comfort and Atlas, confused, moved in the direction of the shift and put himself in the way of the bull. Victor clamped his teeth together in annoyance and provoked the bull with a railroad

gateway, which sent Atlas in a straight line directly at it, and when the bull finally responded he sliced its windpipe and left it to die.

A reporter, who had been dangling his legs into the empty bullpen during the fight, called to Victor as he rode through the fighter's chute back to the prep rooms, "Why didn't you eat the heart?"

"Wasn't enough heart in that bull to take a bite of," Victor shot back as he rode by. It was not the whole truth, but it was enough of one that he felt justified. At the awards ceremony the judge gave him the ear and clapped him heartily on the back, and Victor did not smile, and the afternoon sun was in his eyes.

"I shouldn't have won," he said on the ride back to the hotel, shaking his head.

Emmanuel replied, "Of course you should have. The bull was no choice of yours."

"That is part of the fight," said Victor, "and should have been considered."

"So is the inability of proper consideration by the judges," countered Emmanuel, and Victor smiled grimly.

"You're no fool, Emmanuel, and you know what I mean."

Emmanuel sighed. "Yes." He looked out the window momentarily, then turned back to Victor. "So what will you do?"

"With the Equinox?" Victor asked. "God knows."

"Have you spoken to Annabelle?"

"No."

Both of them fell silent; as they passed the gates of the city they also passed large crowds holding signs, some with drawings of bloody hearts painted on them, and nothing else. When he rolled down the window to speak to the guard, Victor saw a man on the edge of the ropes clench his fist and hold it against his heart, his eyes on Victor.

"What did that mean?" Victor asked when they had driven through the gates. Emmanuel looked at him blankly and Victor repeated the gesture.

Emmanuel looked surprised, and then carefully rearranged his features to seem impassive again. "The slogan for these protests is, 'The hearts of the bulls are the heart of the people,'" he explained. "They are protesting the high taxes on cattle ranchers and exportation. They claim the Baron is using it to fund his private military and crushing revenue. Many people have lost their livelihood and the prices for tickets to the bullfights have nearly tripled."

"Oh, hell," said Victor.

That night he called Annabelle from the hotel courtesy telephone by the elevators; there was a lag in the connection and her voice was unnaturally loud.

"How'd it go?" she asked. "Mama, I'm on the phone. Yes. Okay."

"I made it," he said, after the conversation on the other end had stopped.

"Oh, Victor, I knew you would! That's wonderful!"

"I shouldn't have," he said. "The bull was worse than useless."

"Victor," she said, "that's not the point. The point is to get you into the Equinox. Which you did, which is wonderful!"

Victor ran a finger lightly over the buttons on the phone.

"You're right," he said. "That's why I started this."

"What's the matter?"

"Do you remember that letter from the Baron?"

"The one about Atlas? Do you like the horse? How is he?"

"The horse is perfect," Victor said impatiently, "but the Baron asked me in the letter not to cut out the hearts of the bulls."

Annabelle said nothing for a moment. "That's ugly."

"Yes," Victor agreed.

"Did you do it today?"

"No," said Victor. "Of course, I didn't."

She sighed in relief; Victor took a deep breath. "Maybe you shouldn't fight again before the Equinox," she said. "Avoid pissing off the Baron."

"I already pulled out of those fights."

"Oh, good."

"Not good," he said. "I need to pay the vet bills for the grey; I had to sell her tack to pay the last one."

"I'll wire you some cash today."

"That's not the problem."

"Victor, don't be stupid."

"It's a little late to hope for that," he said before he could stop himself.

Her voice went rigid. "What does *that* mean?"

"Nothing," he said. "I'm just frustrated. This is more than I thought I was getting into."

"All you need to do is get through the Equinox," she said, soothingly. "Then we'll have the wedding, and you won't have to compete anymore if you don't want to."

He laughed. "Yes, just get through the competition with the best bullfighters in the country, and win it."

"You're the one who acted like it was a given." Her voice made him imagine her eyes rolling.

"I don't have any other options now."

"I'm not the one who volunteered you for this."

