

Jersey Devil Press



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Table of Contents:

Editor's Note	3
Blood and Dirt, Kate Folk	5
Prophet, Nell Payton	11
The Hermitage, Kelsie Hahn	22
Hitchin', Terry Rietta	24
The Laws, Zachary Leven	31
The Big One, Grant Farley	33

Editor's Note:

So here it is, the September 2013 Issue, my penultimate as editor. Which is interesting, for a couple of reasons. First, anyone who reads JDP's site, or happens to know me, is well aware that I enjoy saying "penultimate" way too much. I learned the word at the age of twelve while reading John Gardner's *For Special Services*. It was the second in his attempts to write new James Bond novels, but updating the character for the 1980s. (It went about as well as that sounds.) But at least I got "penultimate" out of the endeavor and have been overusing it since.

It's also odd because if there's a theme to this month's issues, it is decidedly not "next to last," but rather "firsts."

First time having sex with General Lee? We've got that.

First time stealing a statue of Jesus that actually isn't Jesus? Yes, yes, we have that too.

First time walking around your new sandcastle? Uh-huh.

First time hitch-hiking? You betcha'.

And first time trying to have your first time at Disneyland. . .of course, we've got that. Who else would?

(Also, because we're JDP and are statutorily required to print a certain number of stories about the apocalypse, we also have a lovely piece of flash about the world ending, which admittedly bucks the whole "firsts" theme.)

And there you have it. Issue 46 is simultaneously a collection of firsts and my penultimate issue. Enjoy.

— Mike Sweeney

Blood and Dirt

Kate Folk

It's July, and we're in a small town in Kentucky, shooting the independent cowboy/zombie film that my boyfriend, Jeff, is funding. Though he's paying for the whole production, Jeff is content to erect tripods and make beer runs for the crew. The movie is called "Blood and Dirt," and the script is awful: too ridiculous to be scary, too violent to be funny. Jeff says it'll come together in post-production.

Because he made a fortune off a protein powder he invented in college, Jeff now gets to pursue his dream of being an artist. All he ever wanted was to be a "creative type," as he calls it, and laments that he's more of a "science guy." He says this almost every day in some context. "I like it, but I'm more of a science guy," he said yesterday when asked his opinion of a painting hanging in a coffee shop.

We've been here a week. At night we camp on a dirt field with the rest of the crew. Even at midnight, the temperature stays above ninety. Our bodies are sickening orbs of heat. We don't touch inside the tent—a cramped, slippery thing, filled with tiny ants.

The adjacent park is occupied by a Civil War reenactment group. They wear real wool uniforms, suffering for verisimilitude. We suspect that they're practicing for an upcoming event, since reenacting a single battle can't take this long. When we ask them questions, they spout platitudes about God and country.

Last night we ate at Pizza Hut, all twenty of us. Only three people had cash so we split the bill on sixteen cards. We stayed in the parking lot for two hours smoking cigarettes and joints and drinking beer from the gas station. One by one, townspeople came out of their houses and stared.

Jeff feels self-conscious if I'm around while they're filming, so I'm alone again today. The temperature hits 100 by eleven a.m. I wander down Main Street. A wave of nausea and I just make it to the diner bathroom before vomiting a gruel of Krispy Kreme and weak coffee. I'm either pregnant or sick from organisms lurking beneath the sneeze guard at the Pizza Hut buffet.

On my way out, an old man corners me behind a wood partition. His eyes are cloudy, like egg whites that have just started to cook. He breathes on me; his breath smells like apples softening in the sun.

"Your people pissed on my lawn," he says.

I edge past him. I feel his runny eyes on me clear to the door.

Even the sparrows move in slow motion, their Chiclet hearts taxed by heat. I follow a trail of popcorn to the town square. Rusty water spasms from the fountain. I sit on a tree stump and am immediately approached by a small woman. She's skinny, with bulbous joints, dull red hair and a jaw like a desiccated chicken wing.

"You're all a bunch of grade-A assholes," she says. "Skipping out on your tab like that."

I tell her I don't know what she's talking about. I walk to the drug store where the crew buys energy bars and Gatorade and condoms. They say the local girls are almost too willing; no fun in it.

I linger in the air conditioning and buy a pregnancy test. The girl ringing me up looks at the name on my debit card. Then she looks at me. She chews her gum slowly. She blows a bubble that deflates suddenly, as if pricked. I have to reach over and pry my card from her hand.

I decide to go to the library. I move as fast as I can without running. The back of my flip flop is stepped on. The shoe comes off and I have to stop and retrieve it.

I've been stalked by a family. A middle-aged man. A plump woman with skin like yogurt with chunks of fruit in it. A teenage girl, blonde with a wide forehead, her eyes red from crying.

"Your friend had his way with my girl," the man says. "She's only seventeen."

I shrug. "It's none of my business," I say.

"Will you give him this?" the girl says. She hands me an envelope. "Steve" is written across the front in girly, looping script.

Steve is a pudgy guy who wears stained t-shirts and scratches his ass on tree trunks. I laugh. "Steve?" I say. "Really?" The girl blushes and runs away.

Around six we spread a tarp over the hot dirt and eat KFC. Jeff shows me stills from the day's shoot on his iPhone. The blood looks fake—too red, too thick, like the tomato paste my mom used to slather on meatloaf. "Looks good," I say.

I tell Jeff about the townspeople, how I don't feel safe alone in the town all day. He laughs and says I can't let these backwater hicks intimidate me. I sip gravy from a Styrofoam cup like it's strong tea.

I sneak out once Jeff's asleep and go to the park bathroom to pee on the pregnancy test stick. A dash blurs into being; food-borne organisms after all. I vomit once for good measure, then stand on the concrete bib at the bathroom entrance, looking at the dark, uniform humps of soldiers' tents, like sleeping elephants waiting trustfully for dawn.

The crew leaves early the next morning. I stay in the tent. The sun rises and I start to broil. I watch the tiny ants move in diagonals over the nylon membrane.

Pop, pop, go the guns of the fake Confederacy.

I step out of the tent, locate my plastic bag of toiletries, and set off for my morning bathroom visit. I ignore the townspeople who have encircled me. When I move, they follow, whining and clutching at the edges of my clothes.

I don't think they'll follow me into the bathroom, but they do. I go into a stall. They sit on the floor, light cigarettes and talk about kids, work, the weather. They could stay there all day. I unbolt the stall door and try to run past but they grab me and pin me to the wall. I start screaming. They touch my face, my hair, stick their fingers in my pockets.

"Leave the lady alone," a voice booms. I feel wool scratch my cheek as his arm coils around my shoulders.

General Lee takes me to his tent. It's spacious, the middle held up by poles. There's a sleeping pallet, a table, a sepia-toned map. He lets me lie on his pallet. He lights his pipe.

I ask where he's from.

"The great state of Virginia," Lee says.

"How long have you been doing the reenactment thing?"

"If you're asking how long this terrible war has lasted—why, it's seemed lifetimes already."

"I'm scared to go out there," I say.

"I cannot trust a man to control others who cannot control himself," Lee says. "You can stay here the rest of the day if you like."

He hands me a Bible, then sits at his desk and writes letters for several hours.

At four, Jeff texts me. "I can't thank you enough," I tell Lee.

Lee stands and bows. "I tremble for my country when I hear of confidence expressed in me," he says. "I know too well my weakness, that our only hope is in God."

"Well, whatever," I say. "Thanks again."

