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**NOVELLA ISSUE**



# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

*Novella issue*

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## Editor's Note:

You've got a lot of reading to do, so I'll keep this short.

This issue collects the winner and first runner-up from JDP's inaugural novella contest and we couldn't be happier with the results.

First prize went to "*Merdeux*" by Jody Giardina, a wonderful sci-fi mash-up of alien invaders, Afghan war vets, and, well, poo. The fact that Jody first had the idea for this story while actually taking a crap in Afghanistan makes it even sweeter all around.

Our runner-up is "Surface Interval" by Nick Kimbro, who's crafted a neat little horror story that calls to mind the isolation and terror of such cinematic classics as the original *Alien* or John Carpenter's *The Thing*. Don't read it near the water.

That's it. Dig in to the double-sized Issue 33 of *Jersey Devil Press*.

— Mike Sweeney

## I.

Simon hadn't eaten any food of his own choosing in two years.

The revelation came to him as he sat at his kitchen table and, by the light of the budding dawn, surveyed the meal arranged there: one cup of raw sugar; half a stick of butter; a dozen beetles skewered with toothpicks, each crowned with a perfect, plump blueberry; a lock of hair from a golden retriever; a roasted red bell pepper filled with grilled and seasoned mouse sweetmeats; an orange rind; and a plate of blanched mushrooms. The hair was going to be a problem for Simon. Long fibers always were, because he tended to gag as they went down. The trick was to eat the hair first and drink plenty of water while doing it. After that, it was all cake. Granted, this would be the kind of horrible, beetle-filled cake a psychopath would feed you, but easier nonetheless.

Simon's inevitable coughing and retching noises woke his roommate, who made his own morning hacking and coughing sounds behind the door of the penthouse apartment's second bedroom. The door eventually opened and Early leaned languidly against the jamb, cigarette dangling from his bottom lip and eyes blinking slowly in the light.

He was wearing nothing but a pair of piss-stained briefs, which showed off how thin he'd gotten in the last few months. Early had always been the long and lean type, but he was beginning to border on sickly, and his pale skin and bloodshot, bag-laden eyes did nothing to help. He still cleaned up pretty well, assuming he took the time to shower and put on some well-fitting clothes. Besides, Simon wasn't one to throw stones here; his own swarthy skin was

drawn tight, and at this hour his brown eyes peered out from dark wells deep enough to draw water.

"Doc, my brother from another mother, it is too fucking early for this Early-bird. I don't need a worm that bad." He looked at the items laid out before Simon. "Had some hair this morning, didn'tcha."

"Yeah. Dog."

"Yeah? Whaddya know, I'm having some hair of the dog myself." Early moved one of his hands from behind the door and revealed a glass filled with some whiskey. He took a sip, moving and replacing his cigarette with the kind of dexterity that only comes from years of practice.

"Well, since I'm apparently up," Early said with fake exasperation, "I guess I should take a look at today's meal."

He slid over to the kitchen table and hunkered down to examine a box, which Simon had moved there for him. Simon and Early each received a box every morning, carefully prepared and hand-delivered by the cooking staff at *Merdeux*, the specialty restaurant that employed them both. Inside the boxes were smaller, temperature-controlled containers filled with the meal orders for that evening's patrons.

Early opened his box and sighed, pulling out one of the containers and dropping it on the table. "It's a good thing they pay me a boatload of money every month, because that," he said, pointing to the container, "is a goddamned jellyfish." He rooted further inside the box. "Rest of this actually looks pretty normal...up, wait. Spoke too soon." He pulled out another container and placed it on top of the first. "Pair of salamander heads in a pretty nice demi-glace."

"You should take extra fiber pills with your supplements today, jellyfish will be hard to push through." Simon tried to sound helpful and upbeat. "And you shouldn't drink so much, it dehydrates you. Plus you know they don't like the taste of hard

liquor."

"Screw it, I don't ever hear the SEETs complain," Early said with a dismissive wave of the whiskey glass. "Sometimes I can't stand this job. You know what I miss? I mean, really miss?"

"A quiet meal, eaten without the sound of others complaining about work?"

"Mmmm, yeah, let's just put a pin in that idea for now," Early said with a fuck-you grin. "What I really miss is pizza. Good old-fashioned pizza, which is all the hell over the place here in New York, so of course the temptation is everywhere. But what I'm talking about is pizza in the morning. Right from out the fridge, cold. Leftover pizza is the greatest breakfast of all time."

"Words can't express how depressed you've just made me."

Simon and Early met in the army during those long wars that ushered in the twenty-first century. They were stationed together at a combat outpost in some godforsaken mountain pass that hasn't seen outsiders since Alexander marched in and promptly marched the fuck right out, as Early put it. Simon had two years of pre-med under his belt before leaving college for lack of tuition funds, and he enlisted as a combat medic. He had hoped that the medic experience would look attractive to hospitals once he got out of the military with his GI Bill money. Early joined so he could blow shit up before settling down and becoming cop in Vermont, like his dad and two older brothers.

Most of the guys at the outpost called Early "The Regular." The nickname came about during the first few days of their deployment. The men of the small unit called themselves "The Regulators" after the posse led by Billy the Kid in the movie *Young Guns*. Several of the soldiers drew tiny six-shooters on their helmets. Before any patrol of the area, their CO, a young captain from Oklahoma who was actually named William, would shout, "Regulators, mount up!"



Every evening, just after sunset, Early would stand up from whatever he was doing and say, "Well, gentleman, this war thing is fun, but I have some important business to attend to," and head over to the porta-johns near the quarters. It didn't matter what was going on, what they had done during the day, or what they had eaten. Other men complained that the MRE cheese constipated them, that the scrambled eggs gave them the squirts, and any other manner of bowel disruption. But Early suffered none of it, his movements unperturbed. One night a sergeant, seeing Early get up, said, "Jesus Early, I ain't dumped in a week, but you go the same time every night. I could set my watch by your asshole." A young private yelled out, "Yeah, Sarge, he's not a Regulator, he's The Regular." The whole post was calling him The Regular by the next morning.

The nickname might have been forgotten over time, as those types of things come and go in a war, if not for one night when the post came under attack. It was nothing out of the ordinary, just harassing small arms fire from the surrounding hilltops. But it just so happened to occur right at sunset. Early was part of a crew manning a mortar, and they were ordered to send out illumination and suppressing fire. After the brief fighting was done, one of the other crewman went back into the ammo tent and discovered an empty artillery crate with a fresh pile of feces in it. He called out for the rest of the guys to come see. Early, unashamed, grinned and said, "Hey, they interrupted my evening constitutional. Neither rain nor sleet nor Haji attack will keep my ass from its appointed rounds." After that, there was no stopping the nickname.

Simon, like hundreds of medics before him, was known as "Doc," which suited him just fine. It was certainly better than some other handles, which included "Stinky Pete," two buddies called "Dickless" and "Dickless-er," and an unfortunate fellow everyone called "Vagosaurus Rex." Simon and Early bunked next to each other and struck up an easy friendship.

Two months into their tour, Simon and his patrol were involved in a heavy firefight after leaving a meeting with the elders of a remote village. Simon, who couldn't engage in the fighting unless actively protecting a patient, grabbed cover under the shadow of a large boulder and bitterly wished he could help his brothers-in-arms. He knew the leaders with whom they had just met—all smiles and promises of cooperation over dirty cups of tea and plates of seasoned rice and meat—had probably contacted the fighters now shooting at him. Some of them might even be participating. He clenched his teeth and fought a very real urge to run back to the village and open fire on the first people he met.

"Medic! Doc, get over here!" The cry came from a few yards further north along the ragged strip of rocks that passed for a road in these parts. Simon grabbed his medical duffle bag and, hunched over to provide the smallest profile possible, ran towards the waving arms of his comrades. He recognized the injured man as a staff sergeant named Knowles, another New Englander like himself. Simon skidded to a stop on his kneepads, kicking up a shower of dust and pebbles.

"Ricochet, Doc, right in his neck. They already called in for the medivac, it's fucking bad," one of the soldiers said, his eyes wide, a few droplets of the wounded man's blood flecked across his face like freckles.

"Shut up, shut your fucking mouth," said another man, who was holding Knowles' hand. He used his free hand to roughly shove the bloody faced young soldier hard enough to put him on his ass. "Staff Sergeant Knowles is fine, he's the fucking man. Get your rifle back on the goddamn line!" The man turned back to his injured friend. "Don't you worry about nothing, Doc is here and he's gonna patch you up. You'll be on a freedom bird outta here in no time."

Simon spent the better part of an hour working on Knowles. The tumbling AK-47 round had torn its way through the soldier's throat, compromising his airway and nicking one of the carotid

arteries. Simon tubed him and did what he could to stem the flow of blood. At one point Knowles regained consciousness for a brief moment, scrabbling wildly at his ruined neck and blindly lashing out at everyone around him. Simon yelled at the others to hold Knowles down and administered enough morphine to send the man back into unconsciousness.

Eventually they put Knowles on a litter and Simon and the young soldier with the blood on his face carried him to the waiting medical evacuation helicopter. By that time, A-10s had blasted the nearby mountains with their cannons and rocket pods, and those insurgents who hadn't been blown to shreds fled the area. Captain Billy the Kid radioed his superiors that the terrain was too steep for anyone to climb in order to look for the dead fighters or any intelligence that might be on their corpses. That probably wasn't true, but everyone was tired and the CO wasn't looking to push things with his men. This wasn't their first casualty by any means, but Knowles had been a well-liked NCO, and seeing him bleeding and thrashing like a fish yanked out of a stream had the men on ragged edge.

When they got back to the outpost, the men made their way to their huts and did their best to clean up. Some of them picked dully at cold MREs, and others just lay on their cots staring at the ceiling. But not Early. Early went around to each of the men, talking with them briefly. He patted them on the shoulder or the knee, making physical contact with them all: the good, psychological techniques they teach you for helping people deal with grief. Early cracked a few jokes, self-deprecating ones that made the men smile. And mainly he extolled the virtues of SSG Knowles: a good man, a hard man, a man the Hajis couldn't kill. "He'll be drinking mai-tai's waiting for us at the airport when we get sent back home. And you know he'll get much ass, 'cuz chicks dig scars."

Early finally made it to his own rack, next to Simon's, and he sat down heavily.

"Look at this," Simon said, holding up the sleeves of his ACU blouse, which were soaked up to the elbows with blood. "This never gets out. I'll have his blood on me for the rest of the tour." Simon stared at the wall, red-rimmed eyes unblinking. "Tomorrow we should go back to that village, find those elders, and blow their brains out all over those stupid man-jammies they wear. Then we should burn down their fucking mosque. We should do it at sunset, so you can take a fat dump on the ashes."

Early nodded. "Yeah, they're full of some righteous bullshit, that's for sure." He paused and put his hand on Simon's arm. "Look, Doc. You're a smart dude, so let me fill you in on the real skinny about what's going on here. The politicians all talk a big game, about terrorists hating our freedom and junk. And sure, some of the people in this valley are the hardcore types, real ideology-driven motherfuckers. But most of these folks? They don't give two shits about all that. They just want us away. They don't care where we go, or what we do when we get there. They just don't want us here. And they'll do whatever it takes to make that happen."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know, I don't really mean it." Simon pulled his gaze from the wall and looked at Early solemnly. He spoke slowly, as if coming back to himself from a long way off. "Xenophobia. That's what it's called. No army can indefinitely hold ground on foreign soil where the population hates them. That's history, you're right. They either breed in—like the Mongols—or they get the fuck out, like the Brits and Commies."

"Well, I'd be all about the breeding-in solution," said Early, flashing his teeth impishly, "but there is a serious lack of tasty in these parts. Everything is covered up, and if you were lucky enough to find a she-Haji, you know she'd be sporting mad Seventies bush. You'd need a machete just to find the pink in all that swamp."

Simon laughed, "If it's pussy you want, Dickless-er here would probably put out for a few bucks." He kicked out at the bunk of the

man across the way, who casually flipped him the bird in reply.

"Hell, yeah," Early said. He held out his hand, making a sort of inverted OK sign: thumb and forefinger in a circle, other three fingers facing down. "The ol' brown star express, baby. Straight up the poop shoot."

Dickless-er lifted his legs and put up the same upside-down OK sign, only over his own ass. "You want this bung-bung soldier boy?" he said in a fake Asian accent. "Fifty dollars, me love you long time." The hut degenerated into increasingly obscene and homoerotic banter, the cloud hanging over it blown away for the time being.

Three-quarters of the way through their deployment, Early almost died. A single, lucky shot into the post by an insurgent sent shrapnel tearing through Early's left knee and thigh, severing the femoral artery. Simon was at his side instantly, applying tourniquet, quick-clot, and pressure wrappings. He managed to keep some secondary blood flow into the limb, and doctors later credited him with saving Early's life and leg.

Simon earned a citation for his quick action, but it was of little consequence. The COP lost a big chunk of its soul as the chopper flew off with The Regular on board, and the last few months of the tour were dirty and mean. Headquarters actually called a stand-down on all the unit's patrols with more than three weeks left on their last rotation: there were too many firefights, they said, too many calls for air support, too many reports of civilian casualties. Headquarters constantly reminded them about winning the propaganda war, about "hearts and minds" and a strong IO campaign being key to countering insurgencies. Simon didn't hear a word of it.

\* \* \*

The aliens arrived about eighteen months after Simon left the military.

When he first got back, Simon talked a big game about returning to school and finishing his MD. But as he filled out the applications, he realized that he'd had his fill of blood and guts. So when the news broke, he was kicking aimlessly around his parents' house, trying to figure out what to do with his life.

At first, there was talk about a full military recall. Like most soldiers, Simon registered with the Ready Reserve when he completed his enlistment, and the internet was abuzz with rumors of a military contingency plan. Of course, in those first days after contact, the internet was full of all kinds of nonsense, from talk of invasion, to theories about the gods of old returned to earth to bring man to the next spiritual level. It was fair to say that as the mothership hung serenely over the East Coast, the world lost its collective mind for a good little bit.

It was amazing how quickly those same minds could absorb a new paradigm, however, and in less than a year most people accepted that aliens were among us and that was just fine. The aliens were apparently not invaders or gods or anything of the sort. They were more like merchants, traveling salesman looking for a nice waypoint in the galaxy.

Nor did they look much like invaders: short, squat bodies in various shades of blue and purple, most no taller than four feet. Instead of legs, their bodies ended in a kind of flat tail, which they undulated, snail-like, to propel themselves. Otherwise, they had amazingly humanoid features: arms ending in hands with fingers (two opposing but otherwise similar), a head with mouth, nose, eyes and ears. The head was flatish and rectangular, like a long shoebox, fronted by a wide-lipped mouth and eyes set to the far end. But you could look into the face and recognize something of yourself there, clear and curious eyes staring back earnestly.

