

JERSEY



PRESS

JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

The Special Issue for Eirik and Monica
2014

ISSN 2152-2162

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Founding Editor/Publisher: Eirik Gumeny

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Introduction:

This special issue is dedicated to Eirik and Monica. Last month, they were airlifted to Stanford, California, where Eirik is actively waiting for a double-lung transplant. And, by “actively” we mean the phone call could literally come at any moment and they’ll be off to the hospital for life-saving (albeit really scary-ass) surgery.

As writers we wanted to do something to help and . . . it turns out there’s not a whole lot we can do. I mean, seriously, no one wants a writer doing advanced thoracic surgery, right? And some of us aren’t even allowed to think about transporting organs since that incident with the kidneys back in ’09. So as much as we wanted to help our friends, we realized there’s a finite limit to what we can do.

That said, writers are good for nothing if not producing meaningful Internet-based distraction. At the least, we could give Eirik and Monica something to read for a little while and maybe briefly take their mind off “the phone call.” As we’ve noted before, waiting for a bus is annoying; we can only imagine how frustrating it is waiting for new organs.

So, inspired by the likes of Bob Geldof’s Band-Aid and Little Steven’s Sun City boycott, we decided to bring together a group of all-star JDP writers in a special issue that we hope will make some people smile a little and raise some awareness of Eirik’s situation. (Just, you know, with infinitely less publicity than either of those other projects.)

And what can you, stalwart reader, do to help? First and foremost, we're still looking for good cold cash to help offset transplant-related expenses not covered by insurance. You can make a donation on Eirik's official COTA site.

Whether or not you can spare any coin, you can also help by getting the word out. A simple mention on Facebook, Twitter, or your blog would be amazing.

Finally, please direct whatever you've got—be it good thoughts, prayers, or (preferably) the healing power of The Force—towards Stanford.

As readers and writers of speculative fiction, heroes and magic are our stock and trade. Now we're asking you to be one and make a little.

So step up, because Hulk smash cystic fibrosis, dammit.

— Mike Sweeney

They Call Him Bigfoot Avert Your Eyes No Autographs Please

Danger_Slater

This one is for all you aspiring cryptozoologists out there. I need you all to listen up. Huh? Oh please, there's no reason to be nervous. I know how to handle this gun. I'm not going to shoot you. I would never! What I am going to do though is let you in on a little secret.

You know that super-famous video of Bigfoot? The one that's all washed-out and grainy? From the Sixties or whatever? Don't look at me like that. I know you know what I'm talking about.

Anyway, in this *very famous Bigfoot video from the 1960s that you're pretending you've never heard of*, these two dudes are walking through the woods, minding their own business, when all of a sudden this sasquatch comes stomping out from the brush on the side of the trail. The guy holding the camera runs up and now he's standing there filming this giant ape-man-thing as it cockily lumbers away from him, swinging its arms like it's George-motherfuckin-Clooney or something. And I'm talking George Clooney in his heyday here—circa 1999—right around the time he left *ER*. NOT the old man George Clooney of today. Though I suppose he was still looking pretty good in *The Descendants* . . .

Hey, don't act so surprised that someone like me can pull off a sweet pop-culture reference. Look, just because I live in the forests of the Pacific Northwest doesn't mean I'm out of touch. Just because you probably don't know who I am, it doesn't mean I'm already a fossil. Just because I'm not as BIG as BIGFOOT it doesn't mean I'm some kind of obsolescent postscript in the bibliography

of evolution. I have the right to speak my mind too! My opinions are still valid! I'm relevant too, goddamn it! Do you hear me, dear reader? Do you hear me, Bigfoot, you STUPID, UGLY, BITCH-ASS, PUNK-ASS MOTHERFUCKER?

ahem

Excuse me. The little profanity-laced outburst at the end of that last paragraph was a bit uncalled for, wasn't it? My sincerest apologies. Now where were we?

Oh right. So this very specific video that I'm talking about is the very same Bigfoot video all you STUPID, UGLY, BITCH-ASS, PUNK-ASS Sasquatchographers out there like to use as the irrefutable "proof" that the mythical ape-man you've spent all this time chasing down is, in fact, real.