I don't tell Jeff about General Lee. They're doing the sluicing scene tomorrow, so everyone's excited.

“God, it’s so great to be around these creative types,” Jeff says. “I finally feel like I’m really living, you know?”

The men are burning through the town’s teenage girl population. The two women on the crew are having affairs with local married men. Angry citizens ring the dirt field the next morning. They hiss and spit at us as we break their ranks.

“Fucking rednecks,” Jeff says, and spits back.

I don’t bother going into town. I walk straight to General Lee’s tent.

His beard is real. I pull it gently, and he laughs.

His trousers are tricky to undo. No zippers, and the buttons are tight. We do it missionary, silent and with most of our clothes on.

After, I ask if he’s married.

“It is good that war is so horrible, or we might grow to like it,” he says.

I stay in the tent while General Lee goes to make a speech to his troops. The gun noises are so familiar, I don’t notice when the real gun goes off. But then, sirens. I walk with the soldiers toward the field.

The sheriff has a man handcuffed face-down on the ground. Jeff stands twenty feet away. His mouth hangs open as he stares at the bloodstained dirt. Real blood, so dark it’s almost black. It must be hitting him now, how fake the movie blood looks.

General Lee stands next to me. “What a cruel thing war is, to fill our hearts with hatred instead of love for our neighbors,” he says.

The reenactment packs up and leaves the next morning. The park is littered with pipe filters and spent packets of jock itch powder.

Steve’s left lung was punctured, but he’ll live. Filming lasts another two days. Now Jeff brings me along on the shoots. I sit in the dirt under a makeshift cardboard awning and imagine that I’m pregnant. Jeff will raise General Lee’s son as his own. He will never

know. I will never trawl Civil War reenactment groups on Facebook, only to discover that my son's father manages a Budget Rent a Car and listens to Creed.

Jeff hands me a twenty and tells me to buy a 30 pack of Miller High Life at the gas station half a mile down the highway. I nod and start walking, because life is a series of small battles, only some of which are worth fighting.

KATE FOLK is from Iowa and now lives in San Francisco where she works as an English teacher. Her fiction has been published in *PANK*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Neon*, and *Bartleby Snopes*, among other journals. She enjoys the company of cats.

Prophet

Nell Payton

Danny is driving, one hand on the wheel and the other under the loose-fitting fabric of Lyndon's dress. The muscles in his forearm flinch and contract and he is moving down her stomach, down farther, in, and then up, pulling at her breasts—her tits, he called them when he first told me that her nipples are the color of plums. I kick the brown leather seat back lightly enough that it could be an accident and slurp on the ice left at the bottom of the Big Gulp until the cold stings my forehead and prickles along my jaw; when the ice is gone I suck sweet lemon-lime air. I don't think either of them had forgotten I was here.

We are two towns over now, six miles south of Hills Point, the drive-through with its broken neon sign flashing "S OW" instead of slow, and the houses here are smaller, but still nice, all yellow or white painted brick. Lyndon used to live in this neighborhood, I remember, before we really knew her. Our mothers were friends when we were younger and I came here once or twice, tossed into Lyndon's playhouse in the backyard so we could pick grass and not talk while our mothers took pictures; I didn't play with girls. Lyndon is looking out the window but she doesn't say anything now or show any sign of recognition.

The trees and hedges are thick with summer greens, the lawns lush and waterlogged from yesterday's rain. An abandoned sprinkler leaks a river down the driveway and into the ditches where there is no sidewalk. Even the houses with cracked walks and scuffed doors are crawling with ivy, morning glories, and vines that look thick enough to strangle us. A dogwood tree has shed a circle of petals, half on the curb, half on the parked cars: white, brighter in the trees and I'm getting dizzy turning my head

to look as Danny drives. Above the dashboard, the sky is pale, hazy and hazier still through the streaks on the glass. The streets have all been repaved, all over town, the mayor's initiative paid for by the state, and the asphalt is a slick tar-black with tiny fractures of light reflecting so the road shimmers, brilliant and steaming waves of blurring heat as we go.

There is no one out today, a Monday, just before three, so day camps are still in session and we know that anyone who can afford it is away fishing or at sleep away or in a van headed to the Grand Canyon. The humidity packs the heat around the car, the leather burns our skin but we all carry sweaters because the air conditioning in Danny's car is warped and spits freezing air with an irregular mechanical tick. We're almost there, Danny tells us, putting both hands back on the wheel and accelerating with a sense of purpose he hasn't had all day. He rolls the all windows down. The air from outside hits me like a wall and the French-fry-burger-stale-sweat scent of the car is suddenly unbearable and I'm leaning my head out the window like a dog.

Lyndon readjusts her dress, she isn't wearing a bra, she rarely does, and her breasts are loose inside the washed-out, red-orange nylon. She flips the mirror down and scoots to the side to find her eyeliner and a studded makeup pack wedged in the crack between the seat back and the cushion. Her hair is stringy, white-blond and she wears it pulled back so tight from her temples that she looks bald when you see her from the front. Her lower lip is full and hangs away from her gums, exposing the tops of her bottom teeth, and her skin never seems to get tanner, just increasingly yellowed. Danny says that her body makes up for her face but I know he thinks she's pretty.

When he catches me staring at Lyndon I mumble something about Isabel, this junior I've told him I like. Danny snarls and throws his soda cup back at me and tells me to grow a pair and get with her. She's at lacrosse camp, I supply as a weak defense. Danny smirks at me, turning, the red flush across his cheekbones rising,

his chapped lips parting on the side to reveal a single canine. He takes his eyes off the road and I strain mine against the rows of parked cars as if I can keep the car on course. Watch, Lyndon says sharply, hitting his shoulder with the back of her hand and Danny straightens the wheel. Danny is still smiling at me in the rearview mirror. There is a rumor that the lacrosse teams, the boys and girls, all just fuck each other at this camp. Lyndon turns to me, her elbow propped next to the headrest: Michael, they are so incestuous. She emphasizes the “so,” and I am trying to decipher her tone. Yeah. Yeah, I agree. Lyndon always speaks this way. In full sentences, with big words. Words that Danny and I never use like incestuous, phallic, temperamental, severe.

All summer, Danny has been sleeping at my house; my mom told him he is welcome in the basement guest room for as long as he needs it. It’s just him and his mom now and she’s a flight attendant on the Southeast routes so she isn’t home much. He’s graduating next year with my oldest sister but they’ve never gotten along; Danny’s always been my friend. Lyndon stays over a couple times a week, leaving in the morning before my dad leaves for the office, her shoes in her hands, her hair wet from the shower and her shirt wet from her hair all clinging to her back. I don’t know if my parents would make Danny leave if they found out about her, maybe they already know but want to keep Danny here, safe, but it’s hard to tell that Lyndon’s been there at all except that there’s a two-inch stain of rust colored blood on the basement couch. I tell Danny to clean it up, get bleach or ask Lyndon what to do or my sister even, but he scratches at the fibers with a long fingernail while we play video games and tells me to shut up about it.

Here is Jesus. Danny has stopped the car in the middle of the road. Look, there, Danny points out Lyndon’s window. And there he is, right before us in the center of a wilting lawn, stout in stone robes,

the creases engraved. The statue looks garish and unkind; the nose is worn down at the bridge and the eye sockets, the curved lids closed, are ringed with grime. It stands at least four feet tall and wider than Lyndon and maybe me. Danny puts the car in park and we get out and lean against the hood, the three of us lined up like apostles. Jesus, that's creepy, I say and Lyndon laughs.