Communication was not a problem, either. Ours was not the first civilization they had visited, and they had developed an

adaptable translation device which they wore around their thick necks. It turned their vaguely slobbery language—it involved a lot of rolling their long tongues around—into a passable, if robotic-sounding, English. Earbuds accomplished the same in reverse on their behalf.

Simon, like the rest of the nation, was initially fascinated by any and all news on the aliens. It was pretty surprising, however, how fast the world grew weary of the constant reports. Flooded by 24/7 footage of the aliens meeting with heads of state, people began tuning out. Sitcoms and evening talk shows resumed their schedules, and soon even the press began thinking, Aliens, we've got it, what else do you have?

The army encouraged its soldiers to maintain contact with each other even after completing all service commitments. The camaraderie and shared experiences helped many men through brief periods of depression and PTSD. Many units set up messaging boards and chat rooms for their current and former personnel, and Simon browsed these with increasing frequency. He felt detached from reality, the double hammer blows of the war and the alien visitors had knocked him down and sapped his *joie de vivre*. One day he logged into his computer and found a private message waiting for him:

*Doc,*

*I want you to come to NYC and stay with me for a while. I've got a job proposal for you. Big-time cash money hos. I'll pick you up at the airport. Don't pass this up bro. I still owe you one.*

*The Regular*

At the bottom of the message was a link, which sent Simon to an airline website to retrieve an e-ticket in his name: first-class all the

way, leaving in three days. Early must be doing pretty well, Simon thought. Good for him, all the guys deserve a break. And then, Fuck it, maybe so do I. He hit the Reply button and quickly typed: "I'm in. See you there," before he could lose his nerve.

As promised, Early met him at the airport. The place was a mess. New York was rapidly becoming a hub of alien activity, and the airports were considered prime targets. Even though most people were adapting to the idea of aliens on Earth, some fringe elements insisted the governments of the world were surrendering themselves in some bloodless coup. Drawing from the same crowd of extremists who had formerly espoused conspiracies involving black stealth helicopters and mind control broadcasts, these lunatics were joined by a few shadowy religious organizations, which saw the aliens as godless abominations that had to be destroyed. The nut jobs had vowed to resist their new alien overlords by violence if necessary. Security was everywhere.

Simon and Early shook hands and shared an awkward shoulder-bump-turned-hug that made them both laugh. "You look great, man," Simon said.

"Thanks to you, Doc. I still gotta walk with a cane when it rains, but if it wasn't for you bro—"

Simon waved off the complement. "It's nothing. You don't owe me...seriously, anytime, you know?"

"Look, let's grab your luggage. The folks I work for rented us a limo for the ride into the city."

"Hey, hey, big time indeed. Let me guess...high priced prostitution? The ol' brown star express to wealth and happiness?" Simon made the inverted OK sign, which Early returned.

"Man, you don't know how right you are. Come-on, I'll take you to the place and fill you in on the 411."

*Merdeux* didn't serve a lunch crowd, and the place was empty when Simon and Early tipped the limo driver and stepped into the



restaurant's interior. Venetian blinds covered all the windows, and the darkness was instant and shocking. It reminded Simon of nighttime on the COP, so far removed from civilization's comforting electric glow. He felt his hand tighten on the handle of his suitcase reflexively before Early found the light switch and flicked it on. The lighting was dim, mood lighting, but Simon relaxed visibly.

"You alright Doc?" Early asked.

"Yeah. Saw a ghost is all. I'm good to go."

Early nodded knowingly. "I see my share of ghosts, but they pop up less and less often these days. Being in the big city helps."

Simon breathed deeply. There was something strange about the smell; not like a restaurant, it was more like a hospital. Antiseptic tang, and under that...something. Simon inhaled again, but it was gone, the cleaning fluids drowning out the other scents.

"So this must be some high priced restaurant to afford all the first-class treatment to recruit me. And since when do restaurants recruit, anyway? We serving mobsters and movie stars, or what?"

Early clapped one hand on Simon's shoulder and gestured around the main room with his other. "If you can imagine it, my man, every evening this place is filled to the gills with the highest paying clientele out there. Rich as sin and looking to spend: fucking aliens, baby."

Simon's eyebrows rose sharply. "The Aliens? Holy hell...I'd never even thought of a restaurant for the aliens. What the heck do they even eat?"

Early smiled broadly. "Ah, that's the big question, isn't it? Well, I'll tell you. The food they like is mainly water, good bit of fiber in it, some protein, and a bit of fatty foods and other stuff thrown in for flavor."

"Sounds like what they served us on the plane."

"Hah, I doubt it Doc. See, their stuff is...highly processed. Look, I'm not going to beat around the bush. Their food is shit."

Simon nodded slowly, waiting for Early to elaborate. But he soon realized no further explanation was coming, and eventually understanding blossomed on his face. "Wait. You mean actual shit? Like feces? These sick fucking aliens eat our shit?"

"Well, not exclusively. It's like a delicacy to them. But yeah. That's what they serve here. Human feces. You know how they called me The Regular? Who woulda thought I'd parlay that particular talent into a high-paying career, right?"

"I...I don't even know what to say. I mean, they really..." Simon cast his gaze about the room as his mind raced, and something about the tables caught his eye. Early watched silently as Simon walked over to one. The tables were arranged banquet style, three long rows, but with seats on only one side. Every few feet, there was a neat oval hole in the tables, and the table cloths were cut and fitted snugly to allow the holes to be unobstructed.

"What the...?" Simon started, leaning over and lifting the edge of the abnormally long cloth to look under the table. Beneath it was a series of straps, stirrups, and handlebars—one directly under each hole. The things looked like upturned gyno exam setups. "Oh, you're fucking kidding me." Simon looked up at Early. "Is this some candid camera bullshit? Please tell me you're fucking putting me on here."

Early laugh and clapped his hands together. "Frosty as always Doc, nothing gets by you. Yep, these guys like their meals hot. They eat it right out of the bunghole, brother." Early made the upside-down OK sign. "Like you said, brown star express. Next stop: dinner."

"Why...why would you bring me here, man? You do this? For a living? And you thought I would be interested?"

"Now wait, before you lock up on this idea, I've got three words for you: Twenty-five. Thousand. Dollars."

"Twenty-five grand a year? I can make that at McDonalds, man! And at least nobody's asking to eat the fries straight out my asshole! What kind of—"

“A month.”

Simon caught his words from tumbling out. Early pulled out one of the chairs and motioned for him to sit, and then sat down next to him. Early leaned in close. “Look, Doc, it’s fucked up. Most people don’t know about this. But twenty-five grand a month—and that’s take home and doesn’t even include tips—that’s a ton of scratch, man. This thing, it’s a good deal. It’s not forever, you do it for a while, build up a nest egg. Then you can do whatever you want with the rest of your life. You still want to be a doctor? Bam, school’s covered. How many doctors you heard of that didn’t have med school bills weighing them down? Or hell, you want to be a beach bum, drinking mai-tai’s with SSG Knowles’ ghost? Done.”

Simon winced at the mention of Knowles.

“Look, hey, sorry about that,” Early continued hastily. “That wasn’t your fault. He died of an infection months later man, you saved his life, let him say goodbye to his wife and kids in person.” He paused and looked away for a moment. “But that’s part of it, you know? Think of all the shit we went through. And for what? Two grand a month? Is that gonna pay for medical school? And my disability...you think that shit pays my bills, lets me live in the Big Apple? If I tried living off that, I couldn’t afford to rent a cardboard box in this city.”

Simon leaned back in his chair and looked thoughtfully at Early. “Why me?” he said finally.

“The restaurant likes former military. They know we’re disciplined and can stick to a routine. We know our bodies, and we’re in okay shape. Plus those of us with field time have eaten our fair share of questionable food. The SEETs, they like us to...process...some odd stuff. Takes a strong stomach, but it’s what they want. A lot of it, I don’t know, it’s not really what I’d call food. We take a lot of supplements, because we can’t eat anything on our own. Ruins the SEETs’ meal requests.”

“SEETs?”

Early let out a sharp bark of a laugh. “Ha! Yeah, that’s what we call them in the biz. Shit-eating extra-terrestrials. Gotta love acronyms, just like the army, right?”

Simon grinned. “I’ve got an acronym for you: FUBAR. That’s what this is, FUBAR.”

The two veterans laughed together, and any tension between them broke.

Two years later, Simon and Early sat together in their apartment’s kitchen, fantasizing about pizza.

## II.

Two unusual things happened that night at work: Simon met a woman and he killed an alien.

The woman was in the part of the restaurant the owners set aside as a makeshift locker room. There were some shelves and hangar racks, a few plastic chairs scattered about, and a shower curtain that separated the men’s side from the women’s. There were stacks of buckets scattered throughout the long, thin room, which were used by each of the “servers” to dispose of the wetnaps and other supplies they used to cleanse themselves before and after a meal. The place was cleaned thoroughly every night, but the flowery antiseptic chemicals only made it smell like a clinic.

Everyone wore the same thing during the job: dark blue shorts and short-sleeved shirts made of paper, the kind of thing people wore in hospitals or tanning salons. Anonymous and disposable.

After they had all changed, but before the customers arrived, the curtain was pulled back and the servers mingled a bit, chatting idly about their days, news and gossip, the normal co-worker fare.

Obviously what they had eaten that day was a perennial favorite topic, as well. That night, Simon noticed a new face, standing roughly between the men's and women's sides, arms folded and looking vaguely uncomfortable. Early was the first to say something.

"Hey, new chica in the casa today. She looks muy caliente. Yo quiero...um...shit, I'm out of Mexican words. Let's go say hi."

The woman noticed them approaching and cocked her eyebrow suspiciously. Early put on his big, friendly grin and nudged Simon with his elbow when they reached where she was standing.

"There's no way, Doc," he said, pretending to continue some conversation they'd never had, "I'm telling you, she can't be an Army vet, she's too hot. They only let the hot ones in the Air Force."

As usual, somehow Early had known exactly what to say to break the ice. The girl gave a strange little half-grin that only hit the right side of her face, and she lifted the sleeve of her shirt to reveal the unit tattoo on her shoulder.

"Damn, wrong again," Early said with mock disappointment, "guess that's why you're the smart one, Doc." He showed his own tat, which to anyone outside the service probably looked a lot like the girl's, and then held out his hand. "I'm Early and this here is my battle buddy, Doc."

"Josefina. Call me Jo." Despite her small hands, her grip was firm; not exactly like she was competing, but clearly showing she could hang with the boys. Simon could see the Army on her now that he was looking. Her thick black hair was pulled back in a simple, military style bun—no hair below the collar line, but he guessed it was about shoulder-length when she let it out. He didn't see any makeup, and her only jewelry was a pair of small golden studs in her ears, the type up to Army reg. She probably hadn't been out too long.

"It's nice to have another Army here," Early said. "We're

starting to get outnumbered by the other services."

"Yeah? I transferred here from the LA branch. That place has a buncha Navy, from San Diego. Most everyone here a vet, though?"

"Yep, of one flavor or another. Here lately we've been getting a lot of dumbass Oorahs." Early gestured over to a cluster of men.

"Watch this. Hey Marines! You guys ready to have some fucking space alien toss your salad?"

"Oorah!" Came the simultaneous reply, followed by laughter and a few fist bumps.

"Fucking jarhead retards," Early laughed with them.

Jo gave her cockeyed grin again, and Simon thought it was the sexiest thing he'd seen in a long time. Something about the way it only hit half her face, like she was too demure to reveal her emotions fully, but too mischievous to keep them all to herself. Simon noticed she was looking right at him, studying him studying her, still wearing the grin. He looked away quickly.

"So, um, LA huh?" he said. "I didn't even know *Merdeux* had other locations. Why'd you transfer?"

A ghost of some memory flitted across her face. "Yea, LA, Miami, they've even opened one in London. I just needed a change of scenery, you know? They offered me London, but I'm an East LA girl, we don't do no tea and crumpets. I'm more beer and pizza. So I chose New York."

Early nodded, "Yeah, I had heard they were branching out. NYC's still the first though. I'm one of the originals, myself. They found me banging around doing physical therapy at a VA hospital," he pointed to his knee and the thick network of scar tissue there. "My boy Doc here saved my leg, so I got him a job. I figure I do him five or six more favors like that, we'll be just about even." Early reached out sideways and gave Simon a hard, brotherly slap in the chest when he started to protest that they were more than even.

"They found me in a VA hospital, too," Jo said. She looked up at Simon, dark eyes behind thick, dark lashes. "So you were a sixty-

eight-whiskey, huh? Medic saved my life after an IED." She reached out and put her hand on Simon's elbow. "That's a tough job, see your friends hurt like that, and still keep it together. You guys are my heroes, you know?"

"It's, uh, they train us. It's training. I just wanted to help." Early gave Simon a sidelong glance of exasperation as the words stumbled out of his mouth.

One of the managers walked into the locker room holding a walkie-talkie up to his ear. It squawked and the manager replied, "Roger ETA." The man barely looked at the servers. "Five minutes 'till the first van arrives, let's get strapped in folks."

"It was good to meet you, Jo. I'm, uh, glad you transferred here." Simon tried to sound nonchalant and failed. Still, that half-grin reappeared, and a hint of blush rose in Jo's dusky cheeks.

"Yeah. I think maybe me too, you know?" She turned and followed the other servers who were heading into the *Merdeux's* dining area.

Simon and Early stood for a moment, watching her leave as others slid past them.

"You, sir, are about as smooth as my wrinkled cock," Early said.

Since each server was tailored for a specific patron, it was more or less random placement each night. Where they went depended on how the SEETs wanted to sit, and that was worked out when the orders were submitted each day. Each server was assigned a number, which corresponded to a certain opening in the tables.

Getting into position was an awkward affair that didn't get much easier even after two years of practice. Simon crawled under the table and did sort of a modified pushup to slide his legs into the stirrups. He grabbed the belts hanging from the heavy metal table's underside and fastened them around his waist. The portion touching his belly was wide and flat, cushioned with a built-in

heating pad that some people felt helped with the process. The belts ratcheted, although Simon had to use one of his arms on the handlebars to hold his weight up and prevent the contraption from cinching his skin.

Finally in place, Simon felt the pressure of the belt and the heat of the pad kicking in, stirring the first hints of movement. The inverted position made the blood flow to his face, and he pushed on the handlebars to adjust the angle and relieve the pressure a bit. As he did he looked around at his fellow servers. Early and the new girl Jo were not close by, positioned in some section he couldn't see. The others near him were finishing up their own contortions. Simon noticed on his first night of work that none of the others ever looked around. Even Early wouldn't look at him when they were under the table. Most wore headphones, either listening to music or feigning so to block out any noise. Some also wore dark, wraparound sunglasses—although it was very dark under the table already.