Well I hate to have to be the one to burst your bubble, but that video is a hoax. Totally faked. 100% bullshit. That's not Bigfoot on that tape. It's just a guy in a suit. I'm sorry. Take a moment if you need it . . .

Back?

Okay then.

So how do I know it was fake, you ask? Simple. I've met Bigfoot. The *real* Bigfoot. And there's no way the real Bigfoot would've ever let those two dingbats with their shaky, antiquated camera catch him candidly skulking around the woods like some kind of . . . I don't know . . . *bear* or something.

You see, Bigfoot *hates* the paparazzi. And I mean he H-A-T-E-S them. He's a total prima donna like that. In real-life Bigfoot is brusque and short-tempered and curt to the point of rudeness and he's totally unappreciative to the legions of adulating devotees and fans who have supported him throughout the years.

The only time I've actually ever talked to the mythical monster in person he was "too busy" to be bothered with me. This was probably back in '87 or '88. Right around the time *Harry and the*

Hendersons came out. “When you can’t believe your eyes, trust your heart,” the tagline on the movie poster read. So I did. I trusted my heart. I trusted Bigfoot. I was just a little kid at the time and he was such a BIG inspiration to me. To all of us. I just wanted to let him know how important his work was to the rest of us cryptids toiling away our lives in relative obscurity.

“Mr. Bigfoot, sir,” I said to him. “I’ve been following your career for years. I’m just the BIGGEST fan. You are a source of joy and vision to all of us out there who just don’t fit in. Who go unloved, unnoticed. You are who we all aspire to be! Now, Mr. Bigfoot, I’m not after your picture. And I don’t want an autograph. At the end of the day, I just want to acknowledge the connection you and I share. Something kindred. Something genuine. I wanted to tell you—to make sure you know—how important you are. To everyone the whole world over. But, especially, to me . . .”

Oh, it was so embarrassing! I was gushing all over the infamous biped like a teenage girl at her junior prom. I bared my fucking *soul* to that hairy bastard.

And what do you think he did? How do you think he responded? What could he possibly say back to me after I so enthusiastically exalted him and everything he’s ever done?

I’ll tell you what that cocksucker did—he didn’t do ANYTHING! Not a goddamn thing. He couldn’t even be bothered to cast his gray-eyed gaze in my direction. Not a wink or a nod. Not a “get out of the way, kid.” He just stomped off like I wasn’t even there. I never felt so insignificant, so small, in my whole freakin’ life! He treated me like I didn’t even exist. And from a human I can accept that. Humans are always so skeptical of everything. But from him? From the granddaddy of all cryptozoological beasts? If anyone knows how bad it feels to be treated like they don’t exist, it should be Bigfoot, right?

He let me stand there like an idiot wondering why. Why couldn't you just acknowledge me, Notorious B.I.G.F.O.O.T.? I wasn't asking for a parade. Just the most miniscule, microscopic, infinitesimally small molecule of a "thank you" would've sufficed. After all, it was fans like me who helped elevate him to superstardom in the first place. Without fans like me, he wouldn't be half the legend he is today. Is a little appreciation more than a horrid, aberrant miscreation like me deserves? Is a little gratitude too much to ask for?

So fuck Bigfoot. Fuck him right in his furry ass. And fuck you too, you aspiring cryptozoologists out there reading this. Stop looking for him. He is undeserving of the fervor, the adoration, the love we're constantly bestowing upon him. I mean, does he have any idea how hard it is for the other monsters in the world? The one's you've never heard of? Does he know what it's like to live in the shadow of such a monolithic cryptid? Some of us out here—we struggle just to prove we're alive, while others . . . *ahem* . . . stumble face-first into fame and fortune.

I think creatures like Bigfoot need to be taught a lesson. And they need to learn it the hard way. And so that's what I'm going to do. That's what this gun is for.

I'm going to kill him.

Oh what? Am I being too harsh? Should I stop holding a grudge? Should I just let it slide?

Forget that!

We're all just animals here. And animals kill each other all the time. It's part of the natural order, or whatever those science-humans like to call it. And please don't even start with any of that "endangered species" bullshit either. His ego is out of control. Someone has to put the ape-man down. For the sake of the future. For the sake of all monsterkind.