I never went to church much, only on Christmas morning and for baptisms but this Jesus looks shorter and fatter than the one on the cross. Danny walks up to it, wraps his arms around the statue and lifts, he can get it a few inches off the ground without help. He drops it back into the grass and I hear a thud although I'm not sure the Jesus made one. Lyndon looks up and down the street to see if anyone is watching Danny but the lawns are empty, the curtains drawn.

We are stealing it, I know. I saw Danny's scan the walk, check his watch, flare his nostrils and cock his head like he does when he is hungry for danger. He tells us an old woman lives here; I have no idea how he knew this but it's not worth asking.

I practice my story on the way to the door; I figured I would have to do the dirty work. A woman opens the door as soon as I let the knocker drop against the wood, Danny was right, she looks old although maybe not that much older than our mom. She keeps the chain strung in the latch. Yes? She asks. I tell her what Danny told me to say: I am doing a project on the neighborhood; I'm trying to get some interviews. She lets me in.

The room is dark and smells stuffy, sour and slightly stale, like someone has been sleeping on the couch for days with all the windows closed. The back of my throat fills with saliva like it does before I puke but I swallow and breathe through my mouth. The overhead light is dim, the brightness filtered through a carpet of dead flies under the bulb. I ask the woman her name and she hands me a pen and a pad of stationary from the hall table with a name and address printed at the top. The name is something Eastern European that looks hard to pronounce; she tells me to call her Jo.

The rest of the room is nice and reminds me of a teacher's house at the end-of-year potluck or the common room of a community center: warm and formal, lived-in but not enough. The furniture is upholstered in fall-browns and orange and even the foot rests and the surfaces are clear except for a glass of water and a book on the end table; the sofa cushions worn and squashed in.

We are still standing in the entryway when she asks me what questions I have for her. I start with how long she has been in the neighborhood. I only remember I'm supposed to be writing down what she says halfway through a story about her husband. I look around for pictures but there are none on the wall and only a small round frame on the coffee table with a girl, her daughter maybe. I can't tell how old Jo is, there are no wrinkles on her face but her hair is gray and brittle. She asks about me and then smiles to fill the silence when I fail to produce another question. We are still standing and I try to see how long it's been on the thin gold watch around her wrist. The watch hasn't been wound and both hands point to the eleven. I ask about Jesus outside and she laughs a hollow laugh that makes the hair on my arms rise; it's Hosea, the prophet. Hosea; she stops there as if I shouldn't need further explanation. He was a gift, she tells me. From the church, for her service. She says she doesn't know anything about him, Hosea, but that it can't be bad to have a saint out watching. No, I agree, it can't be bad. We sit down in the living room. Danny told me he needed fifteen minutes but I stay inside for forty-five and don't leave until I get a text from him that just says "Dude?" After that I wrap things up.

I leave when she goes to the kitchen for two glasses of cranberry juice. Danny has the car running and the lawn looks shrunken without Hosea. I cross the bald patch of dirt on the way to the car, leaving Jo's door open so she won't hear the lock click behind me. We are around the corner and speeding down the next street before I have slid across to the middle seat and Danny has his hand on

Lyndon's knee and the music up high. He is relaxed as he drives, as if he has done this a million times before. Lyndon tells me I have a common face, that the old woman won't be able to describe me to the police. Jesus is snug in the trunk, she says; they had to wedge him in over the spare tire. Some girl band that Lyndon likes is playing. It's not Jesus, I tell them but Danny's hand is sliding back under Lyndon's dress and they don't hear me; I don't repeat myself.

We order the two-for-twenty-dollar special at the diner while Lyndon is in the bathroom so the waitress won't get angry that we have three people ordering a meal for two. Lyndon cuts the steak into equal parts and we pick at everything else together, except for the broccoli, which Danny eats himself, heads first. Our booth is against the window and outside the sky is now obscured by a mass of grey that is striking only because of the sliver of blue that endures just above the rooftops. I pay for dinner and Danny buys the alcohol after; we drink in the car with all the doors open. Lyndon asks Danny what we are going to do with the Jesus statue and he shrugs and says that it's probably too heavy to throw off of something but that we can probably smash it or put it in front of the school or whatever. His good mood is wearing thin. Lyndon spits out of her door and nods okay. She doesn't seem anxious and I see why Danny's so in to her. Before this summer he had never dated anyone for longer than a month. Lyndon has a year left of school but Danny told me that they might drive somewhere together when the summer is over. He said he is thinking north, like Montana because he has an uncle there; my mom still thinks he is going to college.

We should take it back, I say before I know what I'm doing. Shit; I try to backtrack and say yeah to the smashing but the alcohol has made it so my mouth is moving slower than my brain. Danny is nodding and he smacks the steering wheel; Lyndon looks as confused as I feel. That's better, he tells me, smart, that's smart, Mike and he tells us to close our doors. He can drive straight when

he's drunk, he can think straight too; I've actually never seen him look dumb or out of control or anything. He's always collected, his eyes brooding and now I worry he is thinking something terrible. At the gas station, he turns and claps my knee and then smacks the back of Lyndon's head rest; he tells me that this is it, and I don't know what "it" is but I'm proud anyway.

Danny doesn't tell us where we're going but we pull into a parking spot in the back of what turns out to be a hardware store. We are just in time; it closes at six on weekdays. Danny drops four twenties into Lyndon's lap, telling us to go inside and get flashlights. The man behind the counter points to the back. There are tiny penlights in red and aluminum and heavy duty rubber-coated ones with three-inch faces and foot-wide beams. Lyndon takes two of the big ones off the hooks and stacks them in my arms. I am still high off of the praise and I let my hands linger on hers but she raises her eyebrows at me and takes two more flashlights off the shelf. The narrow shelving behind her is covered with pots of sealant and rubber cement and against my other arm there is a stack of power tools, a drill with a thin layer of dust on the handle and three portable sanders. Lyndon passes me, navigating around the cluttered shelves and leaning into a bin for a roll of duct tape, her dress, already cut low across her the back, lifts up revealing the top of her thighs when she bends forward. I follow, the flashlights in my arms and when she spins around with the duct tape we are face-to-face. She looks over my shoulder but I can feel her breath on my chin. We are almost the same height and I could kiss her right now without having to lower my head much. No one would see and she has just as much of a reason not to tell Danny as I do; I take another step toward her and she pushes past me and tells me to stop.

At the counter, Lyndon motions for me to put the flashlights down and the man stacks them in a paper bag. Lyndon pays and buys herself root beer flavored chewing gum. I take the bag from the counter and Lyndon is already walking toward the door. She pops a piece of gum into her mouth, dropping the wrapper on the ground, her ponytail swinging across the exposed knots of her spine. I follow her, inhaling the root beer-sugar smell, listening to the crack of the gum, the sound of her spit and the door almost slams closed in my face.

Danny has maneuvered Hosea half way out of the trunk himself and we help him strap two of the heavy-duty flashlights onto its back. We'll do the rest later, Danny says after he scrapes his knuckles on the stone. He sucks on his hand in the front seat while Lyndon and I try to wedge Hosea back in. It takes us close to thirty minutes and I worry that his nose will chip off, or worse, the bump of stone fabric at his crotch. I doubt there is forgiveness for breaking off the junk of a prophet and I almost tell Lyndon this but she looks pissed off so I keep quiet.

