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# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

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## Editor's Note:

It's summertime in Jersey and we're all our own worst enemy.

We've got an entire issue chock full of stories about people betrayed by self, undermined by their own best efforts, and ultimately destined to fail because of their inherent, incurable flaws.

(Because nothing says, "Summer Fun!" like dangerous psychological projections of self.)

Grab the sunscreen and your anti-psychotics. That giant red ball in the sky wants you dead, unless, of course, it would prefer to drive you mad first.

Waited half an hour after eating?

Then dive on into Issue 31 of Jersey Devil Press.

– Mike Sweeney

# Big Lonesome Monster

Andy Dudak

At first I think I'm hallucinating. Are they some trick of heat and light? Desert phantasms? Reflections?

No, they have finally come, as Coyote predicted.

There they stand in the blazing Sun, looking propped up and awkward, like cornhusk dolls posed by a boy imagining heroes: the *Twins*. The larger one is a muscle-bound twit with a vacant expression, the smaller one a gaunt fellow with the restless eyes of a peyote wastrel.

I rise mountainously from my lake. I take my time, letting my visitors absorb the sheer scale of me. Water drains off my craggy flesh in great cascades.

The Twins adopt silly heroic postures, unsure how to proceed but convinced they're justified in coming to kill me. They have plenty of reasons to think so—there is no denying that I am a murderous fiend—but reason has never sullied the minds of these pretentious imbeciles.

Monster Slayer and Water Child. A laughable pair.

What they have is an idiot faith, unexamined and amounting to madness, in their purity of intention. And why shouldn't they? These "heroes" are spoiled rotten.

I have a lot of time to think about such things, here in my isolated desert pool.

Coyote told me these two striplings are backed by a higher power, one whose intentions are not so muddy. This power's hypothesis? According to Coyote, who is never completely reliable, I am the archetype of all monsters. If I die, all the others will follow. Coyote says I am the perfect form from which the degenerate ones proceed, the ideal they strive for. I am *Monsterness*.

If it's true, and the Twins kill me, I suppose the other monsters will lose their shape, melting like winter frost on morning hardpan.

None of them—Horned Monster, the Bird Monsters, Monster Who Kicks People Off the Cliff—would have me to emulate anymore. They (the Hero Twins and their people) think this proves that I am evil. What they don't realize is that all motives are selfish.

I've had centuries in the forlorn places of the world to figure this out.

Why are people kind to each other? Because such behavior results in a reward sensation, warm and vibrant, like the blooming sun of fermented corn in their bellies. If altruism didn't make them feel like that, they wouldn't be altruistic.

So why are the Hero Twins standing in my lake, waiting for me to make a move? Because playing heroes is fun. They'll get plenty of women. Monster Slayer will be chief, and Water Child head shaman. Beyond these obvious rewards, they'll get that private sensation no hero admits to. Even if I destroy them, they'll have their reward: In the last moment before death, as I grind their puny bodies between my molars, they'll adore themselves.

My mother named me Big Lonesome Monster, just before she abandoned me in the wilderness to die. I was the product of her brief masturbation with a bull's horn. So much for my lineage.

Of course there are rumors that my father is the Sun. Coyote told me this, but he/she might have been lying.

When I told him/her about the bull's horn, he/she said that both stories could be true. The Sun, Coyote said, impregnated my mother, using the bull's horn as a sort of messenger. According to Coyote, the Sun gets a lot of His pleasure this way. There is even the rumor that all monsters are the issue of such scandals, a rash of which flared during the time when men and women lived apart, when females had to get inventive to satisfy themselves.

But Coyote says a lot of things. Coyote, that filthy thieving wandering hermaphroditic liar, is the closest thing I have to a friend. I tolerate him/her, because he/she is simple like me. We follow our appetites and make no apologies. We don't pretend that our motives are anything but selfish. Well, Coyote does, now and then, but only for the amusement of playing a new role.

The reason I'm thinking about this now, as I stare down the so-called "Hero Twins" in my lake (and wonder again why they're standing in that cold water, upside-down of all things, instead of right-side-up on the shore) is because they too were sired by the Sun.

Their mother, White Shell Woman or Changing Woman—whatever the trollop's name is—was fertilized by messenger, by a sunbeam rather than a bull's horn, if I'm to believe Coyote. A dazzling sunbeam: more poetical than a horn, I admit, but why should that damn me to monsterhood while the twins get a life of ease?

Did the Sun intend this disparity, or was it an accident of His novelty-seeking manhood? Maybe the twins know. They've just come from His house in the clouds over the Rainbow Bridge: He armed them for my murder. If He is my father...

I'll try not to think of that. Anyway, maybe He's just testing me. He tested the Twins before He accepted them. Tried to boil them alive, poison them, and impale them on crystal spikes, according to Coyote. Not to mention all the obstacles they had to overcome just to get to His house in the first place.

Their smug heroic pretense infuriates me. Disgusting enough when fertilized by actual bravery, but in their case a loathsome farce! Every step of the way they've been spirited through, ferried across, and bailed out of their troubles, by a veritable menagerie of guides and allies: Spider Woman, Little Wind, Rainbow, even Coyote (he/she was bored), and countless others.



Old Age warns them to stay off her path—walk beside it, she suggests, the simplest thing in the world—and what do they do? Forget! And what does Old Age do? That hag: she *forgives* them! Makes them young again! Not that it mattered. Spider Woman had already given them medicine feathers, chants, and other crafty trinkets to make them virtually invincible.

I can't wait to devour the well-armed pups, feel them squirming and shrieking inside me, never mind the hero-fantasies they'll enjoy in their final moments.

Here they are, the brats: passengers, passive observers on "their" quest. Even now, they've been armed by the Sun to slay me. And the Sun Himself is probably standing by, ready to help should they manage to foul things up. Yes! There He is! In the lake with the Twins, blazingly round and perfect!

I'll swallow them all! I'll drink the whole lake down and them with it!