A knock on the door at the back of the restaurant meant everyone was in place and the evening's patrons had arrived. The tablecloth was dropped fully around them, and they were enveloped in darkness. With that, the servers all reached back and slid down their paper shorts, revealing themselves to the cool air of the establishment through the holes in the tables. The sight of dozens of asses sticking out of tables might have elicited laughter from outsiders, but not from any of the workers at *Merdeux*. These were professionals, highly paid for their discretion. Below the tables, there was the faint creak of leather straps, a slow pulse of breathing. Above the tables, there was nothing but the background hiss of the high-powered air filtration unit.

The aliens made a rasping sound as they moved across the hardwood floor, their tails covered in a thick but flexible material that they wore, almost like the sole of a giant shoe. They conversed with each other in their slobbery language, smacking juicy sounds that made Simon cringe, knowing what was coming soon.



Occasionally one of the sitters would say, "Right this way sir," or "I'm sorry, you're actually seated at seat six," and the aliens would respond in their robotic voices with "THANK-YOU" and "I UNDERSTAND."

One of the aliens, speaking loudly in his native tongue, made what Simon assumed was a toast of some sort, or maybe a prayer. Above him, he could hear the sitters pouring glasses of water for the guests, which was really the beginning and the end of any actual "waiting" they'd have to do. The alien giving his wet benediction concluded and clapped his hands together.

The meal began.

Simon knew even before this job that human bowel movements were measured on the Bristol Stool Scale and ranked from 1-7. He had learned it during his medic training; it was among the questions you sometimes needed to ask someone who got sick in the field. One was hard lumps, what Simon's mom used to call "rabbit turds." Seven was basically pissing out your ass. Three and four were considered "normal" or "ideal," and, when thinking back on it, Simon was a little amused to remember that the official diagnostic for both three and four compared them to sausages. It made sense, considering how sausages were made, but it was even more amusing in Simon's new occupation.

The restaurant's standard was three to four, as well, which was achieved by balancing water intake with fiber supplements. Simon could tell he was hitting a pretty perfect four this evening, smooth and easy, sliding right out. Unlike a normal bowel movement, Simon forced himself to pace, releasing slowly by regulating his breathing and pressure on his diaphragm.

The way the SEETs ate actually varied a bit. Some of them used utensils, spooning off bitefulls like a tasty mousse. Others used their fingers, pinching and plucking from the vine. And still others

just dove in, wrapping their lips around and taking chunks and often using their nimble tongues to lick the bowl when they were done. That's what Simon had tonight, a real go-getter. He could feel the alien's warm hands on his cheeks, spreading him gently. He paced his movement to the alien's progress, something he was used to at this point, slowly extruding the food as the customer consumed.

Most meals took about thirty to forty minutes, and, considering the pay, it was almost ridiculously little work. But this evening, the glowing face of Simon's watch told him almost seventy minutes had passed, and still he could feel the alien's face pressed against him. The alien had slowed down considerably, and now it was almost like it wasn't eating at all. At first, Simon thought it was just savoring the meal, but as the minutes ticked by he began to wonder. He tightened his abdominals, letting out a little more in the hopes of rousing his patron. Nothing, no reaction.

The aliens all came as a group and all left as a group. Simon could hear them slobbering to each other. He was no linguist, but it felt like they were growing impatient. To hell with it, so what if it doesn't tip me well, Simon thought, and unloaded the rest of the alien's meal in a single push.

Still nothing.

Simon heard one of the chairs slide back, and the quick steps of a sitter moving over. "Something I can help you with, sir?"

"I DESIRE TO CHECK ON MY FRIEND-ALLY," came the cold reply. "THERE HAS BEEN NO MOVEMENT IN MANY INCREMENTS OF TIME."

Simon heard the rasping sound of the new alien move towards him and a jiggling as the alien patron already on him was presumably shaken by his "friend-ally." The new alien made a loud series of gurgles, which were returned by the others in a wet cacophony. One of the other aliens used its translation device, which sounded as emotionless as all the others: "EXPIRED. GET THE AGENT, EXPIRED."

More chairs were pushed aside, and Simon heard heavy footfalls. A loud, authoritarian voice boomed, "Get them in the vans and get them home, ASAP." There was no disobeying that voice, and people scrambled to do as they were told.

Heavy footfalls approached Simon's table and he saw the shadow as their owner stopped in front of his position. The tablecloth was pulled up, and a flashlight beam blasted into Simon's face. He winced at the sudden explosion of light.

"You. Out. Now."

"We'll try to make this quick..." the Homeland Security agent glanced down at the file in front of him, "Simon."

To be fair, Simon couldn't remember the agent's name, either. Stackman, or Stockman, or something like that. Early called him stache-man, because he had a huge mustache—a beautiful, Magnum PI job, black and shot through with just a few accents of grey. He had conducted Simon's background check on behalf of *Merdeux*, and he occasionally did spot checks of the restaurant, looking for possible threats to the aliens.

Stache-man slid a piece of paper across the desk of the tiny office that he'd commandeered two hours earlier from the restaurant's manager. "Look over that list and confirm for me that you ingested all the items noted."

Simon read the sheet. It was an accounting of the order he'd received that morning, right down to the portion sizes. "Yes, this looks right."

"Including the last item?"

The last thing on the list was the plate of blanched mushrooms. "Sure. Mushrooms, that's normal food, easy stuff."

The agent took the list back and shook his head. "Pooch screw," he said.

"I'm not following," Simon said. "Was the order not right? All I

did was eat what they sent me..."

Stache-man looked at him for a few moments, sizing him up. Finally he leaned forward and said, "I was a Ranger. Did three tours."

Simon nodded softly, unsure where this was going.

"I'm just saying that because it means we're kind of brothers. I reviewed your service record, you're a decorated vet. We're on the same team, so I'm going to trust you."

Simon nodded again, waiting.

The agent sighed. "It's the mushrooms. The Slugos...that's what we call them at DHS. What is it you guys call them again?"

"SEETs."

"Right. SEETs. The SEETs, they can't digest mushrooms. Horrible allergic reaction, something about the proteins. Did you know mushrooms had protein?" Simon shook his head. "Yeah, me neither. I thought they were like vegetables, but they're loaded with the stuff, or so the eggheads say. It's kind of ironic, you know? Considering where mushrooms grow, and then what the SEETs eat..." The agent chuckled, then looked uncomfortable and glanced away.

"Anyway, mushrooms," he continued quickly, "they never should have been on the menu. The orders come in digitally from the Slugo mothership. We've verified everything is secure on our end, nobody tampered with it. So you're in the clear. It looks like it was just an accident on their end, somebody didn't get the word about the food allergy. Nobody really knows how they pick their...your...how they pick the food. Some of the stuff they have you guys eat...I don't know how you do it."

"Money," Simon said.

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess that would do it. Speaking of which," the agent pulled out an envelope from his inner jacket pocket, "this is for you. From them...the Slugos."

The envelope contained ten-thousand dollars in new hundred dollar bills.

“Wait. I don’t get it. I accidentally kill one of them, and they give me ten grand?”

Stache-man nodded. “Look, I said I was going to trust you. People don’t know about the mushroom allergy. There are...lots of things people don’t know about our new friends. That money is for your discretion concerning this situation. I’m not going to delude myself. I’m sure you’re going to tell your roommate” — another quick glance at the file — “Early, about what happened here. Maybe that’s for the best, considering both of your...professions. Just don’t go blabbing to every Tom, Dick, and Harry. Because you never know, sometimes Harry turns out to be an alien-hating wackjob asshole.”

Simon was unsurprised to find Early waiting for him, but he hadn’t expected Jo to be there as well. The two walked over as Simon and Stache-man emerged from the back office.

“So what’s the verdict, government man? Was it...” Early opened his eyes wide and waggled his eyebrows with faux drama, “...murder most foul?”

The agent shook his head dismissively and said to Simon, “You’re free to go and to resume work effective immediately. Remember what we talked about.” He turned to Early. “Take your boy home.”

Simon smiled at Jo. “You didn’t have to stay, thanks.”

“Fuck yeah she did,” Early cut in. “That’s the code man, she knows she’s one of us. We stick together. Brown star solidarity, baby.” He held up the inverted OK sign, and Simon returned it, chuckling.

“It’s fine,” Jo said, briefly reaching out to touch Simon’s arm. “I’m just glad you’re alright. Early’s right, we need to stick together, especially in this crazy business. It wouldn’t be cool if you got arrested right after we met. People would probably think I was,

you know, bad luck or something."

"So seriously, Doc, what happened?" Early asked.

"Nothing," Simon said, unable to meet Jo's gaze. "I guess the thing was just old or something. Natural causes."

Jo hailed a cab, leaving the boys to walk home to their apartment. On the way, Simon filled Early in on the real cause of the alien's death.

"Fucking crazy man. So they're all allergic like that?"

"I guess so," Simon said. "That's basically what the agent said, a severe food allergy common to all the SEETs."

Early headed straight for his laptop as soon as they entered the apartment. "I've gotta check out the web, see if anyone else knows this shit."

"Look, man, the agent said we shouldn't tell people about this. Some loon might, I dunno..."

"What? Making a fucking mushroom WMD? A shitake suicide bomber?" Simon and Early started to laugh. "You afraid of a Portobello Pearl Harbor?"

"Ass. Yeah, I guess I am." Simon said. "This is how we get paid, after all." He took out the envelope the agent had given him and shook it for emphasis.

"Aren't we quite the whores? Well have no fear, Doc. I promise, I'm only going to search a few sites I know. Check in on the blogs and chat boards of some...concerned parties I've run across over the years. I'm not going to post anything, just see what's already out there. Cool?"

"So no club 'till closing time tonight? The famous Regular, world-renowned party machine, forgoing an evening of debauchery to stay at home and surf the web? This night just gets weirder and weirder." Early flipped him the bird, already clicking through web pages on his laptop. "Fine, snoop around. I'm hitting the rack."

When Simon got up the next morning and plodded groggily out to the apartment's common area, he found Early already at the kitchen table, awash in the soft glow of his computer screen. Disoriented, Simon looked around, thinking he'd overslept. But it was only just morning, not much later than usual for him.

"Holy crap, man. Did you stay up all night doing that?"

Early jumped at the sound of Simon's voice. "Fuck me, Doc. Gave me a heart attack." Early looked at his watch. "Damn. I guess I did. You should see some of the shit that's on the web about the SEETs man. Stache-man was right, there are some real psychos out there. Nobody seems to know about the mushroom thing, though. But man, there is some other crazy shit that folks do know."

Simon sat down across from Early and yawned expansively.

"Like what?"

"Well, take a guess at one of the industries the SEETs are buying out. No? I'll tell ya. Diaper services."

"Shut up." Simon waved his hand at Early dismissively.

"No, Doc, seriously. Check this out," he spun the laptop around to Simon. "This guy, he's a total fucking nut, but he's also an accountant, and he digs into the financial records of all these companies that have been bought out by SEET-shell corporations. Most of it's over my head, probably just legit shit. But the dude has all these records of diaper services across the country being bought out. And he also says that the SEET-owned diaper services are beating out the rest of the competition, because they charge almost nothing."

Simon looked at the webpages, full of conspiratorial rants and copies of supposed financial records. "I dunno, this could be nothing..."

"Bull, Doc. I mean, this guy's a loonytoon, no arguing. But he doesn't know that the SEETs eat shit! There are some folks out on

the web, they do know, but this guy has some cockamamie theory about SEETs trying to indoctrinate infants in their cribs. He's just clueless. So it's like, why would he lie? And I mean, it makes sense. I'm sure baby poop isn't as tasty as what comes out of Josefina's sweet ass every night," Early grinned dirtily, "or hell even out of mine. But I bet you it's okay in a pinch. It's probably like their equivalent of a microwave dinner."

"Man, I just can't see the SEETs loading up their honest-to-God spaceship with used diapers. It's not astronaut food, for Christ's sake."

Early snapped and pointed at Simon. "Astronaut food, good one. Rows and rows of freeze dried diapers, fucking alien MREs, baby. Everything a growing SEET needs!"

Simon laughed and stood up, starting towards the apartment's door. "I'm going to grab tonight's order, get started. Far as I'm concerned, this is none of my business, I get paid to perform a service."

"Yeah, yeah, bring it in. Sounds good," Early said, already distracted again by the lure of the web and its conspiracy theories.

### III.

A few nights after the alien death, Simon found himself positioned next to Jo under the tables. It was bound to happen sometime, Simon knew, but having her right next to him made his movements feel awkward and clumsy. Jo had gelled with Early and Simon at work, but Simon was aware that her banter and good nature was more than just fraternal good will among Army vets. She was flirting with him, and Simon was doing his best to flirt back.



According to Early, his attempts were pretty lackluster.

Now Simon had Jo to his immediate left, and two years of experience flew out of his head. His feet kept slipping out of the stirrups, and, when one of the dangling straps brushed against him, he jumped like it was a snake. He kept trying to flex his muscles in some sort of impressive display, which threw any kind of natural rhythm off, even though it was dim under the table and unlikely Jo was even looking at him.

Finally, he got himself together and in position. He snuck a peek to his left and noticed with surprise that Jo was looking around at the others. She was the only other person he'd seen do that. She turned towards him, and Simon smiled and gave a thumbs up sign and was immediately mortified. Even in the twilight, he could see that lopsided grin appear on her face, and he flushed, both grateful and disappointed when the staff dropped the table cloth and sealed them in near total darkness.

About two-thirds of the way through that evening's dinner, Simon heard Jo take a sharp breath and let out a soft groan. His eyes had grown accustomed to the small shafts of light that crept under the table, and he could just make out Jo's face squinting uncomfortably, her head down. He knew what that look meant, had worn it himself a few times. Occasionally the SEETs got frisky or impatient and did a bit of what Early called "cave diving." They would use their fingers or tongue to probe inside the servers' anuses, looking for more treats. One more unpleasant experience which the servers justified to themselves by checking their bank accounts and tip jars frequently.

Without really thinking about it, Simon reached out his hand. Jo saw the movement in the darkness and put her hand in his. Two or three times she squeezed him roughly, the SEET clearly continuing its spelunking adventures.

Then it was over, the aliens gone, and the servers pulled up their paper pants and unbuckled themselves from the harnesses

that look so much like torture devices. Jo moved quickly, angrily, throwing the straps aside and scrambling out from under the table before anyone else. She turned and snatched her portion of the tip off the table, crumpling the bills tightly, and stomping towards the locker room. Simon wanted to say something, make her laugh and know he understood. But he didn't have Early's knack for always saying the right thing, and he just watched her storm off in silence.