Just before midnight, Danny tells me to take a walk but I don't want to go far so I sit against the back tire and feel the car move to their rhythm. It's still hot but I use my sweater as a cushion on the cement and resist the impulse to stand up and watch through the window. There is a chewed pen on the cement and I roll it up and down the white parking paint wondering if he pulls her hair. Wondering what her breasts look like hanging down when she's on top, if they get tube-like, pulled down by gravity like the ones in the porn videos I've seen. Danny hasn't told me if he makes her come and I wonder if he would even know what that looked like, whether he would be able to tell; I don't know if I would.

I can feel the imprint of the asphalt on my cheek when I wake up and I brush the grit off my jaw with the back of my fingers. There is a faint hum of crickets but the car is quiet when I lean over to the open back door. Danny is stretched out on his stomach in the backseat and Lyndon has curled naked between his shoulder blade and the seat back. He is only wearing boxers, my boxers stolen from the laundry, and his face is oily in the light from the bulb outside of the tiny hardware store. It takes me a second to realize his eyes are open.

“Morning.” He grunts. It’s not really morning. The sky is still dark with no sign of the sun. There are no cars and the clock on the dashboard says 4:25. Danny shakes Lyndon and hands over her underwear, I turn around while she puts them on and then she climbs over the armrest and back into the passenger seat, holding her arms over her chest, but not that carefully. Danny follows her into the front seat and reaches back for his shorts. Let’s do this, he says, adjusting his boxers and zipping up his fly.

We park in front of the neighbors’ driveway, just one house down from Jo’s, and Danny shuts all the lights off in the car. The closest streetlight is a few houses toward the corner and the moon is a dull splinter muted by the clouds. It is dark enough that if Jo comes outside she won’t be able to see us right away and if she goes in to call the police, we bolt. That’s the plan.

We pull Hosea up over the edge of the trunk and put on the final touches. The old radio that Danny keeps in the back of his car with a gospel CD inside is duct taped to Hosea’s robes and Lyndon is laughing, covering her teeth just thinking about it. We wrap more tape around the prophet’s middle to strap the last two flashlights to his back and then Lyndon and I get the base and Danny takes the head so we can angle him out of the trunk.

When it's planted on the grass Danny whispers that we should flip all the flashlights on first and then hit play and run back to the car and wait. We won't drive away when Jo comes out, or the neighbors. Danny says they can't do anything to us. We won't drive until we see the flashing lights of the police. He walks us through it again.

It takes a while to maneuver Hosea back onto his spot and Danny switches on the flashlights one by one. The crevices in the stone are black against his illuminated face and the eye sockets look empty in the shadows. In the haze, the beams disappear a few inches above Hosea's head, but he is lit and divine and Danny seems pleased with our handiwork.

Danny turns the music on; his finger lingering on the button for dramatic effect, and then a slow hymn with the barreling tenor of what must be a very fat man in a choir robe builds in the air as he turns the volume knob. Lyndon and I dash back to the sidewalk, but Danny takes his sweet time.

Nobody comes outside, but the music is loud and I know Jo must be awake in there. I picture her sitting up on that couch and flipping on the lights but I see nothing. Danny looks disappointed. The music fills the space in every direction, entombed by the humid air overhead, trapped around us, finding the corners of the yard, the low hanging gutters, and throbbing, the voices savage, in our own ears. Danny lights a cigarette to share with Lyndon; he hands me my own. Hosea's arm is bathed in light but the hand and opened palm is shaded, invisible and it looks like limb has been sliced off, a clean cut through the stone. The light, positioned from below makes Hosea's beard look like a jagged smile and I am starting to get spooked. I toss the cigarette at Hosea and wipe my palms on my shorts.

The embers from the cigarette spark in the dried grass at Hosea's feet, rising slowly into a thin flame that then cowers, shrinking and burning close to the ground with no breeze to feed on; I'm holding my breath. Lyndon and I walk back to the car and

she reaches to turn the key in the ignition, letting the car hum awake to speed Danny along. Her bare feet are up on the dashboard, blue in the glow of the gauges and the clock radio, and mine are perched on the armrest between the front seats. We watch the embers go dark, waiting for sirens, waiting for Danny to get in and drive us away. The air-conditioning stammers on with a choke and soon we are freezing watching Danny through the glass. Lyndon wraps her sweater around her legs and I toss her mine but she lets it fall on her seat beside her. Danny is still, dark against dark, his shoulders back and his hands relaxed at his sides. When he gets back to the car, he doesn't say anything to us. He seems tense, disappointed, and I ask him if he saw anything, any movement behind the curtains. He didn't. Danny gets in the back seat with me, stepping on the paper bags and the beer cans, and drops the keys into my lap; he lets his head fall back against the seat. You drive, he says.

I walk around to the front seat and look over at Lyndon, memorizing everything from this angle. Her nose and lips are still swollen with sleep and her head lolls against the window frame leaving a greasy smudge on the glass. We are two towns over, six miles south of Hills Point, the drive-through with its broken neon sign flashing "S OW" instead of slow and I don't know where to go from here.

NELL PAYTON lives in New York City (which is the greatest—she highly recommends it). Her work was most recently published in *Echoes Magazine*.

The Hermitage

Kelsie Hahn

This is the hermit crab, forcibly transplanted to the sand castle the children built for him. The castle consists of one central tower, its balcony lined with seaweed. Its windows are shuttered in flat, cupped shells. An outer wall encircles the whole structure, each of its four watchtowers dotted with spiraled periwinkles. Splinters of driftwood gate the grand entrance at the front.

This crab is angry, scuttling around in his shell painted like a soccer ball. Rage infuses his posture, the angles of his one big claw and one little claw, the violent jags he tracks in the sand. This castle is not temperature-controlled. This castle does not have a dish of filtered water. This castle does not include a wardrobe of colored shells. This castle is not the lifestyle to which this crab has become accustomed.

But this crab, he notices the view through the shell-shuttered windows: the curl of ruffled waves gone coral and tangerine as the sun sinks behind the dunes. He considers a draw bridge, tapestries here and there, a breakfast nook. He estimates the going rate of chandeliers. He calculates real estate values.

This crab does not yet realize that he has been left behind by the children, by the parents who foolishly allowed the children to bring him and who did not notice when they took him from his sufficiently ventilated traveling case which now sits empty in the back seat, cooled by AC and rocked by the movement of the car.

The castle is warm and still. This crab, he tours. Measures floor space. Sketches lay-outs. Peruses catalogs. The walls begin to dry, and chunks of sand crack and sift off. Beyond, the tide creeps in.

The crab thinks, "Ah, a fixer-upper." He begins the repairs.

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Hitchin'

Terry Rietta

Lyla sat on the side of the highway, painting a daisy on her thumbnail when she heard a rumble. She squinted through the heat shimmer and spotted a dust cloud trailing a car in the distance, then looked heavenward and exhaled a prayer of thanks.

The wisp of a girl cocked her hip, thrust out her thumb and flashed beauty-queen teeth: a picture of 22-year old optimism daring anyone to pass her by without taking a second look. As she stared down the pockmarked stretch of road, the sun burned right into her eyes, so she closed them, and she waited.

Time moved at a different speed with her eyes closed. The not-knowing-what's-out-there anxiety turned moments into minutes. The car should be there by now. Maybe she'd imagined the vehicle. She fought self-doubt as her cheeks ached from holding a pageant smile for so long. Lyla shifted her weight, adjusting her pose self-consciously. She thought about rearranging her boobs in her bra, but she didn't want to take her thumb out of the air, so she settled for arching her back.