I've worked myself into a fury now, and the desert trembles in sympathy. I imbibe the lake in one violent gulp. No small task, but I'm Big Lonesome Monster! Down it goes, into my cavernous belly, graveyard for so many thousands of Navajos. But I can't hold all that water for long. Anyway, they should be dead by now. I'll spit the lake up and enjoy the vision of their floating corpses.

Up you come, fathoms!

There they are. The waves settle, and I see them clearly. Still alive, the Twins stand tall, upside-down, proudly brandishing their weapons. Probably some charm of that bitch Spider Woman's! And the Sun is shining bright as ever: I hoped He would be extinguished by the deep dark of my stomach. I want to see Him a black, dead disk.

So, they are strong. I'll swallow them again. No one could survive a second time.

I squat in the desert, boiling the lake and my enemies deep in my gut. The desert is brilliant, the sands bristle with spears of light, and the horizons shiver. Doubt grips me. I concentrate.

I vomit the lake a second time.

The waves settle, and there they are again, alive as before.

I swallow the lake a third time.

I beat my swollen belly, red-fisted, mad. It echoes with its cargo of water like a Hopi drum, resounding, an irregular beat of rage. Several times—four, to be exact—I think I feel their bodies breaking, but maybe it's my own bones and guts. My stomach is numb now. Whether with the freeze of lake water, or the punishment of my fists, I don't know.

Up they come again. I panic: they're unharmed.

I drink a fourth time, not blind to the significance of the number. In Coyote's stories, everything happens in fours.

Now I'm desperate. A voice (my own? Coyote's?) tells me to look up! Look up! Something important will be made clear! Something vital!

The heat. The bright day. A nearby pair of shadows...

I ignore the voice. I'm eager to commit my latest crime against the world, even as something Coyote once told me flutters through my mind and gives me pause: he/she, in a gleeful manner, confided that monsters everywhere are subject to a peculiar weakness. He/she boasted that he/she had seen this confirmed all over the world—in the northwest, where he/she went about as a raven, in lands across the seas where he/she took the guise of a monkey, or a spider, or men with names like Hermes and Loki.

Incredible now that I recall these details, but not the weakness in question.

Anyway, the son/daughter of a bitch was probably lying, just to rile me up. That was the first time I tried to kill him/her. We have something of a tumultuous friendship.

I bury my doubt—something I’m quite adept at—and take up a great spear I once used to skewer sixteen Apache warriors (four times four is sixteen) and roast them over their burning camp before swallowing them in one slurping, sucking gulp.

Four times four *is* sixteen. Does that mean I’m part of the universe Coyote describes? The Universe of Fours? Am I subject to Its laws? I always considered myself above that system. Arrogant, I know, but I’m so big!

Again the voice tells me to look up. But a strange impetus—or lack of one—prevents me. Not laziness exactly, but a cousin of it.

I stab myself, my scream of pain rolling out across the desert to the four mountains of the four directions.

A fountain of water and blood and stomach acid geysers forth, flashing in the Sun (how is He shining on it from above when he’s plainly in the water with the Twins?), hissing, steaming as it hits the sun-cooked desert floor.

I stab again and again. More fountains. This time I’ll get them. They’ll be floating face down in the water, full of holes like me! And the Sun: His light will drain out through His spear wounds. Will it pool like blood, that light?

I lie in my now-gory lake, and I can’t believe it: they’re still alive! I’m weak, pierced by four wounds from this absurd battle with myself. I can’t drink the lake a fifth time. Does that mean I’m subject to the Law of Fours, or is it a coincidence?

But I’m still strong enough to lunge forward and snatch them from the depths, and throttle them.

First I hurl my four lightning bolt spears. Four is all I've ever had. I never thought to make more. They miss, or get extinguished by the water. When the waves settle and the steam dissipates, there stand my enemies, smilingly unperturbed.

I focus on the fact that there are three of them. Three enemies. What does that say for Coyote's numerology? Ha!

"You think you've won?" I demand, my voice rolling across the desert in the four directions. I consider enlightening them, wiping those smug grins off their faces before I annihilate them. Would they comprehend the nature of their heroism? They've never had to think for themselves.

Monster Slayer puffs up like a ridiculous bird, filling his chest with hot air for a dramatic reply. He pauses, blinking. I grin as Water Child leans over and whispers something in his ear.

"You have slaughtered thousands of my people!" Monster Slayer proclaims. "You are ab-abhorrent!"

He doesn't understand. Neither does Water Child, who merely possesses a more complete armory of his peoples' delusions. My fury escalates. If they had come in a spirit of practicality, it would be different. I am a danger to them, after all. Logic dictates I must be dealt with. I would still fight back, of course, but with respect. How I've pined for that, to be matched against mental and spiritual equals! But the knowledge I have for them would shatter them. A good portion of their pathetic culture would go up in smoke, and that would be a slow, cold revenge. Now my blood boils even as it drains away.

I plunge into the lake, grasping, flailing, screaming with the bloodlust that is my real name. But the Twins and their Father (our Father?) escape me. They break up, vanish into the void of the lake, only to reconstitute after I give up and the water settles.

Another charm of Spider Woman's?

"Look up!" cries Coyote. His/her voice is definitely in my ears, not my mind, this time. He/she is throwing his/her voice, probably from some distant hilltop. It's one of his/her oldest tricks. I look up,

if only to catch a glimpse of him/her—I know it cannot help my plight.

At first I take no notice of the Sun in the sky. Where is Coyote? I see a fleeting shape on a distant ridge—hard to track, with the Sun blinding me—and then it's gone.

The revelation comes moments later:

The Sun is in the sky.

And on the opposite shore of my lake stand the Hero Twins.

Now I understand, even as the first lightning bolt pierces my chest, courtesy of the Sun. I laugh bitterly as I'm flung backwards, scattering the lake and its beguiling reflections in an explosion of sudden steam.

Reflections: that was the weakness Coyote teased me about. The defining characteristic of my race, he/she jeered, is that we can't distinguish reflection from reality. Now I remember, but too late.

The moisture dissipates in the four directions. The Twins cheer.