"No, you only arranged the most expensive wedding this country's ever seen," he snapped.

"Well, you don't have to go to that, either," she said coldly. He felt sick.

"Of course I'll be there," he said. "I just didn't expect to have to pay for it with my art."

"Oh, yes, because your *art* is what made you enter the lists after refusing for, I don't know, *your whole life*," Annabelle flared. "It's not *my* fault your head's the size of a cow's distended uterus and you had to prove you were the greatest bullfighter since Augustori the Great just because of some little comment—"

"And it's not *my* job to make sure you can afford to buy Perclusian silk menstrual rags and throw a wedding with a guest list the size of a small country—"

"*You agreed to all of this*, don't get mad at *me* because you didn't check your flank armor properly—"

"Yes, I'm so sorry my dead father can't afford to buy me a brand-new one of whatever my spoiled little heart desires—"

The phone line went dead and Victor looked blankly at the receiver before whipping it against the stone wall, where it split into three useless, jagged pieces.

Victor did not sleep well after that; he got up early to train his horse and at night he walked around the city aimlessly. He tried calling Annabelle three different times, and once she came to the phone but they had little to say to each other after they both apologized, stiffly and without feeling. On the fifth night he wandered over to the Veterinarian's stables where Selah was recovering. He stood outside the glass door looking into the sterile white hallway, but he couldn't see her. He was interrupted by a flashlight held by the night vet.

"What are you doing out on this lovely evening?" she inquired mildly, but with an edge to her voice, and he smiled and stepped away.

"Just came to see if I could see my horse," he said.

"Ah," she said, relaxing her shoulders in understanding.

"Which one is yours?"

"The grey with the gored leg."

She smiled. "I'd be unnecessarily worried about that one, too." She pulled out a set of keys. "You want to go in?"

"I would," he said. "If it's no trouble."

"I'm not busy," she said, and opened the door and led him partway down the hallway to a stall on the left, where Selah had limped over to the gate to see about the commotion. He put a hand to her nose. "Hey, hey," he said, and patted her neck with his other hand. "How is she doing?"

"She's coming along," said the vet. "Not as fast as your fans would prefer, I think. But a couple of months and she'll be good as new, leg-wise."

He leaned his head to the side in dismissal. "As long as she's healing. The other stuff we can work out later."

She nodded. "I heard you found yourself a horse for the meantime."

He laughed at that description of Atlas while Selah settled her three-legged stance to enjoy being petted. "I was loaned a horse, with strings tied to the saddle."

"I hope you know how to ride without one, then."

"Me too," he said. He looked at the vet. "Thank you."

"Anytime," she said, and she walked him out in silence. The door shut behind them with a muffled thump.

"They say you didn't eat the bull's heart this last time," she said, and he swung around to face her.

"No," said Victor. "I didn't."

"The protestors are angry about it, you know. They think you betrayed the cause, that you are supporting the Baron."

Victor sighed and didn't say anything.

"I suppose that's what you mean by strings tied to your saddle."

"How do you...?" he started to say, and stopped. She raised an eyebrow at him. "When you have to put a horse down, for instance," he said, "how do you decide that's the right thing to do?"

When the owner is looking over your shoulder. Or when a little girl is crying about her pony."

"I remember what my job is," said the vet. "Or rather, what it isn't. I'm an animal doctor, not a magician. My job is to help animals. Sometimes that requires helping them die, even if little girls are crying. Even if they get angry and refuse to pay me."

Victor nodded. "Thank you," he said again. He went home and slept.

On the morning of the Equinox, Victor, out of sheer habit, reached for his shoe polish and a rag. Before he connected with the tin he stopped, letting out a very short and small laugh at himself, and then he put on his dusty shoes and poured himself a cup of coffee. The telephone on the bedside table did not ring.

On the way to the Equinox, Emmanuel drove calmly with perfect posture. They passed crowds of protestors, kept a mile's radius from the stadium under the guise of safety, but really for the purpose of keeping them away from the cameras. There was a line of purple rope, and armed police, and then the crowd abruptly turned to fans. Some of the fans' signs bore the bleeding heart of the protestors' signs, but with Victor's name underneath. Victor stared out the window and his arms hung uselessly at his sides while his feet tapped the floor of the truck. With every tap a small cloud of dust rose.