Worried that she might not be seen, she opened her eyes and angled out a little bit into the road.

She saw only a blur, but she heard a screech and felt a whoosh as a faded orange Chevy Corvair swerved, nearly smearing her into the asphalt as it passed. Lyla's face turned away, but her thumb stayed out there, bravely trying to do its hitchhiking job.

If her thumb had eyes, it would've seen that piece of gravel flying through the air. And those thumb-eyes would've widened at the sight of a ragged-edged hunk of rock spiraling and twirling almost purposefully, its trajectory set on a collision course with her perfect pink, daisy-dotted thumbnail.

Schick.

The gravel cracked the top off Lyla's nail and ricocheted off into the desert.

"Shit, shit, shit." Lyla flapped the hand, trying to shake off the pain.

A haze of dust settled on the young hitchhiker as the Corvair backed up slowly. Teased hair, tattoos and a plague of freckles slouched behind the wheel.

Lyla coughed and waved through the dust. "You cracked my nail."

The driver popped her gum. "'Bout cracked your skull."

Lyla shrugged, rubbed her damaged thumb.

The driver surveyed the area, wary. "You know, hitchhikin's illegal."

"I think it's more of a 'frowned upon' kind of thing."

"Where you headed?"

"The West."

"*The West ain't a place.*"

"You're absolutely right. The West is more of a tradition. . .or an ideal. A place where ambitious souls travel seeking adventure."

"Did you read that somewhere?"

"What? No."

"You think I'm stupid?"

"Of course not."

"Cause it sounds like you're tryin' to shit me and we just hardly met. You don't look like much."

Lyla straightened up and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. "Well, appearances can be deceiving, can't they?"

"Not in my experience, no."

"I'm wounded and out in the middle of nowhere making chit-chat with a crusty stranger about chasing fame and fortune. If that isn't the start of an adventure, I don't know what is."

"You're trying to get a ride offa me. . .and you're calling me crusty."

"I meant it affectionately."

The driver snorted. "Well okay then, little miss affection, say I'm up for an adventure, you got a line on a fortune?"

"I believe a girl makes her own luck. I have some. . .prospects. Nothing exactly rock solid."

"Don't mean to sound like a broom-toting bitch rainin' on your hopes and dreams, but that ain't much of a plan."

Lyla's face flushed. "And this ain't much of a car. You just gonna let me sit by the side of the road sweatin' through the ass of my jeans while we talk about the feasibility of my so-called plan or are you gonna give me a ride?"

"I'm thinking about it."

"Look, I haven't hitchhiked much. . ."

"That I believe. . ."

". . .but I really didn't imagine it would take this long to get into a car once it had pulled over."

"Easy there, sister-in-a-hurry. A female in this world can't just let some stranger into her car without knowing a little somethin' bout her travelin' companion first. World's a screwed up place. I only pulled over cause I thought I mighta hit you."

"You're a Samaritan."

"No, my people are from Lubbock."

"It means a doer of good deeds." Lyla giggled.

"You got an uppity tone about you. You're just making up words, now."

"No, I'm not. It's a compliment. You thought you'd hit me and you wanted to help."

"I'd a probably just covered you with a little dirt and gone on my way."

"Okaay. Maybe not a Samaritan."

"Dark deeds can happen out on the road. Specially to folks who think they're above everyone else."

"Sometimes I come off a little snotty. I'm sorry."

"Don't like it when people talk to me like I'm stupid."

The driver slid the car into gear and idled forward. Lyla put her hand inside the window and hop-step-skipped along side it.

"Hey, hey, hey. Look, I really could use a ride. Kinda desperate actually."

The driver stopped. "You got any money?"

"Not much."

"How much?"

"Well, not any."

"You really didn't think this through, did you?"

"I left in kind of a hurry."

"What's his name?"

"It's complicated."

"Lotta girls got mixed up with him. *Complicated* gets around don't he?"

Lyle shrugged in agreement. The driver studied her, assessing. Lyla found herself holding her breath, listening to the rumble of the engine idling.

"So. . ." Lyla exhaled.

"So. . .here's how it's gonna go. I'm gonna give you a ride. . ."

"Yes!" Lyla bounced and clapped.

". . .but you annoy me, condescend to me, talk too much, get too quiet, fiddle with the radio, fart in your sleep, sneeze in my direction, etcetera. . .your bony behind will again be sweatin' by the side of the road quickity quick. We good?"

Lyla extended her hand through the car window. "We're good. I'm Lyla."

"I'm Karla. Hop on in. Seat belts don't work, but the AC does."

Lyla slid into the front seat.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

"I'm heading to Okmulgee. It's not an ideal. It's not a tradition. It's just Okmulgee. And there's not much fame, fate or fortune to

that town 'cept for a truck stop that's serves up cherry pie so good, it'll melt your panties off."

"Yummy."

"Just so you know, saying shit like "yummy" will get your ass kicked to the curb, too."

"Good to know."

"Wake up, princess."

"We stopped?" Lyla's eyelashes flickered and she looked around to get her bearings. She stretched a kitteny stretch and breathed in the cool night air.

"Yeah. Gotta fill up."

"Thank god. I've gotta pee soo bad."

Karla scanned the parking lot. "I wanna be real clear now. You got *any* money?"

"I wasn't lying. I really don't have any."

"Then we are in a situation. I figured you were holding out."

"Sorry."

"S'alright. We got a couple options, but I'm guessin' they're both gonna be firsts for you. Open the glove box."

"Okay. . ."

A .38 special sat nestled next to fast food napkins, inkless pens and a ratty owner's manual for a 1974 Dodge Dart.

Lyla recoiled. She tried to close the glove compartment, but it kept falling back open.

"Stop that." Karla took Lyla's hand to settle her down. "It's just a bad latch."

"Shit. Is that thing loaded?"

"Not much point in having one if it ain't."

"Are you trying to scare me?" Lyla stammered.

"I'm tryin' to educate you."

"I think I *may* have just peed a little. I really have to go."

"My god, girl. You are *such* a pain in the ass."

"I'm really really sorry. Can we continue my education after I pee?"

"Nope, cause here's the rub. We. . .are running on fumes."

"Empty? Like past E empty?"

"Like halfway to G empty."

"Okaayy."

"So we either go in with that gun and take what we need. . ."

"Shit. You're serious. You're, like, totally serious right now, aren't you?"

Karla shook her head and sighed. "It's not as serious as you think, so settle yourself. Some little redneck retard makin' minimum wage is *not* gonna risk his neck over a tank a gas and some Funyuns."

"Riiight. . .you said there were two choices. Is there a non-violent one?"

"There is." Karla tapped the steering wheel with her fingernail, the beat matching the cadence of her words "One of us can blow the kid behind the counter. . ."

"Blow, like blow job?"

"You *are* a quick one."

"Oh my god."

"Makes you feel any better, we could toss a coin."

"For the violent or the non-violent option? Or to find out who's going to suck the retarded redneck kid's dick. I'm saying this out loud 'cause I can't believe these are my choices."

"Well the other option is pulling off the side of the road in the middle of nowhere and tryin' to get some sleep with horny truckers hopped up on meth and god knows what else knocking on the windows hourly and askin' 'You all right in there little ladies?' We'd fend them off until morning where we'd wake up. . ."

". . .broke and out of gas."

"Right-y-o."

“Oh my god.” Lyla glanced down at her chipped thumbnail. There wasn’t much of the daisy left that she’d painted earlier that day.