I manage a laugh. Weak as I was, Papa had to make the first blow for them. Now He makes a second, again in my chest.

The Twins hang back, eyeing the Sun for His signal to attack. Monster Slayer's expression of simultaneous fear and self-righteous bravado is insufferable.

My lust to kill has never been stronger, but I cannot move. The Sun's bolts have pinned me to the desert floor. I'm impotent, made safe for the Twins, like a bird lamed by a cat and given to her kittens for sport.

They advance haltingly, overeager, cringing, exultant. They load their brand new bows with lightning bolts.

"Do it!" bellows the Sun impatiently. "Get it over with!"

I look directly into His brilliance, beyond it, into His face. He tries to stare me down, but in the end looks away. And I know Coyote was right.

The Twins' bolts hiss forward, dragging with them the tumult of summer thunder. With the Sun's bolts they make up four. In the

instant before they strike, I understand the totality of the Law of Fours, a law that even *I* am not big enough to break.

I did have a fourth enemy. And, now, he at least dies.

**ANDY DUDAK's** fiction has appeared in *M-Brane*, *Anotherealm*, and *Schlock Magazine*. He has worked as an editor, writer, screenplay analyst, and illustrator. His graphic novel *The Assemblers* is available on Amazon. He currently lives in Beijing.

# Bonnie and Clyde

Nicola Belte

He sits upright on his haunches in the middle of the rug, sticks out his paws, and lets his tongue loll from his mouth. No. Too keen. He rolls onto his back, arms and legs in the air, and wriggles on the floor like there's an itch in the middle of his spine. No. Too cute. He sits cross-legged, shoulders slumped, as a fist of sunlight punches through the curtains and raps its knuckles on his head. He feels silly, almost scolded. He just can't get into it today.

He gets on all fours — *that never fails* — and growls, scrambling up as a car door slams shut outside, yanking the curtains together. He can't have them peering in, not after last week. It's bad enough when the postman leaves his packages with his neighbors, but when they "accidentally" open them. He peers out and sees her head bob along above the hedgerow. *Nosey bitch*. He imagines her in her immaculate kitchen; her lips puckered and her eyebrows near jumping off her face as she pulls his beautiful new tail from the box, like it was gross matted hair from a plughole.

*Fence panels*, he thinks, *ten foot high ones*. Anticipating all the al-fresco fun that he and Bonnie will then be able to have, he shakes his fluffy head, making the tiny silver bone dangling from his collar bounce.

She's late. He's given up waiting in the middle of the floor; he'll assume position when he hears her key in the door. She hadn't look impressed when he'd given her a key. He'd covered her eyes, and slipped it into her hands, and she'd looked at it like it was something he'd emptied out of a pooper-scooper, and *then* complained that he'd smudged her nose.

He sighs and slumps down on the lumpy floral sofa. He runs his hands across the greasy armrests, faded and worn from too

many nights crashing out when he was too drunk to get to the bedroom—before they'd met, of course.

It's humid, and his suit is beginning to itch. It's dry clean only, and his mother's friend works at the laundry. The last time he went in he'd told her he'd been to a fancy dress party. The time before that he was making balloon poodles in disguise, for the sick kids in the hospital, stuttering and going red as her long nails scratched at the stubborn clumps in the fur.

He drinks a beer. He's hungry, but he wants to wait for her. Their bowls sit next to each other on the floor, filled with pink marshmallow hearts. He thinks of their noses touching as they eat, their bottoms wiggling harmoniously in unison. She must be working late. But surely she'd have called?

She wasn't herself last time. She didn't bother with the whiskers and she'd lost one of her feet. She'd kept going on about the taxi driver, who'd asked her too many questions—who'd stared at her—and then over-charged her, knowing that a racoon wouldn't argue back.

She'd lain stiff and grumpy in his paws, not yelping or yiffing or mewling or panting, eyes glazed over, like roadkill. She said she was tired, that she had stuff to do, *work stuff*, and that she couldn't be expected to spend all evening sniffing and scratching at each other. She'd said that she rather they just mate quickly, and be done with it, and crouched forward over the bed with her nose in the pillows and her tail in the air.

He calls her and reaches her voicemail, her professional one, and listens to her posh voice that sounds nothing like her. She sounds like a dog trainer, one that reigns with a rolled up newspaper, a stern finger, and a whistle. The girl he knew would bite her.

She was probably out with them. Those men. Those *successful* men. He imagines them all jostling about together in a crowded bar, their knees pressing together under the tables, talking about marketing strategies until the booze kicks in. Human hyenas. Pack



animals. Men. His heart races, and he reminds himself that they don't know her, not at all, not like he does.

He'd felt the tips of her tiny ears pricking into his chin as they'd fallen asleep, fingers and limbs intertwined. They hadn't. He'd seen the glittery freckles of glue on her cheeks when her whiskers came off, the way that her tail hung so perfectly between the curves of her buttocks, the shape of her wonderful breasts in her black and white leotard. They hadn't. These things were his and his alone.

He remembers when they met. He hadn't been sure about the party. Chatting online was one thing, but actually meeting those people? He'd sat in his car, tapping the wheel, trying to guess who the furies were amongst the people walking past. *Him? No way. Her? Perhaps. What am I? In or out? Fuck it.* He walked in.

It was meant to be. She, nicknamed Bonnie, named after her grandmother's dead terrier; he, a coyote named Clyde, because it sounded dangerous and wild and edgy, and he was anything but.

"Well fancy that," she'd said, foxily flicking her tail as they were introduced, and as Clyde looked into Bonnie's black-ringed eyes, and took her paws in his, the huskies and the bears and even that beautiful leopardess blurred into hazy dots on some distant savannah.

She isn't coming. He sits in the back yard, watching his stained white pillowcases blow on the clothesline; the black blurs left by her make-up like the mouths of sad ghosts. Something rustles in the trees. A cat wails. He thinks of her, burrowing in, her lithe striped body moving through the battered dustbin of his soul; sees her running away across the fields with his heart shredded in her teeth. *Bitch.* He pulls off his collar. He's a coyote, not a dog.