When Simon and Early emerged from the locker room into the main room of the restaurant, Jo was waiting. She was wearing a black leather jacket, adorned with some unit patches and logos on the front and back. Her hands were stuffed in the pockets and she was staring at the wall when Simon and Early approached.

"Hey, Jo, whaddya know?" Early said, wearing his broad and easy smile. Simon had told him what went on at dinner, and he said, "I heard one of the SEETs got kinda too friendly with you, tickled your throat a little."

Jo looked at Early sharply, and he held his hands up in mock surrender. "Woah, hey, we've all been there. Professional hazard. Just the other day, I had this one, whatever his name is in SEET-ese, it's gotta translate to John Henry, because this fucker was digging tunnels. For the next two days my bung didn't have enough pucker left to make any noise when I farted." He held up the upside-down OK sign that signified his asshole and made a trumpety fart noise.

Jo stared at Early for a second, and Simon thought she might slug him. But then she just threw back her head and laughed, punching him in the arm instead. "You're the real bung-hole, pendejo." She returned his hand gesture with a smirk.

The tension had left her stance, and as Jo turned to Simon she was more at ease. "I just wanted to thank you. You know, for what you did back there."

"I, uh. Sure. Anytime. I just wanted to help." Simon said. He could see Early out of the corner of his eye, rubbing the bridge of his nose and shaking his head.

"That's the second time you've told me that you just wanted to

help. I think maybe you're too modest." Jo said to Simon, grinning her grin. Simon smiled back sheepishly, face red.

Early, not one for awkward silences, jumped in. "So Doc and I were going to hit a few clubs, sip some drinks and relax. You should come."

"Uh, yeah."" Simon said, acting as if they had indeed made such plans. "You should join us, hang out."

Jo nodded, still looking at Simon. "Okay, yeah. Sounds like fun."

Just then a group of five Marines stepped into the main portion of the restaurant, jawing at each other loudly.

"Oh, shit!" Early said, slapping his head exaggeratedly. "I totally forgot! I'm supposed to go out with the Oorahs tonight, show them how a real man parties." He looked at Simon meaningfully. "Well, shoot, that shouldn't stop you two from going out. Grab a few drinks, shoot the shit. I'll catch up with you guys later."

They watched as Early did a limping jog to the back of the main room, grabbing one of the Marines in a joking headlock and getting lifted off his feet for his trouble. Simon saw him whisper something to them, and they all laughed loudly. They waved to Simon and Jo as they walked by, Early in tow. "We'll try to bring this Army maggot back in one piece, but I don't promise nothin'," one of them said as they left the restaurant, leaving Simon and Jo by themselves.

"Look, if you don't want to go out tonight, that's cool..." Simon started.

"No, it's fine. Why should those guys have all the fun, you know? Show me around this town."

"Great, I know this bar not too far from here. I hear they have great finger..." Simon trailed off, and then laughed. "I was going to say, 'I hear they have great finger food, if you're hungry,' but that doesn't really apply to either of us anymore, does it? I guess it's been a while since I've taken anyone out."

Jo gave him the grin, and slipped her arm through his. “Don’t worry about it, we can sit there and smell the food together, remember what it was like to be poor but well fed.”

Simon hadn’t been on a real date since before moving to New York, and he quickly realized just how much of dating really revolved around food. Fortunately, the shared strangeness of their situation made the whole thing amusing. They stayed at Simon’s bar until almost closing, sipping drinks gingerly so as not to “pollute” themselves too much. Simon made sure he tipped the waitress well, so she was more than happy to let the two nurse their few drinks in peace.

Simon and Jo talked about their families and time in the army, why they’d enlisted, those sorts of things, broken up by a few games of pool on the crappy billiards table in the back of the bar. Simon was surprised to learn that Jo had joined the military to escape her three older sisters, who were all members of a gang called *13 Ladrón*. When Jo graduated high school, the three sisters had tried to jump her into the gang by beating her up in a park, but Jo broke one of their noses and ran off, and the next day she signed up for the army. The more she talked about her past, the more Simon heard the LA street creep into her voice.

“When I got out of the VA hospital and went home, nothing had changed. My sisters were still running with the gang, selling drugs and sometimes hooking. I had the offer to work at *Merdeux* in LA, and so I took it and moved to a nicer area, cut off contact with them. It was all good for a few months, but then they found me. My second oldest sister, Azucena—she was the one whose nose I broke—she got shot and killed. So my other sisters found me and said it was, like, my duty or something, to take her place. And they wanted to know what I was doing to make so much money, why I wasn’t sharing the scam with them, like there was no way someone from our family could make an honest living, you know?”

Jo brushed a single fat tear from her eye and threw it onto the bar floor. "Sucks man, because that's your family, right? Your family is supposed to take care of you. All those *maricón* fuckers talk a big game about *La Raza*, staying unified and shit, sticking with your own. But the truth is, what good is *La Raza* if your own family keeps trying to drag you down? That's when I realized in my whole life, the only time I felt like I had a real family was in the army. And I knew then that I could choose my people. So I decided to leave, you know? Find somewhere fresh and decide on my own who I wanted to call family."

Through the end of her story, Simon held her hand gently. He didn't really understand everything she was saying—his own family had always been there for him—but as he thought about Early and the other guys at the COP with whom he'd spilled blood and sweat, he understood enough.

After the bar, Simon and Jo walk around the city together, arm in arm, staying in the areas where everything stayed open all night. They eventually wound up in front of a 24-hour movie theater, where Simon bought two tickets to some romcom that was funny and forgettable. They joked about how watching a movie wasn't the same without popcorn, and for most of the movie Simon kept his arm around Jo, and she rested her head against his shoulder.

When they got out of the movie, the sky was just beginning to lighten. "I sure am glad I don't have a nine-to-five job, I'd be hurting," Simon laughed. "Normally I'd ask if you wanted to go for breakfast, but under the circumstances..."

"Well, I bet the restaurant delivered the food to my place already. I could, you know, maybe pick it up, come by your place? Maybe we could, like, share techniques, for getting down any gross stuff."

Simon's apartment was within walking distance, so he hailed Jo

a cab. He gave the driver his address, and, by the look on the guy's face, paid him a bit too much for an early morning rush round trip.

The door to Early's room was closed when Simon got in, and when Simon put his ear against it he could hear Early snoring loudly. The intercom beeped about thirty minutes later, and Simon quickly buzzed Jo in and helped her with her *Merdeux* package.

They laid the food out on the kitchen table, sitting adjacent to each other and reading each item aloud as they placed it down. Jo's boxes didn't have anything too strange; it was all "normal" food, if combined in strange ways: meatloaf with flambéed peaches and marshmallow cream made her laugh.

Simon wasn't so lucky. One of his boxes contained boiled tube worms in turkey gravy. He'd never seen a tube worm outside of a marine nature program, but he knew that its feathery feeding parts were going to give him fits. He looked mournfully at Jo. "You have any tips for hair and dangly bits like these guys? I, uh, have some problems with my gag reflex."

"I think I might be able to help motivate you, at least," Jo said, her sexy, strange grin creeping across the right half of her face. She had already taken off her Army jacket and hung it on the back of the chair, and now she undid the first two buttons of her blouse. She picked up one of the tube worms and draped it across the top of her breast, the gravy slowly dripping down her cleavage.

She laughed sweetly at Simon, his eyes wide and mouth agape. Pulling herself closer, she whispered, "Just remember, we have to eat all our dinner before we get dessert."

It was both Simon's strangest sexual encounter and his strangest food experience, and when it was over he was sure he never wanted to go back to the old ways of doing either. Jo had been right, while she hadn't exactly cured his gagging, she had certainly motivated him to power through it. They had retired to his bedroom, laughing and drizzling bits of food on each other and

lapping it off again. When it was over, they were sticky with the remains of the meal and slick with sweat.

They ran giggling to his shower, lathering their bodies. Simon saw the scars across Jo's back for the first time, two ugly shrapnel wounds and some burns under her left shoulder blade. He ran his hands over them gently, and, when she tensed slightly at his touch, he soothed her with kisses to the back of her neck and ears. They made love again, slowly, pressed up against the steamy tile wall.

When they were done, they stumbled back into his bedroom, exhausted from their overnight activities. They saw the mess they had left and laughed. His sheets were a disaster, like someone had murdered a food mascot in its sleep. Simon tore them off the bed, bundled them up, and threw them in the corner. He took his large comforter, which had been spared the worst of the stains, and spread it on the mattress. They climbed in, wrapping the ends around each other like a sleeping bag, and fell asleep immediately: wet and satisfied bodies tangled around one another.

Early woke them in the early afternoon, bursting into Simon's room carrying the laptop.

"Dude, Doc, you should check out these stories on the web, they're...holy shit." Jo buried her face in Simon's chest, smiling and red-faced.

"Say, man, could you maybe give us a few," Simon said with a grin.

"You did it," Early said. "You fucking stud, you actually managed to break off a piece of that grade-A tasty."

"Dude, seriously..."

"I'll go, I'm out, you two get back to doing whatever it was you were doing...which by the way I hope you're doing with protection. I'm just saying, I hear that chick will put just about anything in her mouth."

A thrown pillow chased Early out the door.

They emerged twenty minutes later, Jo wearing her jeans and one of Simon's old Army PT shirts, her own top stained beyond the point of polite company. "Hi, again, Early," she said, slapping him playfully across the back of the head as he sat at the kitchen table.

"So, um, how was your night?" Simon said, sitting across from Early. Jo sat down on his knee and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Don't you two look pleased with yourselves? My night was a blur of alcohol, stupid human bets performed by drunk Marines, and lapdances from strippers, one of whom may or may not have been a transvestite. I feel pretty confident that she was, but I'm slightly less sure about whose idea it was, and whether I liked it. Anyway, that's what I did in the name of being a good wingman."

"The army appreciates your services, and you are hereby honorably discharged from wingman status."

"So Doc, check this out," Early spun the laptop around. "That is a flyer that someone from upstate scanned into their computer."

"It looks like one of those ads companies run in poor neighborhoods and around colleges, trying to get people to sell blood plasma or sperm," Jo said, reading the page. "Some of my...some people I knew back in LA used to try and run scams near those places, because they always pay in cash."

"Give the lady a prize, that's pretty much what these are. But there's one difference." Early reached around and switched to a new webpage. "They ain't payin' for blood or manjuice."

The webpage was a blog by a college kid, talking about a new medical company nearby. They apparently paid for stool samples, ostensibly for research purposes. The company paid fifty dollars per donation, up to three times a week. There were some catches about what the student could and couldn't eat, and among several DON'Ts was the single word: mushrooms.



“Doc, if the diaper companies are like MREs, this must be like their version of McDonalds. Fast food.”

“Diaper companies?” Jo asked. Early happily filled her in on the previous conversations, including the bit about mushrooms being verboten. “You think we’re gonna be out of a job soon?” she asked when he was done.

“Nah, they’re not making these kids eat any of the really weird stuff. You know, your bugs and inedible crazy crap in jell-o. They still need us for that. We’re the Wolfgang Pucks of the shit-eating culinary experience. But I’m telling you, these SEETs are branching out, taking over. First our babies, now our college kids and homeless dudes. Pretty soon our grandparents are gonna be droppin’ trou and bending over to drop a steamer in some alien’s face. This is some insidious shit, and most folks have no fucking clue.”

Simon laughed. “I can’t tell if you’re actually serious about this, or if it’s just a big joke to you.”

Early grinned wanly. “Yeah, me neither,” he said, spinning the laptop around to continue surfing.

## IV.

The three of them settled into a routine fairly quickly. After a few weeks, Simon asked how Early would feel if Jo moved in with them. Early joked for a while about how having a female in the apartment would cramp his style with the ladies he brought home. Finally, Early told him he thought it was a great idea, and he couldn’t be happier for the two of them.

Some days Simon and Jo played their foody lovemaking games;

they actually went shopping and bought special stain-proof sheets, so they would stop wasting the good ones. But most days Simon and Jo would wake up Early, and the three of them would sit around the kitchen table, eating whatever strange concoctions *Merdeux* sent their way.

After work, Simon and Jo liked to curl up on the couch and watch old movies, sometimes indulging in a bit of wine. Early was increasingly in the bottle, sometimes going out and partying at clubs, sometimes just drinking in the living room, sitting with Simon and Jo, surfing the net while they watched TV.

One day after dinner, as they were cleaning up in the locker room, one of the Oorahs came over and talked to Simon. He wanted to ask out one of the other female servers, but he was hesitant.

"How did you get over it, Doc, knowing what your girl does for a living?" he asked.

"What do you mean? Jo does the same thing I do."

"Yeah, but...like, in my family, if a girl, like, shows her ass in public...man, that wouldn't fly. How am I supposed to take her home to see my mom? She finds out my girlfriend gets her money by having an alien stick its tongue up her poop shoot...I don't know that I could look my folks in the eyes again, they'd say I was dating a whore. No offense man, it's just, you know..."

"Look, here's what I know. Sometimes in life, you have to make a choice. Stick with the family you were born into and do what they want you to, or realize that you're your own person. Sometimes in life, you have to pick your own people, choose your own family. It's not for everyone. But that's what Jo did, and I love her for it."

In bed later that night, thinking about the conversation while drifting off to sleep, it occurred to Simon that it was the first time he'd said he loved Jo, and that it felt completely natural.

\* \* \*

When Simon awoke, Jo informed him that Early hadn't come home that night. The door to his room was open, his bed still made. They tried his cell, but it went right to voicemail.

Simon and Jo ate their meal in silence, Early's box placed next to his usual seat. The two were just about to get dressed and search Early's normal haunts for sign of him, when something thudded wetly against the apartment's door. It was Early, stinking of booze and drenched from the rain. When Simon opened the door, Early stood for a moment, slumped against the door frame, still fumbling with his keys.

"I couldn't use my cane and find my keys at the same time," he said, slurring his words and gesturing to the ground where his cane had fallen.

Early limped into the apartment and collapsed like a heavy sack on the couch.

"God, Early, get out of those wet clothes, you'll get pneumonia," Jo forced him to sit up and stripped off his soaked shirt. His undershirt was splattered with blood.

"I maybe got in a fight," Early said, looking down at his own blood.

"Christ, man, what happened?"

Early explained that he had run into a group of guys at a bar and got to talking. He let slip that he worked with aliens, made good money doing it. "I didn't tell them no specifics, thankfully," he said. Apparently the group had convinced Early to come out behind the bar and had proceeded to beat him nearly unconscious. "They called me a traitor, Doc. Cuz I work with the SEETs, they said it was against scripture and against the Constitution, if that's not the craziest thing you ever heard. They said the Constitution says, 'All MEN are created equal,' and that doesn't include aliens."

"That's from the Declaration of Independence," Simon corrected.

Early looked at him with a goofy grin. "Holy shit, you're right.