Karla reached into the glove compartment and grabbed the gun. She cocked the hammer back on the .38.

“You wanted an adventure, sister. Heads or tails?”

TERRY RIETTA is a father, a filmmaker and a storyteller. He hits his free throws. He washes his hands before dinner. And he has always written to woo his wife.

The Laws

Zachary Leven

Professor Rubenstein was the first to notice the universe was changing. A subtle observation through the circular screen of his electron microscope. The generally meticulous isotope particles had switched from square-dancing to slam-dancing. Incredible, but not entirely inconceivable. The laws of physics were altering course. And why wouldn't they be? There was no reason the laws that held our reality together shouldn't turn like the seasons, each cosmic equinox spanning a scant fifteen billion years. As the day progressed, his theory was confirmed. The grass outside the window of his campus laboratory turned a vivid shade of purple as the light reversed its wavelength. His telephone no longer chirped exuberantly, but now made a horrible burbling noise, the electric pulses impotent and lame. He raced outside to find clouds diving toward the earth in tailspins, as if they had been gunned down by artillery.

There was only one thing Rubenstein could do. He had to see Julia. Beautiful, dazzling Julia, whose tender hands had consoled him through an endless parade of bitter, failed experiments; whose smile had transformed his heavy heart to a fluttering bird. He had to once more feel her cheek against his, to taste her mellifluous breath. He had to once more hear her delicate voice tell him to trust the universe. Would the laws hold her form together long enough? He jumped into his car, but the motor oil had atrophied to a taffy-like sludge.

He slogged through parking lots of asphalt quicksand, the gooey pavement consuming his feet with every herculean step. He walked over barbed-wire meadows stretching beneath a red and green sun that swirled like a peppermint lollypop. He dodged

buildings that collapsed into pools of swampy muck. But he seemed to be holding out—his blood still flowed, his muscles still moved. If he could only last a while longer.

Trees with coarse monkey-hair tangled themselves across the lane where Julia lived. The earth rumbled as he frantically traversed their slippery, fallen trunks, and skated up a walkway of frozen lava. His fist went right through Julia's door, droplets of liquid timber spraying across the living room, where the couches had puffed into enormous leathery balls. "Julia!" he cried out. And then, she came splashing through the floor above him, into his arms. She was there, she was whole! And still, the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. Such bewitching eyes, such verdant lips. He brought her toward him to kiss her, but she pulled away.

"Oh, Danny," she said. "I'm so sorry. I just don't love you anymore."

Rubenstein gently placed her down, the ground beneath them trembling like a frightened poodle.

"I don't understand," he said. "I don't understand how that's possible."

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The Big One

Grant Farley

Georgia won two Disneyland tickets with her jingle: "Feel frisky with Fresca!"

I was her chosen one. Lucky me. Her skirt was just long enough and my hair just short enough for us to get in. Right away she had to buy Minnie Mouse ears. She bought the same cap every year since she was ten. That meant seven and counting.

I snapped her picture with that silver Kodak Instamatic: Sleeping Beauty's castle looms in the distance beneath scattered dark clouds. Her cap pushes her bangs down over her eyes and skews her granny sunglasses. Her brown hair drapes across her peasant blouse. Her Indian purse-slash-bag hangs on her shoulder.

As we trucked down Main she stopped in front of a glass and china shop.

"In 1956," she droned like some tour guide, "this was a store known as The Wizard of Bras. Some kind of kinky Victorian shop with these so-called 3-d Illusion Boxes showing and I quote intimate apparel of a bygone era."

"Very funny," I said.

"I never lie about Disneyland, Sherman. The shop was sponsored by Hollywood Maxwell, inventor of something called the 'Vette Whirlpool' bra. *I am not wearing a bra.*"

She had apple breasts, so I would have been hard pressed to tell, except those nipples poking out were a sure give away. Could that get us kicked out?

I thought she'd go through the castle right away, but she veered to the right into Tomorrowland. We climbed the ramp to The Monsanto Chemical Company House of the Future.

Georgia recited, “the floors on which you are walking, the gently sloping walls around you, and even the ceilings are made of plastics.” We stepped into the Atoms for Living Kitchen, with its revolutionary microwave oven, and passed pictures of the future nuclear family of 1986.

“My dad left us at Disneyland when I was ten,” she said. “He had been staring out this window into Tomorrowland and he turned to my mom and said: ‘If we can’t be happy at the happiest place on earth, we can’t be happy anywhere.’ Then he was gone. The nuclear family — Ka-boom.”

I followed Georgia into the living room. Well, wasn’t I stoked for the future of America as I gazed at a wide, flat TV hanging from the wall.

“My mom went through the day like nothing had happened, maybe figuring he’d come to his senses and pop up like a hippo at the Jungle Boat Ride. But he didn’t and it was my mom’s first drive on a freeway. Sitting next to her felt like the Matterhorn only if you don’t know how it ends. E ticket, for sure.”

She pushed the glasses back on her nose and turned to me. “Next stop, Sherman, the Skyway to Fantasyland.”

We climbed the long ramp and then the side door of the gondola was pulled open and we were practically shoved into the swaying death trap as it lurched past the platform and swung out into space.

“I sort of have this thing about heights,” I said. “Especially when the height sways underneath you and there’s no seat belt and your two stupid buddies when you were twelve got the thing swaying as they shouted down at tourists, ‘it’s the big one!’”

She ignored my babbling, undid her Wendy wristwatch and tossed it at me.

“Time it,” she said.

“Time it?”

“The ride. Time it!”

“Gotcha. It’s now twelve thirteen and eighteen. . .twenty seconds.”

Then I leaned back, clutched the handrail and waited for the big one. She sat across from me and I peeked into the tented shadow between her legs and then up at the nipples, which now that they’d been brought to my attention. . .well, enough said. I didn’t want to look out at the horizon anyway. She must have shared my phobia because instead of gazing over Autopia, she studied the floor between us. Then she stared up at me and then at the floor. Like I was being measured and this might as well be my coffin.

We drifted into the cave through the Matterhorn and Georgia tore out a primal scream louder than any of the tobagonians. Just as I was about to join in we were back in the light.

She shook her head. “You’re a lost cause, Sherman.”

“I prefer my first name, you know.”

“Time, quickly.”

“What?”

“Watch. Time. Now!”

The wheel hauling the cable clanked as we swooped down into the chalet and some guy dressed in lederhosen reached out and snagged our gondola.

“Twelve sixteen and. . .and forty-five. . .forty-eight seconds.”

“About as I anticipated,” she nodded as we climbed out and headed down the ramp. “Three minutes and twenty seconds give or take.” She grabbed the watch back from me. “And not more than thirty seconds to spare once out of the Matterhorn.”

A drizzle brushed our skin as we walked past Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride and it thickened to a light rain near the Matterhorn and then Southern Californians all around us were hunching beneath their jackets and unfolding brochures over their children’s heads and scurrying any which way for shelter. We wandered around until we were pretty soaked then we sat under an awning at the Carnation ice cream parlor near the bandstand. Next to us sat the

typical nuclear family of the 1960's with a boy and girl buried in their ice cream.

"Two minutes and forty-five seconds give-or-take isn't a whole lot of time." She had taken the Kodak out of her bag of tricks and was aiming it at me.

"A whole lot of time for what?"

"Don't move. Say ice cream."

"Ice . . ."

"To lose my virginity."

". . .cream."

Click.