He'd howl, but he's forgotten how.

**NICOLA BELTE** lives in Birmingham, U.K, and has never dressed up as a woodland creature. When NOT doing that, she writes fiction, and you can find her at her blog [nicolabelte.blogspot.com](http://nicolabelte.blogspot.com)

# Change-Me Chelsey

Thomas Kearnes

She followed you. That's the only explanation. You left her in your daughter's room, left her behind a closed door, yet here she is! She crawls behind you as you ease down the frozen-food aisle. The pale light from the glass-doored freezers casts a harsh glow on her, as if she had been anointed to some position you with your lineless tan could never hope to attain. So down the aisle you go, grocery list crumpled in your hand, while Change-Me Chelsey scoots after you. Her palms and paisley jumper are stained black from the grungy supermarket floor.

Even among the echoing chatter of the other customers and intermittent loudspeaker price checks, you can hear her: *Change me, change me, change me.*

She's an ugly bitch. Your husband brought her home just days before Christmas. "It looks like someone punched her in the face," you said. You held up the box and looked through the cellophane window at Change-Me Chelsey. The clear apricot plastic skin. The white-blond hair stiff as paintbrush bristles. The nose like a tiny cauliflower. And the comic bulge around her rump where the mother lode, the diaper itself, awaited removal. You had seen her before at the toy store, hundreds of her synchronized like an ant army. But to look at only one of her, the one your daughter will love and cherish as you hope she does yourself, is almost too much. You looked at your husband. "It's not just for her," you said. "We'll have to put up with this, too." Your husband kissed your cheek because that's how he deals with hysterics. "It's a toy," he said. You placed it on the kitchen counter, but you were in a hurry, the stew sputtering on the stove, and the box fell to the floor and landed on its back end. Change-Me Chelsey stared up at you, her longing lips

pursed lewdly behind the cellophane. Her stubby arms opened wide and up, reaching for you. "Change me," she said. "Change me."

Your daughter cannot see the doll stalking her and her mother down the hair care aisle. She sits at the head of the shopping cart, her legs threaded through the metal lattice, as you push forward the cart. She wears an oversized purple sunhat. Your daughter is nothing but thrust elbows and pendulous feet underneath her hat. You cannot see her face.

*Change me, change me, change me.*

You want to ask your daughter if she hears anything. You want to reverse her position in the cart so she cannot see Change-Me Chelsey behind her. But that is not the proper use of a shopping cart child seat, and the last thing you want is to receive the contemptuous look that greets you in the mirror every morning. Another doleful exchange with your husband, his eyes puffy. No. With renewed conviction, you speed up the cart, your body at a slight incline like a hiker climbing a hill. "Wheee!" your daughter screams. "Faster!" You don't respond.

What were you so afraid of? A doll. A goddamn doll. So what? It followed you to the store. Big deal. The five lighted intersections between your house and the store, the eleven stop signs, the railroad crossing. (Flashing red means danger! Hurry, Chelsey, hurry!) You've made that same trip for years, will make it for years to come. So what if she wants to follow you, begging to have her diaper changed, roving the tiles on all fours like she's constantly taking it up the ass? Let her spend eternity trailing you, the clicks of your black pumps a metronome beat she cannot refuse.

*Change me, change me—change yourself.*

"Mommy, look!" Your daughter has twisted herself around in her seat and points ahead of you. Change-Me Chelsey waits at the end of the aisle beside a display of toilet paper. Super absorbent. Safe for delicate bottoms. You look behind where you had just

seen—well, *heard* at least—Change-Me Chelsey’s endless cry. No doll. No child. Just a middle-aged woman in a loose gray cardigan inspecting a box of hair dye. “Mommy, that looks just like my doll.”

You see, even your little girl knew better than to jump to silly conclusions.

“We need to go,” you say and wheel the cart around, nearly tipping over a sports drink display, heading toward the checkout lanes. “But I want my apples,” your daughter whines. You say her father will get some on the way home, but this does not please her. So little does. “Apples! I want my apples!” “God dammit, let me think!” This quiets her. Because of the sunhat, you can’t see her face, but you do risk a glance backward to see Change-Me Chelsey gaining on you as you slip into the shortest checkout line.

You’re stuck. You can’t leave behind all these groceries. You can’t run for the parking lot, stolen food and all. Your daughter wails. The people in line look at you like you let loose a foul odor. You bow your head, beaten by your daughter’s talking, pooping toy. It only wants what you want.

*Change me, change me, change me.*

*Fix me, hug me, love me.*

After a few moments, a woman who entered the line behind you urges you forward, and you sense something at your feet. You look down and there is Change-Me Chelsey. She is lying on her back—or would be if she didn’t possess a twist-off head and pivot limbs. She looks contorted and inert. You pick her up and then hold her. You turn to your daughter and show her the doll. That’s all it is: a doll.

“Look what I found,” you say.

From underneath the sunhat, two small, bony arms emerge, hands grasping like hungry hatchlings. “Give me,” your daughter says. “Give me.”

**THOMAS KEARNES** is a 35-year-old author from East Texas. He is an atheist and an Eagle Scout. His fiction has appeared in *PANK*, *Storyglossia*, *Night Train*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *JMWW Journal*, *Word Riot*, *Eclectica*, *The Splinter Generation*, *A cappella Zoo*, *Ampersand*, *wigleaf*, *Underground Voices*, *3 AM Magazine*, *Temenos* and elsewhere. He has also published in numerous gay venues, from the now-defunct *Blithe House Quarterly* to the new literary publication *Educe Journal*. He is columnist for *Flash Fiction Chronicles* and a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee.

## McRib Ending Soon

Clint Walker

She follows him through the drugstore, late at night, hovering over his shoulder while he tries to find his brand of condom. He's too embarrassed to buy them by himself. His excuse is, "I can't take those up there. They're going to know what I'm going to do with them." "Yes," she says. "That's the point. That's why you shouldn't feel embarrassed. They'll know you're getting laid." He ignores everything she says while he starts to pace. She asks which kind he's looking for, and he says, "The green box. It should say 'large.'" When she laughs, he responds that he's not trying to show off. He tries to explain that "large" doesn't really mean "large" anymore. It really means "medium." Since you can't order a small soda with your two-cheeseburger meal, just like you can't really buy "Trojan small" either. She laughs again and helps him look. She even goes to the drug counter to ask if they have his brand. They mutually decide on a suitable replacement.