That negates their whole argument. I should go back and find them, let them know that they got it wrong. I'm sure they'll apologize straight away, they're really very rational guys. Dumbass."

"Go, take a shower," Jo said. "We'll get your food ready, make some coffee. You'll feel better after you eat something."

Early looked at the floor. "I highly doubt it." But he got up and did what she told him.

He came out of his room half an hour later, wearing only a towel around his waist. He was painfully thin now, all boney protrusions. There were bruises all over, and Simon could tell he'd been punched and kicked repeatedly. Simon did a quick physical and thought maybe one of Early's ribs was cracked, too.

"Maybe we should call you in sick tonight, whaddya say man?"

"Fuck that. I've gotten worse than this," Early pointed to his knee. "You know it better than anybody." Early proceeded to chomp through his meal, chewing and swallowing without even looking at what he was shoveling in his mouth. He swallowed the supplement pills and aspirin Simon handed him with the same dispassionate expression, moving mechanically.

"I have to show you guys something," Early said finally. He got up stiffly, groaning, and found his laptop. He took them to a website that required several passwords to get in. The site contained dozens of video links, and Early clicked on the newest one.

The video showed grainy footage of what looked to be a hospital ward at night. The camera zoomed in on one bed, showing a series of tubes and IVs, shaky close-ups of charts and medical labels.

"Some people took this footage outside of Albany," Early explained. All trace of the drunkenness was gone, replaced by a hollow-eyed look of exhaustion. "All the patients here are in persistent comas. The SEETs bought this place, and they're pumping the patients full of IV foods and laxatives. Then

they're...fuck, Doc, they're harvesting the shit. Like these are goddamned animals, man."

"Oh my God, is this real?" Jo said, staring at the screen.

"At least when we were in the army and the brass sent us into a hot mess, they gave us some fucking guns so we could fight back. These people are helpless man." Early looked at Simon miserably. "Is this what we've been supporting this whole time? Did we help create this?"

Simon didn't have an answer.

Simon knocked on Early's door when he and Jo were ready to leave for work. They had all considered not going in, calling in sick or just quitting. But they'd agreed to give it one more night, look at things again in the morning. It was right before their payday, and there was some minor concern that they might not get their money for the preceding month if they quit now. Nobody really argued the point, it just came out, and then lingered in the room. Simon quietly hated the idea that money was their primary motivation, but had to admit that without money, he never would have been here at all. "Hey, sure, what's one more night, right?" Early had said, finally. Now Early was behind his door, and Simon wasn't sure if he was coming after all.

When he opened the door, Early was sniffing, his eyes wide and bloodshot. His nostrils were rimmed with white powder.

"Fuck, man," Simon reached up and brushed away the cocaine before Jo could see. He shook his head. "I dunno. I just dunno, I don't think you should go now. When did you start with that shit? What are you thinking?"

"Shhh," Early said, mock conspiratorially, "don't rat me out to the cops dude." He flashed his teeth in a cheery grin. "It's under control Doc, don't you worry your pretty little head. Just a little something to help push through this last night." Jo came over then,

and Early stood between them, wrapping his arms around both their shoulders.

"I fucking love you guys, you know that?" he said, too cheerily for Simon's liking. "I mean it. You're like my little brother and sister. Only, like, you two fuck like rabbits, which is awesome. Mom and Dad are such prudes about that incest thing, but don't worry, I'm the cool brother." He winked at them. "Let's go to work, kiddos."

The meal was almost over when all hell broke loose.

Simon had gone about his routine on autopilot, barely thinking or talking. He kept seeing the video in his mind, rows and rows of humans being treated like cattle, nothing more than food stock. Even as he pulled down his disposable pants and felt the first groping moves of the SEET spreading him wide, he knew he wasn't ever coming back to *Merdeux*.

As dinner started to wind down, Simon heard some grunting from his left. Cave diver, he thought. But the grunting quickly escalated, and he realized it was Early making the noise.

"Gah! Woah, daddy, take 'er easy!" Early said, and this was met a harsh "shhhh" from one of the sitters above the table, and a mild foot stomp to emphasize the point.

The whole table lurched, its heavy metal frame creaking. "Oh, fuck, get this out of me!" Early yelled. "Doc, Jesus, help! Get it out, get it..." Terror clearly overtook him, and his noises devolved into wordless screams.

Simon and the other servers scrabbled at their belts, falling unceremoniously to the floor and sliding out from under the table. Meanwhile, Simon could hear Agent Stache-man from the back room, "What in God's name?!"

Two Marines extricated Early and flipped the huge table over on its back, sending SEETs scattering to the far wall. Simon saw that one of the SEETs was still holding a fork, and its arm was

covered half way up with blood so dark it was almost black. Two DHS agents were holding the alien back, but its eyes were rolling wildly and it thrashed its tail, smashing the wall hard enough to send plaster dropping to the floor.

Simon ran to Early. Early's legs were drenched in gore, and the part of Simon's brain the army had trained to be dispassionate saw the ropy remains of intestines, the sheer amount of blood, and immediately placed him in the worst category of injury.

Simon took Early's hand, and the whole room was silent, watching. "I think I'm shit out of luck, Doc," Early said. His brief laughter caused another cascade of blood to gush out of his crudely eviscerated body. It smelled like pennies and damp grave dirt. The color drained completely from Early's face, and his eyes rolled back. "Sorry..." he said, weakly, and then he was gone.

From behind another table, Simon heard Jo scream, "You monsters!" She leapt over the table, grabbing a glass pitcher of water on her way. Before anyone could stop her, she brought the container down hard against the restrained SEET's head, and the alien immediately stopped its struggles and fell back, unconscious and oozing blood of its own.

The two agents went for their firearms, but a pair of Oorahs rushed them and pinned their hands to their bodies. Another Oorah grabbed Jo and hustled her quickly into the locker room.

Stache-man had his own gun out and fired once into the ceiling. The sound was flat but deafening in the enclosed space. "Enough!" he yelled at the Marines, and they released the two other agents.

"Be cool, man," one of the Oorahs said, holding his hands out in front of him. "Remember whose side you're on, bro."

"Get these...things...out of here," Stache-man ordered his subordinates, pointing to the remaining SEETs. "The rest of you, clear the room. Now."

Everyone obeyed except Simon, who continued to kneel over Early's body, still holding his friend's cold hand. Nobody said a

word to him.

It was the cocaine, of course. It had driven the SEET into a frenzy, and the authorities didn't even consider filing any kind of charges. The whole situation was kept quiet, never even mentioned in the press. Early's death was ruled an accidental death due to complications from drug use. At first, Simon considered calling Early's family, telling them what happened. But in the end, he decided there was no point. He and Jo were Early's family, his real family, and they already knew the truth.

*Merdeux* closed for two weeks, a cooling off period with time to renovate after some of the damage. The day before the restaurant was set to reopen, Simon and Jo sat at their kitchen table, nursing coffee. The apartment was full of boxes. They both had plenty of savings, but without the extraordinary income from *Merdeux*, they wouldn't have the money for long living in their current digs. They were both happy to be leaving. The door to Early's room was closed, had remained that way since he'd died, because it felt like his ghost was haunting the place.

There was a beep from the intercom, and Simon answered it. Agent Stache-man was on the other end. After a brief hesitation, Simon buzzed him in and opened the apartment door.

Stache-man quietly entered, wordlessly moving to the kitchen table and sitting in Early's normal spot. He had a heavy looking briefcase with him, which he placed on the table. Jo brought him a cup of coffee without asking if he wanted one, and all three of them sat, drinking and not saying anything.

Finally Stache-man broke the spell. "How are you guys holding up?"

"What do you want?" Simon said, deciding to do away with the facade of civility.

Stache-man nodded. "Fine, you're right. It's not a social call. *Merdeux* is opening up again. Are you guys coming back?"



"Are you fucking kidding us?" Jo glared at the agent. "Is that even an option, you think?"

"No," the agent said. "Not in my opinion. But *Merdeux* and the SEETs...they're saying all is forgiven. They want to keep this real hush-hush, want things back to the way they were before. And you guys are already used to this job, no transition...besides, they can't tell one of you from another when you're under the table. So they're having me go around to all of you guys, to provide you with these," he pulled a pair of envelopes out of his coat and slid them towards Simon and Jo. "Cashier's checks this time. One-hundred-thousand dollars. Each."

Simon stared at the envelopes, tears burning his eyes, squeezing Jo's tiny, hot hand. "Stick those up your ass," he said quietly, venom in his voice.

"Yep, I also figured you'd say that. But they're made out to cash, and as far as I'm concerned they're yours whether you come back or not. So do whatever you want with them, I don't care. That's not the real reason I came to see you two."

Stache-man opened his briefcase a crack and pulled out a small tablet computer. "I want you to watch this."

He pressed play on a video, which had the words TOP SECRET across the top and bottom of the frame. It looked like cellphone footage shot from a window overlooking an alley. A group of a half dozen people were standing with their backs to one wall. Simon could see one young woman was crying. There was a noise reminiscent of machine gun fire, but it was no weapon Simon had ever heard before. The people jerked backwards and fell over, executed.

Jo covered her mouth and leaned into Simon.

From the bottom of the frame, Simon saw shadowy movement, and he recognized the slobbery sounds of SEET talk. Three aliens emerged from the other side of the alley, skittering forward on their tails, holding some type of alien rifles in their hands. The SEETs

eyes darted about, looking for anyone watching. Then they slithered up to the newly dead bodies, fumbling at the clothing and tearing it off.

"Shut it off," Simon said, but Stache-man didn't. Nor could Simon turn away. He watched the aliens gorge themselves, without apparent remorse or restraint, on the executed humans' evacuated bowels.

When it was finally over, Stache-man shut off the tablet. "Those humans you saw were anti-alien activists, under low-level surveillance. Religious fanatics and über-nationalists. The very people I've been hunting down for the past few years...human beings. Somehow the aliens found them before we could intercede. I showed you that because I want you to reconsider returning to *Merdeux*."

Jo started to stand, her face flush with anger. But Simon sensed something coming and pulled her back down, shaking his head softly.

"The aliens that frequent your restaurant aren't your average shlubs. They're leaders, high ranking in their society. Real heavy hitters, most nights." Stache-man reached back into his briefcase and pulled out a small blue container covered in cellophane. It was filled with mushrooms. "I figure, maybe you add a little something special to the menu with the next order. Maybe...talk to some of your buddies, get them to do the same?"

Two years after the mass casualty incident at *Merdeux*, Simon was working in a small brownstone that had been converted into a makeshift hospital. On one of the building's corners, in a place only a few people knew to look, there was a small etched mark, a circle with three lines shooting down. A simplified, upside-down OK sign. Brown star solidarity, one of the symbols of the resistance, used to mark buildings where medical aid and supplies could be obtained. Under that symbol was another, similar to a simplified

heart. It was really an "M" whose sides had been elongated and connected at the bottom. "Mushrooms here," the symbol said.

Simon moved from bed to bed, checking on his patients. None of them were critical tonight, for once. A quiet evening.

He heard the creak of the back door and approaching footsteps.

"Hey, sexy," Jo said. "Save any lives today?"

Simon bent over and kissed her deeply. "Some, maybe. Others, I dunno, we might need to do an amputation or two..." He looked over at a teenaged boy, only fifteen, lying in a bed with a bullet wound in his leg. The boy's eyes were wide, staring at Simon. Simon stared back, then winked. The boy let out a deep breath and weakly flipped Simon the bird. "We're doing fine here," he said, turning back to Jo. "How about you, you take any lives today?" He patted the M4 slung across Jo's chest.

"You bet your ass. We had an insider, you know? A guy pretending to sell info with a line on pure feces. The SEETs sent one of their captains and a squad to meet him. Our man sent us a text message when the meeting ended and he was clear, and we hit fuckers hard. Got the captain myself." She let loose with her cockeyed grin.

Then she leaned forward and whispered, "We're not telling most folks, but one of our mortar teams got hit when the SEET reinforcement ships came in. I don't think any of them made it. New guys, from the religious block. Those fundamentalist types skeeve me out, I wish we didn't need them. Still, I didn't even bother to learn their names, and I feel a little bad about that now."

Jo leaned back. "All in all it was a good mission, and we've got another one planned a few days from now."

"So long as you remember our deal," Simon said. "You've got another month, then you're on the backlines until the baby comes." He put his hand on Jo's belly. "Any nausea? Fatigue?"

"No, I'm fine and so is little Early. And I'll keep my word, don't worry, Doc."

“Good,” said Simon, folding his arms around Jo. “Because we chose to make this family. Now you’re stuck with us.”

In 8th grade, **JODY GIARDINA** was sent to the guidance counselor after a graphic description he wrote made his English teacher vomit. He’s been seeking to replicate that visceral connection with his audience ever since. He came up with the idea for this story in Afghanistan, praying he wouldn’t be killed while taking a dump. Jody lives with his wife and dogs in Augusta, GA.

## Surface Interval

Nick Kimbro

A man's honeymoon isn't the time to be discovering new phobias. Especially when what you're afraid of is water on a live-aboard halfway through its two-week voyage. I don't know what's the matter with me. I've dove hundreds of times—and by hundreds I mean at least twenty (a fair amount when you think about it). I know how relaxing it can be, suspended in depth, the only sound the distant hiss of oxygen and carbon dioxide bubbles billowing toward a gleaming surface. Knowing though doesn't help.

Genevieve is like an eel in the water; it's like she was born there. She can't understand what my problem is.

"Oh my God!" she says, passing her fins to Pablo, the boat captain, and hauling herself up out of the sea. "You would not believe the coral down there."

"Pretty good, eh?"

She's grinning that adorable mashed-up grin and waddling toward me. I help guide her tank into the slot behind the bench.

"Good dive?" I ask.

She removes her mask and red rings encircle her eyes, a string of snot dangles from her nose. "Pretty good," she replies, understating it, I know, for my benefit. Once the others finish their decompression stops, I'm able to get the real story.

"That's some of the biggest brain coral I've ever seen!"

"And how about the rock lobster!"

"Did you guys see the octopus I was motioning you toward?"

"Where was that?"

"I saw it."

It seems like every dive they go on turns up eighteen different things I've never seen before.

"How are you feeling, babe? Better?" Genevieve places her wet hand on the back of my neck and it makes me shiver.

"A little bit," I say, rubbing my shoulder. She thinks I've got decompression sickness. "To be honest though, I kind of enjoyed just being up here on the boat for a change. It's kind of relaxing."

"Hey!" she says. "Married a week and already cherishing your solitude."