I was tripping on a dose of flashcube blindness and ice cream brain freeze so that maybe I'd just hallucinated.

"Now *that's* a picture." She put the camera back in her bag. "Got this camera at Christmas. You know the gimmick. There's a tag on the outside that says. . ." She leaned toward me and leered. ". . .open me first."

I hadn't hallucinated.

The father at the next table was babbling about something, but I swear that the mother seemed to stiffen.

"But. . .how. . ."

"It's generally accomplished one way, Sherman."

I was about to ask where when the true significance of three minutes and twenty seconds give-or-take slid into the pit of my stomach. "No."

"Yes."

"But. . .but. . .why me. . .if it is me?"

I meant it as a reasonable—maybe even inevitable—question. But it sort of squeaked out like some guy staring into the implacable face of doom.

She ignored the squeak and answered in a voice, well, a bit too matter-of-fact if you ask me: "First." She held up her index finger and pulled it down. The mother leaned toward us as the father was

preoccupied wiping ice cream from the kids' faces. "You are cute and sweet."

At seventeen you'd really, really rather hear something like, "sexy and dangerous."

"Second." She held up two fingers and pulled them down. "You're short enough to do it given the confines of space."

There was this Life Magazine article in my room about Tunnel Rats, the bravest and craziest Marines in Viet Nam. I was opposed to the war, of course, but these guys were way beyond bitchenness. They had to squeeze down into the tunnel complexes dug by the Viet Cong carrying only a flashlight, a .45 and a knife. They faced hand to-hand combat and booby traps and sharpened stakes and cave-ins and spiders. I mean, things could get pretty hairy down there. You had to be five six *or less*. That would make me one of the *taller* Rats. I felt like I'd prepared all my life for tunnel duty.

"Third." Three fingers went up. "You're discreet."

"Discreet?"

"I know all about Abigail. She told us that the two of you did it and that you were such a gentleman you never said anything to anyone."

"Who is *us*?"

"You're missing the point."

What Abigail apparently hadn't said, or Georgia wouldn't have picked me, was that we got really close. . .I mean really close. . .and then. . .well. . .I hate that term prematurely ejaculated. It reminds me of some panicky fighter pilot. So I didn't really have much to be discreet about. Well, I did, but not what Georgia thought. Still, I couldn't figure why Abigail (or any girl) would want her girlfriends to think she wasn't a virgin when she was. It seemed to me it would be the other way around. The full scope of my ignorance about girls was rapidly unfolding.

"You can count on my discretion."

"Fourth."

"Oh, God."

"Again, according to Abigail, you're shall we say. . .fast. Really fast. Now, although ordinarily not a positive attribute, given the confines of time. . ."

"I know. . .Three minutes and twenty seconds give or take. . ."

"Exactly."

And to think that I had been going to ask Abigail to the prom.

The father had apparently taken the kids somewhere because I just noticed the mother sat at the next table alone, with a smirk on her face.

"Fifth: Since I'm two months older and two inches taller than you, there's no chance of us ever being boyfriend and girlfriend, so we can dispense with any fake relationship afterwards."

She stuffed the camera in her bag and strode out of the parlor without looking back.

I might have called: "Did it ever occur to you that I might say, 'no'?" Except that at the time it had never occurred to me that I might say no.

As I hurried after her I glanced at the scowling mother tossing the family trash in the canister. I imagined her scurrying to security where they would post some sort of *Dagnet* all-points bulletin to be on the lookout for two horny teenagers. With a list of my attributes beneath.

The rain had temporarily let up as we looped around the Castle back toward Tomorrowland, but then Georgia veered left past the Matterhorn.

"The skyrail is this way," I said.

She stopped. Sighed. "Nine p.m."

"Nine? That's. . .almost six hours. . .Why. . ." Then it hit me. "The fireworks show. Well, that's just bitchen."

"You know I find that term offensive." She forged ahead.

"So we're just going to go on rides for the next six hours like nothing is going to happen?"

"Haven't you heard of foreplay?"

It was my turn to stop. She crossed her arms under her apples—which now that they'd been under careful surveillance looked like small honey dewes—as a river of kids eddied around us.

"We'll just have to take care of that before the sky rail, won't we?" She turned and strode toward that enormous maniac clock, her long brown hair bouncing just above her ass.

We initiated contact with a few kisses in the dark as we floated past those dolls. "It's a small world after all," rattled around my head the rest of the day. Not real inspirational given the circumstances.

Fantasyland consisted of waiting in long lines followed by quick feels in the dark outside our clothes, the last of our childhood slipping away as we worked through Peter Pan and Sleeping Beauty and finally ended at Snow White.

"If you ask me," she said as we emerged to dark clouds but no rain even though I hadn't asked her anything. "It's pretty weird all those little men sleeping with one sexy girl. Kind of like us times seven."

"I'm only two inches shorter than you. And we haven't 'slept' together even once."

We had stopped at the entrance to the King Arthur Carrousel.

"I go on this one alone, Sherman. You stand over there and smile and wave."

She practically ran over a couple of kids to snag the pink horse. She sat side saddle, chastely tugging the hem of her skirt.

I smiled and waved.

Beneath those Minnie ears and razored bangs and granny glasses beamed a smile of bliss and innocence and I had this Holden Caulfield flash of guilt and regret. But I snapped out of it.

We still had over four hours to go as we escaped the rain in the tiki tiki tiki tiki tiki room. Despite all that drumming and throbbing, it was anything but a turn on. Then it was a short walk to the Jungle Boat Ride. There wasn't any alone space there, so

other than accidentally sitting on her hand and her snickers about elephant trunks, it was pretty calming.

I was in awe of her carefully orchestrated plan. If Macnamara and all those generals had had such foresight, the good old U.S. of A. would have already won the war. But there was one glitch. One nearly fatal error in her strategy: The Matterhorn.

It has always amazed me that Walt would ever have allowed toboggans in which a teenaged boy can spread his legs and his date squirms in between them, rubbing up against him, with his hands free to finally slide beneath her blouse and along her soft skin to the bottom of her breasts and then sort of trembling they inch over the curves and slide to her nipples and gently roll them between his fingers as they careen through the dark and she screams hysterically and the g forces throw her ass back against his throbbing member until. . .well. . .I was grateful for the rain to explain my wet pants as we climbed out.

"Shit, Sherman, it's 8:45!" She dashed toward Tomorrowland. "We're not going to make it, hurry!"

As I followed, I pondered that age old dilemma. . . *how long before I can get it up again?* Then those breasts bounced against that wet blouse and I experienced an epiphany: What young men lack in longevity they make up for in rebounding skills.

"We could make it if we take the Fantasyland terminal back to Tomorrowland," I shouted boldly.

She ignored me and kept running and bouncing.

The line of would-be fireworks sky riders cascaded down the ramp and snaked around the submarine ride. She stopped, blew her bangs out of her eyes, and assessed the situation. I girded my loins—so to speak—against the gnarly possibility that she would order a suicidal assault up the ramp to cut in front of large, outraged dates.

But retreat is sometimes the better part of valor. She just scowled, as though making some mental calculations, shrugged and turned away.

KA-BOOM! I could only look up at the lights sparking the night sky and ponder, *what if*. . .

"My bad, Sherman."

We wandered forlornly beneath the sparkling heavens.

I tried to devise the use of another ride. . .if only Tom Sawyer's Island was open at night that could be very promising. . . but there were forces here beyond my ken.

"Buck up, Sherman. We still have eleven."

Of course! The second fireworks show.