"Who is the judge?" he asked suddenly.

"What?" Emmanuel asked, blinking.

"Who is the judge?" Victor asked again, more clearly.

"Baron Toldo," said Emmanuel, after a pause.

Victor stopped tapping his shoes.

The bull Victor drew was young and enormous and black; all of the best bulls had been saved for the Equinox and everyone knew none



of the bullfighters would be slighted in the rankings for the bull he drew. Victor sat in the rooms beneath the stands and listened to the muffled roar of the crowd. Every once in a while a boy would run up with a token from Lady Someone-or-other, a handkerchief or a flower or a note, and Victor piled them at his feet without looking at them and waited.

Emmanuel came by when there were only two fights before Victor's and sat next to him on the bench. "Your shoes are dirty," he said, staring straight ahead.

"I forgot to shine them," Victor said. Emmanuel snorted. "Is Annabelle here?"

"No," said Victor. "Do you think they've found a stand-in for me at the altar by now?"

Emmanuel smiled, the long lines in his face more forgiving than usual in the dim light. "If they have, I doubt he'll hold up well in the wash."

Victor's smirk spread into a laugh that shook his whole body, and he leaned back against the wall, the tension that had gripped his solid frame for many days finally dissipating.

"Well, then," said Emmanuel slowly. "It looks like it's just you and the bull."

Victor looked at him, clear-eyed, and smiled.

"There's a shoeshine boy by the entrance," said Emmanuel. "His prices are exorbitant but I think you could talk him down. Seeing as you're a bullfighter, and all."

Victor stood. "You only said that because no one who's paying you is looking."

"Yes," said Emmanuel. "I am not a bullfighter."

The bull was massive and bellowed continuously. When Victor rode slowly into the arena, the afternoon sun turned the bull's black coat red. It rushed him immediately and Victor caught it in an

elegant opening gateway, herding it directly at the judge's box before it turned to charge again and he forced it into the first leg of a complex spiral pattern. Victor worked the Baron's horse in close to the horns, which spanned a distance the length of his own body. His movements were neat and controlled, even after his sword weakened the bull's neck muscles and the charges grew sloppy and angry. The bull took a long time to die and the crowd was growing restless while Victor worked to cut through the folds and fat deposits to pull out the chicken-sized heart. He held it for a moment, in both hands, while blood leaked from it onto his very clean shoes. Then he looked for the Baron in the judge's box and sank his teeth into the thickest part of the enormous organ, blood dripping down his chin. He chewed the rubbery flesh, rolling it over his tongue, and spat it out in the dust, and tossed the remainder towards the stands. When he left the arena he left on foot, his chin still bloody, and the very fine horse still standing obediently over the empty carcass of the bull.

In the records that year, Victor's name was listed in third place, with an asterisk beside it and a footnote, detailing the numerous objections filed after the Baron's fall from power by prominent University historians and philosophers regarding the judge's decision.

Born in the backwoods of the Empire State and sentenced to a lifetime of walking into furniture, **HILARY GAN** moved to Arizona in 2003 and intends to write her little heart out from that locale evermore. Her work has appeared in *Jersey Devil Press* and *The Fiddleback*; her story "The Pragmatist" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and selected as a Million Writers Award Notable Story. She likes dirty blues music, fluffy kittens, and egomaniacs.



## On the cover:

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### “Fictional Ruins” and “Finger Bang”

Jon Snoek

**JON SNOEK** is a bearded hippie from Texas who bears no small resemblance to Jesus, or to Papa Smurf when he paints his beard white. Don't let these gentle doppelgängers fool you: when the zombie apocalypse happens, he will shoot you in the face. Then he'll use your brains to make art. When he's not doing any of those things, he makes animated short films, which you can watch at [funnyordie.com/snoeked](http://funnyordie.com/snoeked).