They reach the parking lot and walk to separate cars and he thanks her for the help. "You saved the day," he says. "She'd kill me if I got off the plane and I didn't have these." She asks when he's coming back. He says a month or so. She asks if he'll be back in time for a mutual friend's wedding. He says he will be, but he won't. She will attend with a third-tier friend she scrounges up at the last second. He hugs her goodbye and drives off. His flight leaves early in the morning. She stands alone on the cold asphalt and looks up and down at the franchises on Restaurant Row: An entire street of backlit logos, all with black plastic letters affixed to bright yellow message boards, each and every one exhorting her to eat shit.

**CLINT WALKER** is a lifelong resident of Central Illinois. He has spent time as an English teacher and has also just completed his graduate studies at Eastern Illinois University. It's there that he won the James K. Johnson Creative Writing Award in 2010. His work has been published at *Carte Blanche*, *Mary Magazine*, and *Work Magazine*.

## Paper Heart

Ally Malinenko

When she was born the doctors suggested she not be named. She wouldn't last the night. No one had seen anything like it. *Ectopia Cordis* was an extremely rare disorder, a child born with their heart on the outside of their chest. But even then it is always at least flesh and blood. It is always a pulpy red organ.

What Mr. and Mrs. Kagit saw on their daughter was not. They called in the specialists who did not speak Turkish.

"But I don't understand," Mr. Kagit said, careful to speak slowly so as to not trip over his accent.

"Neither do we," the doctor said. He still wore his scrubs and Mr. Kagit, who fiddled with the hat in his hand, couldn't stop his eyes from darting down to the blood and then back to the doctor's face. Blood. So much blood.

"Is she all right?"

"Your wife?"

He nodded. One at a time. His feet were sweating in the plastic booties.

"We must warn you. Mr. Kagit, the child will probably not survive the night," the doctor said on his way back through the swinging doors.

Later, by his wife's side, he held the child. Her dark eyes, stared up at him, a wintry midnight cold. She didn't seem to blink. Nor did she fuss. On her chest, the child's small heart expanded and contracted, crinkling, made of paper, like an origami box. It was white and seemed to have the exact consistency of tissue paper. He lifted a finger, wondering.

"Don't touch it," his wife said, stirring in her sleep. "They said she will not survive."



“Shhhhh,” he soothed his wife. Her eyes closed and he brought his daughter closer to his body as if he could pass to her something real, something red and liquid. Something organic. His daughter. With her paper heart.

The reporters came when she survived the night. Then the vigils started. There were candles and weeping women. Baby Kagit was declared a miracle.

More specialists arrived from Istanbul. They took the child and laid her on cold metal and with more cold metal they poked and touched at her beating paper heart. She did not stir. She did not cry. In fact, she had yet to make a sound.

“We’re sorry,” the specialists said, passing the child back to her mother. “She will not survive. One cannot live with a paper heart. There is nothing we can do.” The specialists packed up and left town that night.

They loved her hard and fast, knowing she would not survive. But she did. After the first week they started to wonder, what if? They asked the doctors again but their answer never changed. She cannot live with a paper heart. When a week turned into a month, they named her, Narin Kagit.

When she was two months, they began to play music for her, watching her little paper heart flutter with excitement.

When she turned a year old, the whole town had a celebration; long lines of people filled the dusty streets, their hands full of warm food covered with cloth. The doctors let the Kagit family go home. Why not? Her one year was like a lifetime to most. Each morning, when Mr. Kagit lifted darling Narin out of her crib, her mouth still quiet, her throat fluttering but soundless, her eyes bright and laughing, it was a gift. They doted on her, they loved her, they kissed the dark hair that grew on her head. They kissed her downy eyelids, her round cheeks. They kissed her slender toes, her long arms. At night they wondered, inside never aloud, what she would have looked like if she were able to grow. Her warm

mocha skin, her dark hair, her black black eyes. She would have her mother's beauty and her father's strength. She would have the best of both of them.

They performed a ziyaret and took her to the türbe, lifted her in the air, and pressed her face against the chalky stone. Even then she did not make a sound. They prayed hard and fast for a cure.

When she turned two, they had another celebration. She was a blessed thing. A child of great importance. She was a message from Allah, from the Great Spirit. The town gathered to watch her walk and run, Narin's dark hair flowing behind her, her paper heart fluttering. She must be a message, they said, a message from the heavens. We should all live so free, they said. Praise, Allah. She's a prophet. Will she ever speak?

When she turned five, they decided, with a shrug of their shoulders, that she should go to school. What choice was there? So they packed her a small lunch and brought her to the schoolhouse.

"Don't let anyone touch your heart, okay taçyaprağı?" her father said. He drew with a finger a little circle around her chest and she nodded. "And you stay far from the water, okay?" The water would melt her paper heart, turning it to mush and stopping whatever force flowed through her veins.

As so she did. And the years came and went and came and went and Narin grew up, tall with a strong spine and long fingers and dark hair and black bottomless eyes. And eventually they all stopped thinking of her as their little miracle and the people of the town went back to work, back to their lives and when she passed them on the street they nodded as custom instead of gesticulating and kissing her palm which was by all means, just fine with Narin.

But still she didn't speak. She carried a slate at her hip and an endless supply of chalk was always dusting everything she touched and leaving little pocks of powder along her cheek or the back of her hands. She seemed unable to speak. Or unwilling. Her parents assumed it was part of her condition. A paper heart and no voice. But still, Narin was happy and light and good.

The day he arrived was just like any other. He hadn't planned on coming to this town, he told her later, but he hadn't planned anything, he said often and with a sigh.