"I didn't mean that," I say, knowing she's trying to keep things light to hide the truth behind the statement. It is not the honeymoon she imagined when I announced that we'd be spending two weeks diving off the coast of Spain. Here, more than any other place in the world, the reefs sprawl out from the coastline so far you cannot even see land. They are scattered so distant the only way to see some of them is to travel on overnight voyages. They are some of the most pristine and exquisite formations in the world.

*In another life, maybe.*

On our fourth dive we were one hundred feet down and searching for eels under the shelf when I felt this annoying dryness in my throat. I tried swallowing, and when that didn't work, spitting into my regulator. I spit and I spit, trying to moisten things up, but the more I spit, the dryer and more mucousy it got, until finally I was afraid of clogging my regulator. This was a silly thing to worry about: those things are designed so that should you have to vomit underwater, you can do it straight into the regulator. But for some reason, at the time, it was a real fear.

Luckily they showed us during dive school how to remove and purge your regulator then put it back in. No problem. I had done this myself at one point during checkout. But here I was one hundred feet underwater with a snotty regulator in my mouth, and when I took it out and purged it, suddenly my mind drew a blank. Do I put it back in my mouth *then* purge it again? Do I purge it *as* I'm putting it back in my mouth? I tried the latter and swallowed a mouthful of water, and now I was panicking.

Genevieve, being the prodigious diver that she is, was thirty feet ahead of me and not looking back. I jerked back and forth, searching for the nearest person to help remind me of this very basic skill. My lungs were starting to hurt. I turned around and saw Bill swimming toward me, that old bastard. I could tell it was him by the way his bald head shone, even at depth. Bill was the only retiree with us on the voyage: a Vietnam vet and one of the original frogmen that later became the Navy SEALs. He spent most of his time bitching about how lazy the rest of us were for sleeping in past seven o'clock and about all of the crazy things he'd seen during his lifetime. He was a one-upper, that guy, and I hated him. But right now he was the only one who could help me.

Seeing me thrash, he swam right up and gave me a confused look when I signed that I was out of air. My regulator, after all, was floating somewhere behind me, and my spare also was still clipped to my side. He took his own spare and popped it into my mouth, like a pacifier, and purged (so it was the first one after all). Once I'd inhaled several deep breaths he motioned to ask whether or not I could continue the dive. I could have, probably, but by this time my nerves were rattled and all I wanted was to surface, to be surrounded by air and to feel the sun on my back and the reassuring pull of gravity underneath. I pointed up and he had no choice but to surface with me. At several points along the way he tried to stop to allow the inert gases to escape our joints and tissues, but I was in no mood for procedure. I kept ascending so he had to either follow or risk me damaging his equipment.

Our heads broke the surface and the pressure draining out of my ears felt like a balloon expanding.

"What'n the hell was that?" Bill cried, signaling Pablo on the boat to come pick me up.

I murmured something about no air before turning and swimming in the direction of the boat. Not even a thank you. Once I was safely on board I realized I'd never been so happy to be alone.

Part of me wanted the rest of them to stay down there, indefinitely, so that I wouldn't have to invent any stupid lies about decompression sickness. But eventually they came up. Eventually, they always do.

"How are you feeling there, sport?" Bill asks me at dinner, patting me on the shoulder as he scoots around my chair and takes his seat. Our dive leader, Eddie, has prepared some calamari. I poke at the tentacles with my fork, the thought of seafood unappetizing.

"I'm fine, Bill," I say, and feel Genevieve's hand rest on my opposite thigh.

"Don't worry about him," she whispers.

Easier said than done.

"Reckon you'll be joining us out there any time soon?" he asks.

"I don't know," I say. "Right now I'm enjoying just being on the water while y'all are down beneath."

"Never heard of anybody signing up for a live-aboard just to sit on top of the water."

"Probably a lot of things you haven't heard of, Bill."

He glances at me sideways and I imagine him coming back with a remark about having to hold your best friend's hand while he's dying, or some vet bullshit like that. But he's quiet.

"Here you are, darling." Eddie leans over Genevieve, pouring her another glass of red wine. At the opposite end of the table the other passengers, a Spanish couple who don't speak any English, say something to him and all three of them laugh. The rest of us just stare, waiting for Eddie to explain. He doesn't.

Eventually I pop each of the slimy cephalopods into my mouth and, though they gross me out at first, I see how much Genevieve is enjoying hers and eventually I also begin to enjoy them. The wine helps. By my fourth glass I'm in a much better mood. I even listen while Bill tells us about detonating underwater charges off the coast of Thanh Hoa. After helping clear away the dishes I go on



deck and look out over the water. There is a line of orange light on the horizon, although the water around us is inky black. A warm western wind is blowing, and the boat tilts gently in the waves. I haven't been standing there long before I feel Genevieve's arms encircle me from behind.

"How are you doing?" she whispers in my ear.

"I'm doing good," I say. "I wish you'd stop asking me that every five seconds."

I can tell by the silence that she is hurt, but don't make any effort to comfort her." Are you enjoying yourself out here," she asks at last.

"It's a beautiful evening," I say.

"I mean this trip. Our honeymoon."

"Oh." I think about it. "Yeah, I'm enjoying it. I just wish I wasn't feeling so bad, so that I could do more dives with you. Who are you partnering with while I'm up here?"

"Bill."

"You're not setting any underwater charges out there, are you? These reefs are protected, you know."

She laughs half-heartedly.

"Evan?"

"Yes?"

"Is it because of what happened the other day? With your regulator?"

"No. That was an accident."

"Because, you don't have anything to be embarrassed about..."

"No, I don't. So why do you feel the need to keep reminding me?"

Her arms tighten around me. "I'm just trying to—"

"Don't worry about me. I'm having the time of my life. You just keep enjoying the dives without me. I'll bet Bill's better at spotting stuff underwater than I am anyway."

This is true, I know. I can tell by the way her arms loosen, ever so slightly.

The door to the cabin opens and the sound of voices escapes for a moment before it closes again and the Spanish couple joins us at the railing. Their names are Maria and Escobar. They lean against the railing, her arm wrapped in his, and say something to us in Spanish, at which we stare until the woman says, "Beautiful," gesturing toward the open sea.

"Yes, very beautiful," I say, and it's true. The middle of the sea is the only place one can go and feel truly isolated. On land, even in the mountains, there are power lines. But here as far as the eye can see there is nothing, no ships, no land masses. Just miles of open water in every direction and worlds beneath not even science has explored. Seventy percent of the Earth's surface exists three miles beneath my feet. Only a few submersibles in the world can explore depths like that, and even then there are canyons that open into further depths, seven miles down in places, where the pressure is so great even a titanium sphere would crush like a soda can. Scientists can't imagine what kinds of life might exist in those places, and cannot hope to. Whatever is capable of living at those depths cannot possibly ascend otherwise it would explode. But it's there. They are there, somewhere beneath our feet.

We remain on deck for several more minutes and share a spliff with the Spanish couple, before returning to our quarters below. We make love in a heady, vaguely uncomfortable fog then fall asleep without bothering to dress or clean ourselves. The rocking of the ocean causes strange dreams full of half-imagined things, things we cannot remember in the morning. It's been that way since we embarked. Who knows what kinds of strange communions take place each night in our sleep? All we know is that we wake feeling rested.

\* \* \*

In the morning we rinse ourselves on deck using a portable bladder hung from a metal bar at the stern. We (and by “we” I mean they) were planning on getting in an early dive, although for some reason the captain is having difficulty locating the site. The buoy that marks it, he says, seems to be missing.

“I know it’s around here somewhere,” he keeps muttering. We all lean over the side looking for shallow water, the reassuring glimmer of coral in the sunlight. At last we spot it. Eddie uses the forward sonar to figure out where to drop anchor, and in minutes everybody is suited up and ready to go.

“Are you sure you’re still feeling bad?” Genevieve asks me, buckling her BCD vest and sliding on her fins.

“Yep.”

One by one, they waddle off the back end, each waiting for the one in front to clear the water before taking a long, awkward stride out and tumbling in after them.

“You’ll keep a look out for pirates while we’re down there, won’t you?” Bill asks me, following behind Genevieve.

“You bet,” I murmur.

God, how I hate that man.

Once they’re all in the water I watch them lift their inflator valves over their heads and release the air from their vests. Slowly, they begin to sink. Unlike the others, Genevieve has to descend gradually—allergies making it difficult for her ears to equalize all at once. They disappear into the deep, Genevieve last of all, but ultimately her as well, and I climb onto the top deck and lie on my towel in the sun. It turns out I’ve been telling the truth and it really is not so bad being the only one on board, except for Pablo, but he doesn’t talk to me so for all intents and purposes I am alone. I lie on my back and feel the sun press against the skin of my stomach, aware of the boat rocking back and forth beneath me. The waves aren’t too bad. I can only imagine the kind of visibility they’re getting.

I lie in the sun for about thirty-five minutes before I hear Pablo call to the first couple to surface. I sit up and look over the edge. It's the Spanish couple and they look wild. They start going off in Spanish: "No me lo vas a creer lo que está ahí abajo. Nunca he visto nada así!"

He talks back to them and it's clear they've seen something pretty strange.

"Y los otros? Donde están?"

"Todavía estamos investigando. Nosotros también estuvieramos ahí, pero nos faltó el aire."

I climb down and Escobar pats me on the shoulder. "Big discover," he says, widening his eyes. "BIG."

In another ten minutes I see Genevieve's head surface and she paddles toward the back of the boat, passing her fins up to Pablo and using the ladder to climb aboard. I help her to her seat. "Did they tell you?" she asks, still dripping, familiar snot streams hanging from her nose.

"They told me something, but it was in Spanish. I guess you saw something big? Shark, was it?"

"No, weirder than that." She's distracted suddenly by Eddie climbing on board. "Where's Bill?" she asks. Eddie struggles to maintain his balance while Pablo helps him off with his tank.

"Damn fool wouldn't come up. He's still down there fiddling with the thing. I waited as long as I could but eventually I ran out of air. He's got nitro, which lasts longer. Signed that he'd be up in a minute."

"Tell Evan what we saw."

He removes his wet suit and takes a seat in the sun in his speedo. His body is nearly orange from being on dive boats his whole life and the hair on his chest is bleach blonde. "Well, honestly I'm not sure. I mean, at really extreme depths there's supposed to be these underwater brine pools that have a higher salinity than normal seawater, which explains why they're distinct, but we're talking bottom of the ocean here. I don't think that's

what's down there. With brine pools, the methane usually causes colonies of mussels to form around it, but there was none of that and the salinity, I would think, should make the pool look murky. Doesn't explain the weird shimmer the one down there has."

"So you found an underwater pool," I venture.

"Something like that. Like I said, I don't know what it is, but I'm pretty sure it's new. I've never seen or heard of anything like it before."

"Was it here the last time you dove?"

"Well that's the thing," he says, looking around and scanning the water as if for landmarks. "This ain't the spot I was trying to take us to. I'm pretty sure it's in this vicinity, but the buoy isn't here, and once I got down there it was pretty obvious I haven't been here before. How I've been missing it all these years, I don't know."

At the back of the boat Bill is passing his fins up to Pablo.

"Hey, Bill," Eddie says once he's seated. "I know you've got a longer air supply than the rest of us, but when I come up I need you to come with me. It's a liability thing, you understand?"

Bill nods without lifting his eyes.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." His voice sounds distant.

"Figure anything else out?"

"I don't know. Tried dropping a few rocks and shells into it, but nothing happened. They just sat on its surface and wouldn't go under. Then I tried to force them under with my hand just for a second and it felt like it was being swallowed whole. The pressure...it was intense."

"Pressure? In the water?"

"Think so." He lifts his hand in front of his face, tries making a fist but can hardly move it. "Still don't really have much feeling."

"Lemme take a look at that," Eddie says, and we all crowd in close while he removes his glove. The hand he shows us is black

and blue and seems nearly half the size of the other one. "Jesus, Bill! It looks like every bone in your hand is broken!"

"It don't hurt."

"Can you feel anything?"

He waits a moment, then shakes his head. Eddie gets up and begins to pace in the sun at the back of the boat. He looks at his watch. "Alright, here's what we do," he says. "We've got another half hour before we can go down again...What do you guys say we stay here today, check this thing out? Tomorrow we'll call in the coast guard and they'll bring an army of marine biologists, but right now how would you guys like to be a part of something new and current—a goddamn scientific discovery?"

"Si," says Escobar.

"Ain't even a choice as far as I'm concerned," says Bill. "You get to be my age and anything new comes along, you better be up for the ride."

"Can you dive with your hand like that?" Genevieve asks, and Bill laughs.

"Honey, I've dove with a broken leg before, bullets stuck in my hip... believe me, a sore hand ain't nothing."

"Right, but this situation with your hand teaches us something," Eddie says. "If we're going to mess around with this thing we've got to be careful. We don't know what it is, or what it's capable of. Could be a living organism for all we know. I know we're all seasoned and competent, but in order to do this and make sure everybody's safe, I really need you all to follow my lead."

They nod their heads, except for me. Bill notices.

"What d'you say, sport? Still decompressing?"

I glare at him. "Think so," I say, as amiably and regretfully as I can manage. "You guys will just have to give me a full report of what you see down there."

Genevieve stares at me like her feelings are hurt. The potential symbolism of this is too much for her: encountering something entirely new together on our honeymoon, literally making a

scientific discovery. I'm becoming more cynical. I mean, isn't everything a new experience? Isn't everything, if you look closely enough, a new discovery? Even our cells regenerate at a rate that, every seven years or so, we're entirely new people. But this isn't the kind of newness Genevieve appreciates. Me neither, really.

"We'll give you the spark notes," Bill says, smirking.

While they wait for the surface interval to time out, we have a lunch of peanut butter sandwiches and fruit, with plenty of water. Breathing through a regulator tends to dry out one's mouth, so for them the lunch is bursting with flavor. For me though, it's kind of bland. While we wait for the last ten minutes to go by, everyone is silent, watching their time pieces and dive computers for the green light. At last they start to suit up again. Genevieve remains holding my hand.

"Aren't you going down with them?" I ask.

"No, I want to stay up here with you."

"What for?"

"Just because," she says. "We need to be together."

I'm touched by the sacrifice, but at the same time the thought of both of us waiting up here is more shameful somehow than if it were just me alone. Ruining my own honeymoon is bad enough; I don't want to be responsible for hers too, especially given the circumstances.

"I think you should go down with them," I say, and she looks at me.

"Why?"

"Because I want to know what's down there, and I'm relying on you for all the juicy details. Plus, who's going to be Bill's dive partner? I mean, look at the guy... he could have a stroke at any moment and who would be there to help him?"

"Evan, something's happening to us. I don't know what it is, but I just really feel like we need to stay together right now. Okay? This is our honeymoon." She looks at me and I can feel her eyes

pleading for me to come with them, to get my gear on and quit being such a pussy. Not all of that, of course, but that's what it feels like.