Eventually we found ourselves next to the stairways that held huge lines swelling toward the entrance to Pirates of the Caribbean.

"I haven't been at Disneyland since they opened Pirates," I said.

"You're a Caribbean cherry? Groovy."

"Everyone says it's boss."

"The best ever," she said. "My favorite."

"Are we saving it for last, then?"

"No, Sherman. I told you it's my favorite. We aren't going on it at all." She was staring through those granny sunglasses past the blackness of Rivers of America at some far off and far out land with its own laws of gravity that only she could defy.

So we ended up seated at the Blue Bayou restaurant next to the swamp where boats drifted past an old guy drinking moonshine in front of a shack on stilts. Banjo music played. Then the boats disappeared down rapids promising unfulfilled screams.

"Maybe we should just order a dessert and split it," she offered.

"Okay, except it's my treat." She may have gotten us into the park for free, but this dessert was costing me more than a whole book of tickets.

"The rain clouds have cleared," I said. "Look at those stars."

"It's a fake sky, Sherman."

"I knew that."

"What do you call a father," she asked between bites of a chocolate volcano that had been plopped between us, "who shows

up with a strange lady and a replacement little girl so they can take you on a fun outing?"

"An asshole?" I guessed.

"A Disneyland dad," she said.

Georgia was pretty much consuming that volcano all by herself and it occurred to me that she hadn't eaten anything except ice cream all day. Had she been bogarting a joint? No, I would have smelled and tasted it on her lips.

"His first words to me, Sherman—his first words after seven months—were, 'What say we finish up that day at Disneyland that I regret had been so untimely interrupted?' I don't know which hurt more, his thoughtless suggestion or the rehearsed phrases. What the hell did 'untimely interrupted' even mean?"

"Well," I said, just trying to be helpful, "when we were attempting to board the skyrail for. . .you know. . .Fantasyland. . .weren't we sort of 'untimely interrupted'?"

Another thing I learned about girls that day was that there are certain words that a guy just seems fated to utter and that he wishes he had back the second they leave his mouth.

She furrowed her brow, of course. Then, as I gauged the depths of the swamp for a place to escape, she smiled.

"That's groovy, Sherman. You had been my default, but. . ."

"Your default?"

". . .but now I'm glad it's you. I could just shudder to think. . ."

"Your default?" I knew that I would never find out who—if anyone—I had defaulted, so I said in a truly feeble attempt at a threat: "Let me remind you that I am not *the one* yet."

She scooped up the last of the chocolate syrup and let it dribble down her chin.

"A point well taken. Feeling frisky?"

And so, after depleting my savings, we forged ahead for a second siege.

"You know," I said as we neared our target. "We don't have to do this."

“What?”

“I don’t want to take advantage of, you know, your vulnerability?”

“And just maybe,” she said without slowing down, “I really, really overrated ‘sweet’ as a desirable attribute.”

Being veterans, our renewed assault on the sky rail went smoothly this time. As soon as the door slammed we went to work.

“Time, Sherman.”

“Ten fifty nine and forty-five seconds.”

The gondola wavered for a moment beside the inspirational rocket ship thrust up into the sky and then lurched out into space.

The roof and sides more or less sheltered us from the elements, but the floor was so caked and oozing from the countless wet, muddy shoes that the area was strategically compromised.

“Time, Sherman.”

“Eleven and thirteen seconds.”

As if in answer, a thundering KA-BOOM assaulted us.

We had precious few seconds to devise a new position. Something involving sitting, no doubt. A rainbow of sparks showered around us. But sitting meant issues of visibility, not to mention additional challenges to penetration of the virgin kind. And then there were the sticky plastic seats.

KA-BOOM!

It was like we were inside the fireworks, tripping in psychedelic haze as the sparks drizzled through rain like melting Crayolas.

“Get your head in the game,” Sherman.

I turned and watched her felix a Sleeping Beauty beach towel from that bag of tricks and lay it across the floor.

KA-BOOM!

Again, I admired her foresight, not to mention her grace under fire.

The direction she placed the towel made it feel as though I was about to perform a sexual act on Sleeping Beauty that is fondly referred to by a number.

"Time, Sherman." She lay down.

"Eleven and fifty-eight."

Now, on the one hand, the full, or at least significant, removal of clothing enhances the sexual experience. On the other hand, with less than two minutes left, it doesn't allow much leeway, especially since the time must include getting clothes back on as well as off.

Hence, our compromise: Hers went up and mine went down.

KA-BOOM!

Every once in awhile a guy gets a break. I found that with each random explosion, rather than reducing me to Jell-o, it further hardened my resolve, so to speak. A paradox I fully embraced.

"You sure you want to do this?" I heard myself ask in another of those doomed phrases.

"You sure you don't want your testicles ripped off and tossed across the submarine ride?"

Let the assault begin.

"Wait, Sherman. Do I have to think of everything?"

Duh, yes, I thought. "What?" I asked.

She shoved a packet into my hand and I tore off the end, rolled it on, and tossed the wrapper over the side like a hand grenade. Maybe in the near future the Monsanto Chemical Company will invent a more efficient condom, probably involving several kinds of plastics and some sort of self-destruct.

It didn't help me when she barked, "Time, Sherman."

"If I have to keep looking. . ."

"Hmmm. . ." It was a sound of puzzlement at a slight glitch in her plans.

"What now?"

"Bigger than I thought, Sherman. Way to go."

She adjusted so that her feet were up against the door and I prayed for a strong latching system.

On the ground beneath us people were oohing and aaahing. I felt pretty proud of myself until I felt serious resistance.

So much, in fact, that, well, I wasn't sure I was in the right place. "For God's sake, just push!"

Several pushes and several adjustments later and we were in.

Then, as we swung into the darkness of the Matterhorn, she began to scream. I'd like to say it had been initiated by my prowess, but it was really just another primal cry mixed in with all the others sliding and twisting down their roller coasters. I screamed along this time, though more out of desperation. Then we were out of the Matterhorn and counting down the final twenty-eight seconds.

"Faster, Sherman. My God, faster."

Oh, those words could be taken on so many levels. I complied with her request. We weren't going to make it. Not even close if you factored in the clothing issue. I could hear the clank, clank of the machinery that pulled in the great cable. And then the gondola took on a tell-tale swaying.

We were, so to speak, screwed.

Now, you might not have heard of an earthquake in March of 1968. It was just a 4.7 on the Richter. But when the epicenter is half a mile from Anaheim and the cables holding your gondola begin to lurch, let me tell you, you feel it. And any time a trembler first hits, you're just frozen, waiting for it to peak, fearing that it really will build to the Big One.

The cable ground to a full, dipping stop. We held each other, hidden beneath the gunwale.

You might not believe me when I say the fireworks continued. But they did. Maybe to the pyro technicians the quake just felt like part of the explosions. Maybe the fireworks were on some kind of timer. Maybe the pyros just had a sick sense of humor.

We lay gently swaying, bathed in the afterglow of the fireworks as time and our gondola stood still.

"I suppose the pain will pass," she said.

GRANT FARLEY swears this never really happened. Well, sort of. At this very moment he may be huddled in his alcove overlooking L.A. harbor scribbling yet another demented story for his collection, *LAmantal*.

On the cover:

"BEING JUDGED"

Brett Superstar

BRETT SUPERSTAR lives in Portland, OR, where he paints and sells art at area shows. He also takes on commission work from time to time. You can find his work online at brettsuperstar.com.