His name was Damla and he did not know his parents. He was thin, wiry, as if his body had been stretched too far over his delicate years. He had no memory of his parents. Only of the orphanage, the hot kitchen, later the workhouse. He left when he was eleven and had been walking ever since. He worked when he could and he walked. He couldn't remember how old he was.

He could not read so when Narin wrote on her tablet he shook his head. Instead he just stared into her eyes and she into his and they understood one another as millions of lovers have for centuries. Damla, like Narin, was born different. But he was never thought to be a message from Allah. Born without tear ducts his eyes leaked all the time. Even when he smiled, even when he slept, glistening tears, dripped down his face, staining his skin, like a river corroding rock. In the workhouses of other towns, they called him the devil. "Serpent tears," they hissed, spitting at the floor near his feet.

"I cannot stop," he told her, dabbing a stained cloth at his eyes. "I am always crying."

The first time they made love, she unbuttoned her shirt. Her breasts hung delicate and light, her nipples turned upward. Between them her paper heart fluttered. She climbed on top, and when he entered her, he touched her briefly, one slender finger just brushing her paper heart. His tears formed a halo around his head, staining the blanket.

They were not to be together, so naturally they always were. He wore no shoes so that he could steal into her home and climb into her bed. When he left she touched the warm dark spots on the pillow, left by his tears. He told her she was beautiful, kissed her slender arms, the nape of her warm neck, the hollow of her throat.

He traveled down her body carefully, always so careful to not let a single tear fall on her paper heart.

"Leave with me," he told her under a sky like a soap bubble. Damla propped himself up on one elbow, his long hair brushing his shoulder. The tears fell, one two, landing on the side of Narin's cheek as she gazed up at him. "Leave with me."

She shook her head and smiled, always smiled. Her sweet Damla, with his big plans.

"We can run away together. We can leave here," he begged.

She pulled him to her, her mouth closing over his to keep all those words inside. He kissed her back, pulled her on top of him, her paper heart fluttering.

But Damla had been right. They should have left. One miracle can bless a town, give it new life, and inflate it like a paper lantern to create a light against the darkness. But two miracles rub up hard against luck. Two miracles are suspicious, greedy. And a third miracle, secret love, is the most suspicious of all.

Towns talk. After the rains, they pull from the mud all the things that people bury. They pull up gravestones and fear. They pull up broken toys and hope. Sometimes they pull up lies and suspicion.

The fire started in the workman's camp where Damla should have been sleeping. Should have, but wasn't because Damla was in the poppy field, naked and entwined. The smoke rose like a living thing, tamping out the sky. The flames, new to this world and hungry, licked and tasted everything they could find. They even licked the workers whose screams reached the ears of the two lovers in the poppies. Narin and Damla dressed hastily, racing hand in hand towards all that death and destruction. By then people had gathered, passing bucket after bucket after bucket to try and snuff out the flames. Narin saw her father, sweat on his face, his hands shaking as he passed bucket after bucket after bucket and he saw her. He saw her quickly unclasp hands with the boy. He

saw her shirt mis-buttoned so that the collar was split wide and through it one could see the slightest crinkle of fluttering paper.

And the rest of the town saw it too. One miracle is a good thing. Two is spoiling it.

The people saw Narin, her clothing askew, her hair wild, tangled with bits of grass. They saw her now as a woman; as a dangerous woman. No longer was she theirs alone, their gift from Allah. And next to her, they saw Damla, the stranger, whose hands did not clutch bucket after bucket after bucket of sloshing water. Instead they wiped at his face, at his serpent tears which continued to fall, now mocking their pain. And they decided that he had taken too much. First, their sweet Narin and then their peace. He could not stay.

When the smoke cleared, the bodies lay scorched and still. Raw skin bubbled and popped. The death smell drifted everywhere. Eventually, it was all that they could smell.

When they threatened him, she did not speak. When they banished him, she did not speak. Damla did as he always did, took to the road, one foot and then another and then another.

"I told you not to let anyone touch your heart, taçyaprağı," her father whispered as they watched the boy with the serpent tears leave. The soap bubble sky popped. Her father did not stay to hear her first words, created by sorrow and birthed in pain, the harsh guttural words of a torn paper heart. When she cried, she let the tears fall until it turned first pulpy and then red and then, strangely organic.

**ALLY MALINENKO** writes poems and stories and occasionally gets them published. Her second book of poems entitled *Crashing to Earth* is forthcoming from Tainted Coffee Press. She currently lives in Brooklyn where she keeps re-writing the same novel over and over again.

# Crumplezone

Allan M. McDonald

Flip the coin.

Flip the coin.

Flip the coin.

I flip the coin.

I flip the coin and

I flip the coin and peer beneath my purple trilby with hooded, troubled eyes and lean against the lamp post, staring at the sun's benevolent gaze as it rides over the horizon one more night and man, it looks smug. Just fucking smug. It smiles like the cat's got his cream. Really annoys me.

Got to ignore that (but really, how can it be so damn happy) and focus on the two color blues who are holding intimate conversation over by the pond. They are sat on a yellow bench, which is just an incident waiting to happen. If they were red or green then what they are doing wouldn't be so obvious.

Blue and red. Fine. Subtle.

Blue and green. Acceptable. Seen often in company. Nothing to worry about.

But blue and yellow? Might as well stick a flagpole on your head which at random moments extends fifty feet in the air and signals a flying troupe of stunt airplanes, trailing a mile-long banner stating: "this person is a traitor this person is a traitor". Or something more subtle. It's *that* wrong.

As they

As they

As they

I watch as they

I watch as they talk

I watch as they talk quietly amongst themselves, unaware of my presence, leaning in towards each other, brushing their fingers against each other, writing invisible patterns on the back of thin, blue, skeletal wrists.

Aha.

That's how they do it. I pull out my camera and press the tripod button, remembering to hold it forward and take a step back. From out of the bottom three plastic legs shoot down and, by dint of small, clasping hands at the end of each leg, they afford stable purchase on the ground and I release my hold on the camera and watch it remain perfectly horizontal, suspended with no hint of give.