And look, I know I'm just a nobody right now. And I know before this moment you never knew I even existed. But once I've offed this folkloric piece of shit, once I've shoved a sharpened spear through his cold, man-simian heart, once I've blown him away with a shotgun full of lead, once I've dropped a large rock on his slumbering, oversized head—you're damn sure going to know my name:

I MATTER!

I'M LITTLEFOOT!

HEAR ME ROAR!

DANGER_SLATER is more machine than man. He's an explosion-bot! Handle your Danger_Slater with extreme care. One false move and KA-BOOM!—you're nothing but a stain on the pavement and a few cancerous ashes. Danger lives in New Jersey. His work has appeared in *Jersey Devil Press*, *The Drabblecast*, and *The Seahorse Rodeo Folk Revival*. His dirty limericks have appeared in truck stop bathrooms and seldom-used freight elevators nationwide. Here is his website: dangerslater.blogspot.com.

The View from the Backseat

Mike Sweeney

Elmo is fucking useless. He's fallen on the floor again and stares up at me, eyes agog.

Get up here! I say in my mind.

I don't actually have the words yet to enunciate that sentiment out loud. It's odd. I get the words, I just can't say them. I think they'll come eventually, maybe even soon. But for now, all I'm able to produce is a strained, "Ehhh."

Mommy looks at me in the rear view mirror.

"Elmo fall down?"

She talks to me like I'm an idiot but, in fairness, I can't converse yet. She takes care of me, feeds me, loves me. She picks Elmo up off the floor, which is a full-time job because Elmo is a goddamn spaz. I don't have a daddy or a brother or sister. It's just Mommy and me. That's okay. She's all I need.

I let out another pained "Ehhh!" and then, despite my best intentions, I begin to cry.

"Shhh-shhh," coos Mommy. She starts to sing, "La-la, la-la . . ."

I join her. I can't even say my name but somehow I manage to form the sounds of "Elmo's World." It makes Mommy happy to sing it.

Her eyes are off the mirror and back on the road. The rain is getting harder. This stretch has no street lights.

I think I liked it better when I rode backwards.

I love Mommy, but she's kind of a klutz. We're coming from the supermarket where she just took out half a Velveeta display with a shopping cart. I'm not sure how I feel about her steering five thousand pounds of minivan through a driving rain in the dark.

“La-la, la-la,” I keep singing and I can tell she’s smiling by the way her cheek puffs out on the side.

Mommy slows the minivan.

A car is spun out on the road ahead, facing the wrong way.

The front door is open and there’s a figure lying still on the ground.

We’re alone out here.

We should go.

Mommy brings the minivan to a full stop. She looks back at me, big beautiful almond eyes full of worry, and something else. Guilt? Sorrow? I’m not sure I know what those things are yet, but I think that’s what I see on her face. I don’t like the way they look on my mommy.

My eyes drift down to Elmo—*useless prick!*—flat on his back on the floor, surrounded by my discarded juice boxes. He looks like he’s just come off a cranberrylicious bender.

Mommy touches my chin. She lines her eyes up with mine and there’s absolute reassurance.

“Mommy’ll be right back,” she says.

She opens the door just long enough to slip out.

The falling rain is deafening.

She looks around, like maybe we aren’t alone out here. She flicks her key fob, locking all the minivan’s doors.

I watch her jog through the driving downpour, across the empty road. As she moves, her body remembers. Short, choppy strides, become long and graceful.

She squats down to check the silent figure on the ground.

That’s when I see it.

It’s big and moving from behind the other car. It’s not a person. It’s shadow and darkness. Cold. I get flashes of things I used to know, before I was with Mommy, things from the beginning, things I’ll forget in a few years.

I recognize the Cold Thing, or at least what it represents. I don't think I could put it into words even if I had them. Instead, I just scream bloody murder.

Between the rain and the minivan's soundproofing, there's no hope in hell that'll she'll hear me. I watch, helpless, terrified, as the Cold Thing moves around my mommy, stopping with its back to me.

I can't see her.

There's nothing worse than not being able to see your mommy.

I scream louder, harder.

The Cold Thing's head swivels on its neck, facing me at an unholy angle.

It winks.

I think I'm going to pass out.