"You go, babe," I say. "I want to be by myself anyway. The quiet is good for me."

She studies my eyes, searching them for subtext—a secret request that isn't quite coming through in words. She must find none because a moment later she sighs and zips up her dive skin, slides her arms through her BCD vest and starts to get ready. "This isn't the honeymoon I had in mind," she says in a low voice.

I say that I'm sorry, wanting it to be vague, but we both know what I'm talking about.

Once they're all underneath I return to my spot on the top deck, although the sky is overcast and there isn't much sun to soak up right now. I stand up there, alone, and stare out at the unimpeded sky and sea, at the blurry spot on the horizon where the two of them meet. I am struck suddenly by the full magnitude of my error, choosing this for our honeymoon. I feel small out here, and that is not the way a man should feel on his honeymoon.

I climb down from the top deck and up front I can hear a beeping noise. Pablo has been sitting with his feet up, listening to something through a pair of headphones, but now he yanks them off and stares at one of the monitors beside the steering wheel. "Chingada madre," he breathes.

"What is it?"

He doesn't answer at first, but rushes to the side of the boat and peers over the edge into the water, does the same on the other side.

"Pablo, what is it?"

"I don't know," he says, still trying to see something beneath the water. "Radar picked up something. Could be a mistake though. Something very big."

I look at the monitor. On the screen there is a large red circle designating the area around the boat. I can see five smaller forms—



whom I presume to be the divers—off the stern. In front of us is a large amorphous shape that looks roughly the size of a submarine.

“What the hell is that, Pablo?”

“I don’t know, there is no room for an object like that at this depth. I’m thinking it’s a mistake.”

I look back to the screen and can see that the object, whatever it is, is circling to our starboard side, toward the divers. “It’s moving over here,” I say, and we both rush to the starboard side of the boat. The water there is choppy and without any sun the surface appears cold and impenetrable.

“Do you see anything?” I ask, and he shakes his head, but then an immense shadow appears on the water in front of us—or is it a cloud passing overhead?—before disappearing just as suddenly.

“What do we do?” I ask.

“There is nothing we can do except be ready in case they surface.”

I wait at the stern for another twenty minutes before they reappear. During this time Pablo has managed to relax; the shape has disappeared on the radar although he can still see our companions swimming up near the prow. I continue to be anxious until I see Genevieve’s head break the surface and her pulling herself in by a rope attached to the stern.

“Are you guys alright?” I ask once they’re on board and struggling to remove their gear.

Eddie looks at me. “Why do you ask?”

“Did you see anything down there?”

“*Anything?*”

Pablo explains what we saw on the sonar and Eddie shrugs. “Must have been a malfunction of some kind. We didn’t see anything, barely any fish even. It’s like the reef is deserted.”

“Well, what *did* you see?”

“We found a couple of other smaller pools hidden inside some of the coral formations. Look to be the same kind, although we

haven't been able to figure out what they are yet. I tried lowering my weight belt into it and almost as soon as I did I felt some pressure take hold of it and it disappeared. That's why we had to come up so early. I couldn't stay down without it."

"It disappeared? Like something grabbed it?"

He laughs. "No, nothing like that. I think what we're dealing with though is pressure. For some reason these pools contain enormous amounts of pressure. I think it made my weights heavier and that's what sucked them under. Also explains what happened to Bill's hand."

"How is that possible though?"

"You've got me. I've never seen anything like it, although I would like to poke around down there some more before calling in the coast guard. When you get to be my age you have to seize opportunities like this one. That is, if it's okay with the rest of you?"

We all shrug and nod, except for Bill, who says, "I hear you."

"Good. Well, according to the chart we've got to take an hour-and-a-half surface interval this time, which should leave us just enough time for one more dive before dusk."

The sky is overcast now and we've all been on deck for a while. Most of us choose to wait out the interval in our cabins.

"I want to shower," Genevieve says once we're below, "but I know I'm just going to get dirty again." She removes her dive skin and the bikini swimsuit beneath it, wraps her hair in a towel, and lies down on the made-up bed beside me. I lower my lips to her shoulder and taste the salt still clinging to her.

"Dirty girl," I say.

"I'd rather not," she says. "I'm so exhausted from all the diving."

I stop kissing her. "You can rest. I'll do most of the work."

She smiles. "Evan, what can we do to get this honeymoon back on track?"

"I didn't know it was off track."

She waits a moment: "I know you're afraid of going down again."

"What do you mean 'afraid'? I've been diving longer than you have, sweetheart."

"I'm not trying to insult you. I don't even blame you. It was probably really scary what happened, and if it were me, I wouldn't want to dive for a while either. But we can't keep being separate here, not acknowledging it. If you want to stay on the boat instead of dive, that's fine, but I want to stay with you. What's important isn't the diving or discovering some new sea thing...it's that we're together."

My eyes become bleary for a moment and I consider again how it felt being underwater suddenly without air, how my mind drew a blank despite all the training.

"Look, I understand how it must seem to you. But the truth is that I'm just not feeling well. Maybe it's decompression sickness or maybe it's something else, but I just don't want to dive right now. I don't want that to ruin your time. You should keep diving. Enjoy yourself. We're paying for it, after all. Anything less would be a waste."

"But I told you, I don't care about that."

"I know, but I do! I don't want to be the cause, do you understand? It's bad enough that I'm stuck up here myself, but if you are too it's only going to make it worse for me."

"But I *want* to be with you."

I sigh. Her devotion is infuriating.

"How about this," I say. "It's the depth that bothers me—what if while you guys are diving I snorkel on the surface. That way I'll be able to see you, you can look up and see me. I'll be able to contribute to the conversation about stuff when we all come up. How would that be?"

"I don't want to force you to do anything you're not comfortable with."

"Snorkeling would be fine," I say. "Honestly. In fact, I'm surprised I didn't think of it sooner."

"Will you be able to with the sea this rough?"

"It's worth a try."

Now she smiles and I smile too, happy to have come up with a solution finally. I lower my mouth to her shoulder again and can feel her relax beneath me. I remove my shirt and shorts, climb on top of her, knock the towel off of her head and cradle her damp hair in the crook of my arm.

Once we finish, we both put our swimsuits on and carry our dive skins up to the deck. Genevieve hangs hers on a railing to dry. Bill is seated on the bench nearest the stern and is staring off into infinity. In his lap, his injured hand is cradled, moving slightly, unsuccessfully attempting to open and close.

"See anything out there?" Genevieve asks, smiling. He turns, surprised.

"No. Nothing that wasn't already there, anyway."

"Guess who's going to be joining us this time on the surface?"

He raises his eyebrows and she turns to indicate me. I look away.

"On the surface?"

"He's going to snorkel."

"Well, good for him, I guess." He turns back to the horizon.

"Still another half hour before we can go down," Genevieve says. "I'm going to go make a sandwich. You want one?"

"Sure, I'll come with you."

"That's alright. Kitchen's cramped anyway." She looks at me significantly and then at Bill.

"Beg your pardon?" I say, but she just smiles, turns and disappears beneath the deck.

I look back at Bill and he is still gazing at the ocean, holding his injured hand. "How's the hand?" I ask, inching a bit closer and reluctantly taking a seat on the bench opposite him.

He doesn't turn. "It's fine," he says.

"Are you able to move it alright?"

"It's fine," he glances at me fiercely out of the corner of his eye before returning to the horizon. We're silent for several moments, and I consider giving up. I don't even like the old bastard, but something about the way he's seated, the contemplative air around him, interests me.

"Any idea what it is down there?"

"Nope."

"You seem interested in them. You ever see anything like them before?"

He glances at me again. "No." And he waits a moment, as if considering whether or not to tell me what he's thinking. At last he sighs. "There were times during the war when I wished I had. When I was underwater and enemy boats were humming over the surface, sometimes I'd imagine something real similar to what's down there: a pool, or a portal of some kind that I could enter into and be home again, or at least someplace tropical." He smiles, and I smile too despite myself. "I imagined meeting my wife on a beach somewhere. Surprising her. Just coming up out of the water in my scuba gear and catching her there in a swimsuit, a daiquiri in her hand."

"Where is she now?"

"Dead three years. Stroke."

Somehow I'd known this to be the case, and I try to convince myself it wasn't cruelty that made me ask. "I'm sorry," I say. He doesn't answer.

Genevieve returns with two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. We eat in silence. Twenty minutes later Eddie joins us on deck, followed by Pablo, then Escobar and Maria.

"Ready for one last dive before we call it a night?" Eddie asks.

We all nod and murmur assent, slowly start to suit up.

"You joining us this time, Evan?" he asks me, seeing me pulling on my fins and strapping my dive knife uselessly to my calf.

"Just on the surface," I say.

"Pretty choppy out there. Visibility might not be so good."

"If it's too rough I'll come in."

He nods and glances once at Pablo before going to suit up himself. As usual I watch the procession of waddling individuals in scuba gear march off the back end of the boat before following after them. When it's Genevieve's turn, she turns and smiles at me—her face all mashed against the dive mask—before fitting her mouth around the regulator and taking one long stride off the back end, tumbling into the water. I follow and stand there for a moment looking at their heads bobbing together in a little group, disappearing one by one beneath the surface, replaced by streams of air bubbles. The boat rocks from side to side and the water has the look of steel. I've already lost sight of the others beneath it, except for their bubbles.

"Compadre, a donde vas?" Pablo calls from the captain's chair. Without answering I take a long stride out into the water after them. We've been without sun most of the day by this point and the water is cold. Seawater splashes into my snorkel and I have to tread water in order to clear it. Pablo, I can see, is at the back of the boat. He touches his head with his right hand and I do the same—the international sign for *okay*—then press my face beneath the surface and watch the others sinking, anchored to five streams of bubbles.

The waves have me rocking from side to side, and the visibility is not good anyway from all of the silt being stirred up, but from where I am I can just barely make them out and recognize who is who. I recognize Genevieve by the red and navy on her wet suit. They are waiting on the bottom for her to work her way down, and once she arrives they proceed in a line behind Eddie. I cannot make out the reef very well. At this depth it looks like a great, ragged shadow throwing each of the divers into relief. The floor is probably fifty feet down, and not too far off I can see where the

shelf drops off into open water, a spectrum of blue darkening into murk.

Genevieve flips onto her back and looks up at me, gives me two thumbs up. I return the gesture although I suspect anything I do will be lost in the light of the surface around me. I can see Bill swimming several yards ahead of her, not bothering to look around or to investigate the reef like the others. He is focused. It's the pool he's interested in. I try to follow and to remain directly above them, which feels strange and voyeuristic in a way, not to mention lonely. Every now and then I lift my head just to make sure I'm not going to run into the boat motor or anything, although each time I do this I find an infinite plane of grey distending in front of me.

Below I can see that the procession has stopped and is gathered around something. I cannot tell what it is, but by its shape and the dull sense of color I'm able to discern it looks just like a rather large piece of coral. And yet it has captured their interest, even Bill's—all of them hover around it, inverted, the Spanish couple snapping pictures with their underwater camera. I continue to puzzle over what it could be when I suddenly notice, about twenty yards distant from them, the pool. Because of the poor visibility everything surrounding it appears foggy and indistinct; it, however, seems to shimmer even at this depth. It is silver and beautiful, and judging by the size of the divers relative to it I would guess it's about six-by-six feet in diameter. I forget about the divers and swim until I am directly above the pool—the water here, I'd reckon, is about seventy feet—and there allow myself to float, buoyed by the passing waves and hypnotized by the silver shimmer of the pool beneath me, the way it captures what little light there is and reflects it in a way that seems almost like a gesture, though one incomprehensible to me.

I watch it for what feels like several minutes before the others finally make their way over to it, obstructing my view. I wish suddenly that I had my own gear and that I too was able to inspect

it up close, perhaps even touch it, maybe, although that didn't work out so well for Bill. I lift my head from the water and wheel about so that I am facing the boat. I'm surprised to see that I'm nearly one hundred yards out. On the prow I see Pablo stand and lift his right hand to his head. I lift my right hand to my head, and begin to swim back in its direction.

Back on the boat I wait another twenty-five minutes before the first divers appear. It's the Spanish couple again, followed by Genevieve and Eddie. Bill, once again, has elected to stay down by himself and I can see that Eddie is annoyed. We all shower off on the back of the boat and hang our dive skins and wet suits out to dry. By the time we're finished Bill is climbing up the ladder. Eddie helps him to his seat and I can see him whispering something to him. Judging by Bill's face, I'm assuming it's a reprimand.

Once we've rinsed off we return to our cabins and get dressed for dinner. Genevieve and I both put on jeans, which feels terrific after a day spent in bathing suits. "So what did you guys find down there?" I ask.

She smiles. "Just wait," she says. "You're not going to believe it."

In the main cabin, Eddie already has the table set and Pablo is working on a sailor's version of paella with shrimp, blue crab, clams, and mussels. Once he's finished setting the table, Eddie slams a handle of Sailor Jerry's in the middle of it. "This feels like a rum night," he says. We start with rum and cokes and already have a nice buzz going when it's time to eat. On land, the paella would be merely passable, but out here it is a meal fit for a king. By the time we finish there is no more coke but still some rum, so we drink it straight, except for Bill who waves it off with a conciliatory smile. Nobody bothers to clear off the table; by now we're listening to Eddie describe what it was they found, particularly Pablo and I, who didn't get to see it first hand.



"I thought it was a piece of coral at first. Even when I was right on top of it—I couldn't think of anything else it could be, and, in fact, I'm still kind of stumped on that score. But it wasn't like any type of coral I'd ever seen before, and I knew it wasn't there on the first dive. It was red and grainy, bits and pieces of it detaching in the current, and what's more, I could see that the mass itself wasn't attached to anything. It shifted back and forth on the sea floor. When I investigated its bottom side I noticed a strange film covering it, transparent as far as I could tell, although whenever the thing shifted it would glimmer just a little in the light." He stares as if waiting for Pablo and me to draw our own conclusions. I can't tell whether or not Pablo has solved it, but with this much rum in me I'm in no mood to play detective.

"And?" I say.

"It was *skin*," he says. "Like a fish's, although the only fish I've ever heard of with skin like that live only in deep water."

"So it was a fish?"

"No, just a piece of one."

I blink and look at the others to see how they are taking this information. "And where was the rest of it?"

He shrugs. "A better question is what was it to begin with, and how did it get here? All of the fish I know that have skin similar to that live at such depths they literally can't ascend because the lack of pressure would kill them. They're all a lot smaller too than whatever this thing is."

"Well, it doesn't seem like it's survived exactly either."

"No, but it would have died long before making it to this depth. A hundred feet is nothing. There are places not too far from here that are seven miles deep. That's over thirty-five thousand feet. You can feel in your ears the pressure at one hundred; can you imagine what it must be like at that depth? Most biologists doubt life is capable of existing there. We know more about the moon...hell, we

know more about nearly every planet in our solar system than we do about the bottom of the ocean."