Pausing to snarl at the sun (who sticks his tongue out, the dirty rotter) I look through the lens and I frame them and take pictures. Snip snip snip. Focus on their hands. Snip.

My client will be a happy bunny, I think. Considering he is a bunny, I amuse myself with this play on words, grabbing the camera as the legs suck back into the body, and I tuck it in my pocket.

I narrow my gaze against the sun, offer it a well-placed finger, tuck my purple trilby over my eyes and relinquish my spot by the lamp post.

The blues by the pond; man, they have no idea what will hit them tomorrow.

The best thing about the bar, this bar, is that there's no issue with color. Never has been. Yellows are welcome here, as well as reds, which is pretty uncommon in this part of the world. Lucky for me because I'm a yellow and my contact here, the bunny, is red. I can't think of a single place in this part of whatthe(?) where a yellow

stunt dummy with a purple trilby and a bunny rabbit with red teflon armor can sit down over a few beers and have a civilized conversation. Other places people would look at you and you'd just get kicked out the door. No questions asked.

No blues allowed, though.

The camera must be a polaroid. By the time I have entered through the door, passing the bar and the weird alien fellas producing music through their enlarged glands (while entertaining a mitzvah in the gap between the buffet area and the men's toilets), the photos have been developed and the camera has palmed them into my hands. I spot the bunny by the cubicle, musing over the menu and I approach and — with grace and élan — I toss the photos onto the table in front of him, sit on the other side and watch him with my poker face.

He offers them his full attention. He's not quite a rabbit in the same way I'm not quite a stunt dummy but the reasons why this is the case are a) varied b) confusing and c) hard to explain unless you're a yellow stunt dummy offering a red, heavily armored bunny rabbit photographs of colors writing messages on the back of their wrists. You see the dilemma?

So he has hands and inspects each photo in turn, pulling them towards his face.

"Been arguing with the sun again?" he says, without looking up.

I grunt. "Fucker's following me. Haven't seen nightfall for a week now. How did you guess?"

"You know what he's like with the color yellow. Once he gets a sniff he won't let go, but," he sighs, leaning backwards, rubbing his eyes with his knuckles, "that's the way it plays. Keep the shining one happy and he'll light you the way home. Consider yourself lucky."

I say nothing. Poker face. Big plastic, yellow Poker face.

"Okay," he says, after a pause. "What do you want for these?"

I raise my hand to the passing waiter, who is comprised of



nothing but a series of polygonal mirrors and therefore easy to spot in a crowd. I order a drink: a Jack Daniels. It'll no doubt come back as a puppy or a lizard but one time in ten it's something liquid and one time in fifty it's actually something alcoholic. The waiter disappears in a violent orgy of reflected light in a room filled with multi-colored entities who gyrate and bop to the skiffle jazz produced by the energetic, contorted appendages of the aliens by the buffet table.

I pull out my coin and flip it.

"What I want is my sanity back. I want to speak to the man. I want the ticket."

Window

Window

the Window

I look out the Window

I look out the Window on the 23rd Floor and see that the scenery outside is moving back and forth, like a tide pulling in and out and I take a while to work out whether it is the building I am in that is breaking on the outside or vice versa.

Because of this motion and the effect it has on the building—and the constant sway and movement it causes—everything in the office is set up in a way to accommodate this. Desks and cupboards are suspended from the ceiling. The chair behind me and the one occupied by One-Eye Jake, the big controller, are on tightly wound springs that absorb the majority of movement. Cups and other potential sharp/breakable objects are instead made of various rubber and plastic compounds.

I've only been here a minute and already I feel seasick. Or land sick. Or building sick. Or scenery sick. I can't tell.

"Take a ssseat," says Jake, noting my queasiness, "you acclimate quicker if you avoid looking out the window for a while."

"I'm watching out for the sun," I reply. "Bastard's been hounding me for days."

"Consssider yourssself lucky."

"Funny, the rabbit said that."

Jake, it has to be noted, is a snake. Not any old snake but the kind that pop out of tins and are often popular on kid's birthdays or April Fool's Day. He bounces up and down like a harpsichord. He's yellow like me, so we have our allegiances but beyond that there's not much in common.

Except that he is my ticket to the man, and my ticket out of here.

Taking his advice I park myself on the chair-on-a-spring. Everything stops moving and becomes surprisingly calm. I feel the motion of motors whirring beneath my buttocks, counterbalancing the sway of the building/universe.

"Been inssane long?" Jake asks, fake orange tongue lolling out of his mouth. The polaroids are laid out on the table in much the same way they had been set out before the bunny rabbit. He inspects them with care and attention.

I scratch my head, dislodging my purple trilby.

"So long I can't remember my name."

I remember Claire and Tommy's name.

He chuckles. "Same here. I think I used to be a fisherman in Sssouthampton but then I get confussed and I'm not a fisssherman and maybe I'm a fireman instead." He sighs, and pauses meditatively for a moment, which is a weird thing to see on a pop-up snake. "It'sss all fucked anyway."

"Amen to that. Talking of fucked, what will happen to the happy couple?" I indicate one of the close-ups of the blues as they hold hands.

He gets cagey.

"We haven't picked them up yet. Sssurveillance, you understand." His words draw out, struggling over those slippery esses, his paper tongue rattling like a streamer in an air-conditioner.

"Where does this leave me? I need the reward to see the man about the ticket."

He gets cagier still.

"We both know this won't get you the ticket, nor to the man."

I let the words settle and wait for the carrot. The pop-up snake leans forward and beacons me close. Beneath us the desk swings. Our chair motors humm and whirr, happy to help.

"But I know sssomething that sssurely will..."

*Tron*

*Tron*

*Tron*

Remake of *Tron*

"Ever feel you're in a really tacky TV remake of *Tron*?"

"Starring who?"

"The guy out of, you know, that prison show. One with the hair? Kinda spiky? Looks a bit effeminate but could kick your ass for pointing it out?"

I think a while.

"No. If you were talking about that man who fought Harrison Ford in that gay musical comedy then yes. Otherwise no."