The Cold Thing rights its head and moves in on my mommy.

I want to pass out.

I flail and kick against the car seat. It's useless. I'm useless. She's everything in the world to me and it's going to take her.

There's movement. A struggle.

Shit.

Did the Cold Thing just explode?

It's gone, and all I see is my mommy lunging forward, her left fist cocked, her right arm extended. She's holding a short, sharp piece of wood.

Surprise and relief.

Now, terror: the figure that was lying on the ground is standing behind Mommy.

It's not alive either.

The New Thing lunges. Mommy dodges.

She leaps with the grace of a gymnast and pivots mid-air.

(The woman can't parallel park!)

She lands a kick to the New Thing's back, sending it sprawling on the wet asphalt.

Mommy dives, her fist and the stick leading. She finds her mark. The New Thing explodes into the rain.

Mommy looks around again and I think this time she knows we're alone. She glides across the road, soft, confident loping strides.

She's inside the van and all is right in the world. Her cheeks are flushed, but she's smiling. She picks Elmo up and stuffs the little red monster into the side of my car seat. She wipes the drool from my chin and tells me it's okay.

Her eyes meet mine and her smile fades a little. I see those things again, the ones I'm not sure I can name yet—sorrow? guilt?

She looks away from me and starts the car. Her eyes get wet.

"La-la, la-la," I start to sing.

Mommy laughs a little as we pull back out onto the road.

MIKE SWEENEY received an honorable mention in the 1977 art fair for his pencil-and-marker rendering of "King Kong vs. Godzilla." He was the first kindergartener in his school's history to be so recognized.

Lifeguard

Ryan Werner

I didn't marry a girl named Florence and then she won the lottery. That's not the way I tell it, but it sure is the way she tells it, like they're related, like there couldn't be one without the other.

"I'm building a pool the size of your apartment building," she tells me. "Come on back and I'll fill it with whatever you want."

"Fill it with New Coke," I say. "They haven't made it since we were learning long division. Get the last drop to the brim and I'll pack up everything I own."

She tells me not to bother, that she'll buy me a new whatever. "Everything in your apartment looks like it was made in the dark," she says, and the next day a bottle of New Coke shows up in my mailbox, a reason to wonder if the world can only be a better place if we are in it alone but, also, why I might go back: something important is going, gone.

"They're supposed to be sweeter than the Coke they make now," Florence tells me when I set a bag with nine bottles and four cans of New Cokes on the floor in front of her, half a week's worth of deliveries. "There's really no telling how many are even left in the world."

A couple minutes later some construction workers show up to start digging the pool. At one point they partition off the circumference and Florence yells for them to extend it by a few inches.

She turns to me and asks, "How many more bottles do you think that is?" though what she really means is *Why don't you want the sort of love I have to give?*

I keep waiting for the money or the New Cokes to exhaust themselves but neither of them will. I get a bottle from New Jersey one day and two cans from Nova Scotia the next. She's paying the equivalent of good repairs on a shitty car to overnight them to me and I can't make her stop.

"I'd say we're at least an inch deep right now, drop for drop," Florence tells me over the phone. "And the pool is coming along nicely. Twelve feet in the deep end."

"How much in the shallow?" I ask.

She coughs into the receiver and pauses. "Who cares?" she says.

So many New Cokes build up over the next week that I need a laundry basket and both crispers in my fridge to take them all to Florence. I tell her the extra weight is going to kill my shocks.

"Great," she says, stuffing some bills in my hand. "This should cover the shocks, the gas, and the fact that your car looks like a sixteenth birthday present for a set of twins whose parents barely love them."

"I'll get a bus pass," I say, setting the money on the table. As I'm walking away I look back and see her in the window, bottle of New Coke in one hand and a glass half full of New Coke in the other, her way not of giving up, but of showing the magnitude of what she has to spare.

* * *

In the drawing before she hit it big, Florence bought me a lottery ticket, too, either as an excuse to see me or as an attempt to develop an addiction she could blame on me.

When I told her that I ended up winning \$20 she showed me the classified ad for her wedding dress and said, possibly changing the subject, "Doesn't it feel good, gambling with something besides your life?"