There are several beats of silence before Genevieve says, "The pool?"

Eddie nods. "Gotta think they're related, although who knows, really? We're so far beyond anything currently known about the ocean at this point. I've gotta tell you though, personally, I'm not ready to call it in."

"Me neither," Bill chimes.

The rest of us look around at one another and nod uncertainly.

"What do you want to do, then?" Genevieve asks.

"Well, I thought I'd put it to you guys. You're the paying customers, after all. We can either call it in tomorrow, wait for the scientists to arrive, then head out to continue our diving elsewhere, or we can stay here and keep going down until we feel satisfied we've seen everything there is to see with our limited means, then call in the fuzz. It's up to you."

Bill leans forward. "Well, you all know my vote. I'm old and most reefs at this point are just configurations of things I've seen elsewhere."

"Shall we put it to a vote, then?" Eddie asks, studying each of our faces.

We nod.

"All in favor of staying?"

Slowly, we all raise our hands, Bill last, a satisfied smirk on his face.

"All opposed?"

Nothing.

"Well that settles it. We'll go down again tomorrow morning."

It's mine and Genevieve's turn to clear away the dishes, so we do that, rinsing them off in the sink and leaving them there for Pablo to finish up in the morning. Suddenly there is a dull thud and the floor beneath us vibrates, as though from impact.

"What was that?" Genevieve asks.

Several seconds go by, all of our senses tuned to our surroundings, unconsciously trying to perceive whether or not we are sinking. Then it happens again: a dull pounding that sounds like it's coming from beneath us, something throwing itself against the hull of the boat. We grasp at the handrails and pull ourselves up on deck. The others are all gathered at the port bow.

"What's going on?" I call out to them. Bill gestures with his head for us to join them. Slowly, and with the sounds continuing beneath us, we move to the railing and are shocked to see the water churning. But no: it's not the water that's moving—something beneath it. What I first took for movement appears to be shadows, huge ones, shifting back and forth beneath the surface. Another muted sound of impact and suddenly it disappears.

"What in the hell...?"

"You wondered how that piece of meat got down there," Bill says with a smile. "I'm thinking there's going to be a whole lot more tomorrow."

I move to the other side where Eddie is. "What's happening?" I whisper.

"Evan, I have no fucking idea. You want to see something really weird: look over there, roughly where the pool is beneath the water, and wait for another one of those explosions. Wait for it...There! You see it?"

Sure enough, there is a dull flash of neon in the general vicinity of the pool that quickly diminishes into darkness.

I am speechless.

After several minutes the "explosions" become further apart. As they do, the brief flashes of color cease to be so brief. Color appears to bleed beneath the surface of the water: aqua, neon, as well as colors I don't believe I've ever seen before, all phosphorescent and glowing.

"You know," Eddie says quietly, without taking his eyes away, "most deep sea marine life still have eyes just like us, though the

sun doesn't reach down that far. In order to see many creatures have evolved to create their own light inside of their bodies."

Bill turns. "Seeing ain't the only thing they use it for."

This seems to jolt Eddie from his reverie. "No. No, it isn't."

"Tell 'em what else they use it for."

Eddie clears his throat. "Some deep water fish use the light they make as lures, primitive forms of hypnotism to draw other organisms close. It's a tool for hunting."

This information snaps us all back to attention.

"You don't think..." Genevieve begins.

"No, I don't think. But there's not a whole lot we can do about it at this point. My suggestion is that we all retire to our cabins, try to get a good night's rest, and we'll see what we can find out in the morning."

Genevieve looks to me and I nod, and we turn to go to bed. The Spanish couple does the same, and Eddie, and Pablo; all except for Bill, who remains still against the railing, watching, dreaming, long after we've disappeared below deck.

Genevieve and I lie awake in bed. Not long after, the dull explosions start again, reverberating against the hull. "What do you think it is?" she asks.

"Eddie seems to know."

"Yeah, but how do you think they got here? What is the pool?"

"I don't know, babe. Some kind of portal, I should think."

"But where did it come from? Who put it there?"

I have no answers for her.

"Do you think it works in reverse, too?"

At this I turn to her in the dark, attempt to study her features through the shadow, but the darkness is implacable. "Not sure it's worth finding out," I say.

She takes a minute to respond. "No, I suppose not. Honeymoon isn't the time to be exploring new worlds. Enough is happening in this one." She cuddles up against me, holding me across my chest.

Yes, I think. *So much is happening*, and I hold her tight as well, allowing my eyelids to become heavy, lulled to sleep by the pulsing sound of another world crying out below.

The next morning we wake well rested. I nearly leap out of bed, I'm so energetic. I stand naked in the middle of our cabin, listening. The explosions, it seems, have stopped.

"Are you going to dive with us today?" Genevieve asks, sitting up and rubbing sleep from her eyes.

"I think I will," I say. "Yes, today I'm feeling pretty good."

On deck everyone is already zipping up their wetsuits.

"You guys sleep well?" Eddie asks cheerfully.

"Yeah, we really did."

Eddie also seems well rested, as does Pablo, and the Spanish couple. The only one who doesn't is Bill. His eyes are heavy and blood shot, his face unshaven. No one knows how late he stayed up watching the water because he won't talk to anyone. He keeps to himself, checking the valves on his tank, his regulator, checking his dive computer.

"Alright," Eddie says, suited up and standing in the middle of the deck. "I feel the need to disclaim what we're doing here beforehand. We're diving now out of curiosity, out of a desire to know exactly what it was we saw last night. There's no telling what we'll find down there. The silence suggests that whatever might have been a threat last night is a threat no longer, although I want to stress the fact that we can't know for sure. If you go down with us you're accepting that fact, the risk *and* the possible reward. Agreed?"

We all nod our heads.

"Out loud, please."

“Agreed.”

Pablo translates for the Spanish couple. “Si,” they say together.

“Alright then, follow me.” He turns and, after issuing a few instructions to Pablo, pulls his mask down and places his regulator inside his mouth, begins waddling toward the back of the boat. We all do the same, following after him.

It’s a beautiful day for diving: not a cloud in the sky and, compared to the last few days, the sea is relatively calm. Visibility should be excellent.

Behind Eddie is the Spanish couple, followed by Bill, followed at last by Genevieve and me. Eddie stands at the edge for several moments staring at the water before taking a giant stride and tumbling into the ocean. We wait for him to resurface and to give us a report of what’s beneath him. After putting his face in the water and looking around he waves us in. One by one, we all stride out. It feels good to be in my scuba gear again. I breathe deeply into my regulator in order to test it, to convince myself that what happened last time will not happen again. But these assurances aren’t necessary—I know that this time it will all be fine.

I’m the last into the water and with a full wet suit on it feels fantastic, the perfect temperature. I feel the way it floods my BCD, seeps into my wetsuit, and refreshes my skin. Once we’re all in the water Pablo stands at the end of the boat and brings his right hand to his head, we all do the same then turn to Eddie, who nods, and we each press the release valve on our BCDs and slowly begin to descend.

As soon as we’re under we can see we’ve entered a landscape of gore. The reef beneath us, it seems, has disappeared, replaced by humongous piles of fish meat which, in their own way, resemble coral in the formations they make. Hovering above it is a faint aura of red, tiny bits of flesh the current has disengaged. The sun catches the bits of skin and the whole thing sparkles like crystal.

I look at Genevieve and signal to ask whether she is okay. She nods her head, although I can see her eyes are red.

The others descend straight away, although I stay with Genevieve while she gradually makes her way down, desperately trying to equalize so that she won't miss anything. Visibility is so good though we can see nearly everything from where we are, clear to the other side of the reef where, I can see, the pool remains, shimmering.

The others wait at the bottom until we've descended, then set out in a line behind Eddie. Genevieve and I are in back although we can see Bill up ahead nearly on top of Eddie, too polite to pass him but too eager to hang back any further. We swim over the top of the reef, examining the piles of meat for signs of life, or at least a piece of flesh that can help identify the creatures. There are none though. There aren't even any fish, predatory or otherwise, nibbling at it.

This last bit, I realize, is concerning. We're basically swimming over a mountain of chum, and the scent should be drawing in predators from miles around. The fact that it's not is indicative of something, although I'm not sure what. Whatever the threat is that keeps them away surely doesn't appear to be *living*.

At one point I reach out and touch a piece of fish. I'm surprised by how delicate it is. It feels like a half-inflated balloon, not solid like you would expect meat to be. It seems somehow empty inside.

After investigating the reef for fifteen minutes, Eddie leads us back to the pool. What we're supposed to discover here, I have no idea. We've learned already that we cannot touch it, whatever we drop inside of it simply disappears, seeming to be pulled in. Are we just going to wait and see if anything comes out? Honestly, I don't care, because it's my first time seeing the thing up close and it is beautiful—bigger and more brilliant than it appeared from the surface. Staring into it, I lose track of what the others are doing. The way it shimmers...it's like glass or liquid silver, maybe. I don't know how long it has been when I'm finally able to tear my eyes away, but when I look up I see that the others are all doing the

same thing. They are all gathered in a circle around the pool, weightless, floating in a single position and staring down into it, like a coven of witches around a pentagram, mindless, hypnotized.

I realize then that something is wrong. I can tell, ironically, by how natural this all feels. I test myself by trying to make myself move, just a little, just a couple of kicks upward, but I cannot. My limbs feel heavy and rigid, as though they are filled with cement, and my eyes have refocused now on the pool, vast and beautiful, like a giant tear-filled eye. I'm locked in a battle with myself. I must move. I must warn the others. It's not right, whatever this thing is. It is not right for it to be so beautiful, so captivating. The more I struggle internally, the more I can feel it in relation to me, as though the eye is turning now in my direction, focusing on me specifically and compelling me to be still. Suddenly it no longer seems beautiful. I am able to see it for the malevolent thing that it is, its predatory nature. What it wants to do with us, I have no idea. Is this some kind of living organism? Is it hunting us for nourishment, or something more sinister than that; something fundamentally more wrong? Either way, one thing seems certain to me: we are prey.

I am able to tear my eyes away for a moment and I look up toward the surface, which, from this depth, looks like a solid plane of light, like the floor of heaven, which would of course make this hell. With a Herculean effort I'm able to kick one leg free, and the rest of my body follows naturally. I turn to Genevieve and grab her by the bicep. At first she doesn't respond, but I knock against her mask with my fist and this gets her attention. The eyes she turns toward me bear the confused, panicky expression of a child. Something is wrong, she realizes, just not what or how she should handle it. I motion toward the surface, and this seems to frighten her more. Somehow I must communicate what I know. I point at the pool and then draw a line across my throat. When she still seems confused, I point to it again and make the sign for a shark, my hand shaped like a fin atop my forehead. At last she seems to



understand. I can see she cannot move though. I grab her beneath her arms and begin to pull her upwards until at last her limbs are able to move themselves.

I'm about to swim straight for the surface when Genevieve grabs me by the fin and points to the others, still floating in stasis around the pool. She reaches for Eddie and tries to get his attention, but it's as if he is asleep. She shakes him by the shoulders and I help, but there is no response. Finally, I reach up to his air tank and turn off the valve. A couple of seconds pass and his consciousness returns to him and he begins to thrash. I turn his air back on and he turns to me, looking furious. I interrupt his mad gesticulations to signal what I have just communicated to Genevieve:

The pool.

It's dangerous.

Predator.

At first he too looks confused. I can tell by the way his eyes shift back and forth, that he believes me. He makes a circle with his hand, signaling that we should round up the rest of them. He swims to Escobar and Genevieve goes to Maria. They try shaking them at first but eventually resort to turning off their air for a moment.

I swim over to Bill.

I can tell immediately that he is not like the others. Through his mask, his eyes are not vacant in the same way theirs were. They are heavy and bloodshot and stare into the pool with a kind of fevered intensity the others were not capable of. I try shaking his shoulders, although immediately his arm shoots up between us and knocks me away from him. I try to signal to him what I signaled to the others, that he is in danger. But he's not looking at me. His attention is absorbed by the teary eye in front of him. I look toward the others and they are fifteen feet above me now, watching, waiting for me. I wave them on. They hesitate, Genevieve, most of all, but the pool and the gore, the fact that there are no fish

around—they're frightened. The silence no longer communicates safety, but an impending something that they do not wish to stick around for.

When I can see them all ascending I turn back to Bill and, swimming over top of him, turn off his air. Immediately he turns, begins to thrash, tries to reach behind him and turn it back on himself, but he cannot reach it. He grabs his dive knife from his calf and begins to slash it in my direction. I swim upwards, hoping that he'll follow me, and that, if we ascend far enough, I can turn it back on and he'll snap out of whatever state it is he's in. But it's as if he runs into a wall, because despite having no air to breathe, he does not follow me. His thrashing stops, although I can see he is still fully conscious. His arms float down to his side and the knife drops down and disappears inside the pool.

Then, something unexpected happens. I descend again, above Bill's head, which is now focused again on the pool, and I turn his air back on. He barely seems to notice, although I can see his limbs relax. I look at him for another moment and think back on the time he saved me underwater. It seems melodramatic to use the word, because, after all, I had plenty of air—I'd just forgotten how to use it—but he did. He saved me. And all of those feelings flood back to me: a mixture of gratitude, resentment, and shame. I think of Genevieve at the surface waiting for me. The others too. I'm the hero this time. I was the first to realize the pool's nature, what it was trying to do to us, and with one more glance in Bill's direction I turn and begin to ascend, the barren landscape of gore coming into full view again as I rise, and as the surface becomes brighter and brighter above me, I try not to think about whether I'm being cruel or merciful to leave him, vengeful or kind. I can see the hull of the boat growing larger as I ascend, and just as I'm about to break the surface I look back, can see that Bill is no longer there. Just that beautiful, teary eye, staring up at me.

**NICK KIMBRO** is a graduate student at the University of Colorado at Boulder. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Spring Gun Journal*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Weird Tales*, *Space Squid*, and the new anthology *Ocean Stories* from Elekrik Milkbat Press. He is recently married; his honeymoon was nowhere close to the ocean.





## On the cover:

### "Lazy Daze"

Casey Weldon

**CASEY WELDON** was born in southern California, where he spent the majority of his life up to his graduation from the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. After a brief time running his own studio in Las Vegas, Nevada, He relocated to Brooklyn, New York, where he now lives and works as an illustrator and fine artist.

By using to the iconography of today and yesterday's popular culture, his work aims to awaken a feelings of nostalgia within the viewer, though often along with a sense humor, melancholy, and longing for times lost.



Prints of his work are available to purchase at his website, [caseyweldon.com](http://caseyweldon.com).