This, I think, has to be the longest password exchange in the world.

I am sat in the very same seat I photographed under the burning sun four days ago, talking to one of the very same blues whilst he begins to tattoo patterns on the back of my wrist. He has long fingernails and they scratch against my plastic skin like they're being drawn down a tall blackboard. The feeling is not pleasant.

"It isn't often we get interested yellows," he says in a soft voice. "May I ask why?"

I point.

"You see that building?"

The scratching stops. "The governmental housing. What about it?"

We are both watching it now. It continues to wash back and forth. From here it looks like it's the building that moves, but it could quite easily be the ground. The building, by its very nature, is very deceptive.

"I can get you in there, to the top floor. One bomb." I make an expansive gesture with my hands, like something growing. "Boom. They'll listen then."

The blue's hand caresses the side of my head. I notice his black fingernails, long and uncut, his deathlike grin as his lips peel back over his blue teeth on his skeletal face.

"Again, I must ask why."

"I want the same thing you do: I want to be sane again. Taking down that is the first step. If that goes then the big guys up there," I point skyward, to the blue sky and the sun who for the moment has fixated on something else apart from me, "will have to take notice. They come down in one of those ships and we just take that bad boy and ride out of here."

"You make it sound very simple," he says slowly, but I know I've got him. His desire, like mine, is too strong.

"Down here," I reply with feeling, "simple is all we can handle."

Of course, this is a set-up.

The blues, under my tutorage, invaded the governmental housing only to find a top floor filled with heavily armed pocket calculators and themselves carrying a box with the word BOM written on the side that contained nothing but half-used pencil erasers.

And then, under orders, One-Eye Jake lined up all the blues and

set them on fire with a flamethrower. In the main square. With all the other colors looking on. The sun, red and angry, frowned on.

Now, stood at the front, agape in horror, I try to find form, some verbalization to the strength of my act but the screaming—squirming and burnt—tortured flesh blasts everything away into a searing image painting itself large on the canvas in my mind in long, bloody, murderous red, brown and black stripes.

“Congratulationsss,” lisps One-Eye Jake, bouncing up to me. “You’ve got your exit.”

In my hand he palms a ticket. He skips away, only pausing to reload the flamethrower. In the background calculators are clapping.

I take a look at the crowd, but they are mostly still enshrined in horror as the blues melt. I see the bunny but he avoids my gaze. I look up at the sun and he sees me and I feel the full force of a sudden rage that strikes the full distance between us and sets me on my ass. Gone is his happy, sweet visage, replaced by anger, hate and searing, visceral rage.

“Couldn’t you have just loved me?!” it screams.

“I just want to be sane! I just want to be sane!” I cry out, and on the ground I curl up in a ball and clutch my ticket. “I want my children and my family back.”

“Couldn’t you have just FUCKING loved me?!”

The ground shakes the words as they strike the earth. Around me buildings fall, more screams (this time from the non-burning citizens) fill the air but I’m too busy shrinking from the sun’s horrific vengeance. The air is hot, and getting hotter. Smoke and fire replace the heat. His anger is boiling the world alive.

“I want to go home,” I whisper, the tears streaming down my plastic cheek onto the earth. My purple trilby has long gone. “I’ve got my ticket and

and

and

and  
and I deserve  
and I deserve to go."

"Jake?"

" \_ "

"Jake, it's okay. You can open your eyes."

"Can't. The sun."

"Just open your eyes."

There is no heat, just a gentle warmth from whatever it is I am lying on. I stir slightly and feel the creak of leather and the same moment I smell it and realize there are no other smells, no burning flesh or napalm. There are no sounds either, just the rhythmic tick-tock of a clock somewhere up towards my right.

"I'm scared," I reply, because I am. I no longer feel plastic.

"Don't be." The words are warm, and come with a hidden smile. "You've made it Jake. Your ticket worked."

I breathe shakily, cross my arm over my eyes and cry in long racking sobs into the crux of my elbow. I do this for a while until the sobs shake themselves out of me, fading like foot-cramp until I sit up and open my eyes.

A small bald man sits in a black leather, expansive looking chair, a genuine smile splitting his face in half. I can see exultation in that smile and those eyes, but also weariness. Scratch that; he looks shattered.

My skin is pink and human. I'm wearing a gown. My chin itches, and I realize I have a beard. I scratch it with a hand and notice I am still clutching something.

"Open your hand," he says.

I open my hand, the one with the ticket. But it's not a ticket. It's a photograph of Claire and Tommy, arms around each other, young and carefree. Next to them Emily sits in front of me, the proud mother. The photo is worn and bent at the corners.

I place my free hand onto my face and cry slowly, quietly.

"Welcome back, Jake," the man says as I do this. "It's been a long, long road."

"I..." I start, sniffing. "I need fresh air."

He slaps his legs. "Well so do I! And some light. Open the window for me, would you Jake? I'm quite shot, to be honest."

He points and I follow his finger behind me to a set of thick black velvet curtains. Keeping hold of the ticket (no dummy, the photo) I get up, wiping back phlegm with my other forearm and approach the curtains. Already I am planning my life now. Gone is the insanity, the raging confusion, the acceptance of the surreal and super-real, replaced with a melancholic, calm emptiness which suits me fine. I throw back the curtains, and sunlight comes through.

Big and powerful and strong, intensely powerful and RED RED RED RED RED angry and oh my fucking god it's right outside my window a huge sun and its face is so damn angry and the skin peels off my flesh and I turn to dust and the sun is bellowing in pure unadulterated rage, it's mouth contorted and twisted

and it's

and it's

and it's

and it's

and it's everything I have ever

and it's everything I have ever been scared of.

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## On the cover:

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### "Beneath the World Teeth"

Andy Dudak

**ANDY DUDAK's** fiction has appeared in *M-Brane*, *Anotherealm*, and *Schlock Magazine*. He has worked as an editor, writer, screenplay analyst, and illustrator. His graphic novel *The Assemblers* is available on Amazon. He currently lives in Beijing.