I short Florence by a six pack the next time I deliver to her. She barely says anything to me when I'm over there, just takes me to the backyard to show me the wet cement around the pool, a full bottle of New Coke stuck in at each corner like bedposts.

The men working inside the pool make a racket and what I think Florence asks me is if she needs a life coach. "Some things are just too big for one person to handle," I say.

It isn't until later that I realize she said *lifeguard*, worried, always, about the compartments of her helplessness.

When I met Florence, she told tell me everything about her name except where it came from. "There's a city called Florence in almost half of the states in America," she said. "And Florence Nightingale pretty much founded the idea of modern nursing."

"And it was the real first name of the mom on *The Brady Bunch*," I said.

"Exactly," she said, holding one hand in the other. "It's like having built-in matriarchy."

Over the years, she told me it's been a hurricane, a poem, and a saint, but I never asked which one she is.

* * *

After a while of four or five New Cokes a night, I get two of the three worst stomachaches I've ever had, just sugar on top of sugar until I can't stand or sleep.

The third stomachache I get the hard way, I'm sure, but it's been there so long I don't know how.

The New Cokes start to slow down on my end, and whatever I'm taking off the top slows it even more on Florence's side. She demands I drive the missing ones over to her house. It's between early and late with no sun, but I'm awake and shaking anyways, just finishing up the last pile of New Cokes I've got around.

When I get to her house she's not in it. The light in the backyard is on with the flood bulbs pointed at the empty pool. Florence is sitting in a \$6000 chair at the bottom of the deep end, empty bottles around her.

I climb down and sit on the arm of the chair. "I've been reading up on this stuff," I tell her, picking up one of the bottles. "There's a conspiracy theory floating around that Coca-Cola changed the recipe on purpose knowing that people wouldn't like it, which would spark interest in returning to the original formula and make the company more popular than it was before they switched."

She sets the bottle down and walks over to the ladder in the deep end, leaping up, barely getting her fingers around the bottom rung, and climbing out. Instead of following her, I sit down where she was in the chair.

A few minutes later I hear a hose near the shallow end. I turn around to look and see the water start to flow in with Florence next to it, sitting down with her legs pointed in and then sliding onto her feet. She's holding a silk pillowcase full of New Cokes over her shoulder and walking so slowly toward me that when she finally reaches me the water has already begun to touch us.

RYAN WERNER has got a body built for sin and an appetite for passion. He practices shameless self-promotion at his blog, ryanwernerwritesstuff.com. He is the author of *Shake Away These Constant Days*, a collection of short stories published by Jersey Devil Press, and the chapbook, *Murmuration*, from Passenger Side Books.

Think Tank

Craig Wallwork

The first time I met my father he was nine years old. The train had thrown his body two hundred feet down the track, bones were toothpicks dropped on the floor, angles and spikes. Eyes the color of sliced grapes were imbued with burgundy. I got to sit with him for a full two minutes hearing him croon his final breaths as the cadence of death prodded each limb and hand. It was the happiest moment of my life.

Quint said he could get me into the Think Tank for only half of what everyone else was being charged. That he never told me what everyone else was charged didn't fill me with confidence, but the prospect of never existing did. No one knew how the Think Tank worked. Some say it's a chamber, a flotation device that allows the mind to enter an altered state. You don't see or touch anything. It's all in your head. Nothing changes. There was this rumor that a kid used it to go back in time. He bought a lottery ticket for the following week. When he left the Think Tank, he was no richer than when he got in it. Quint believes the rumor was started by the company who owns the Tank. Stop people from profiting from their science. They didn't want the world to be full of gods and billionaires. If you were going into the Tank, it was just to observe the past, not influence it or alter the future. Stuff happens in history for a reason. Let it be. That's why they limited how far back you could travel. At a push you could go back fifty years. The last major terrorist attack was 9/11. Maybe if you found the oldest person alive today, they could have been no younger than thirty years when those towers fell. To me, that date might as well have been scribed in the Bible, it was so long ago.

Digital prints still exist of her before the accident: two rattlesnake tails of plaited hair draped her face. Eyes the size of opals. On the hood of an old Cadillac she sat, legs crossed, ankle-length boots. The winds had spun the clouds into a web, diffusing the sunlight to make her skin flawless. If Quint heard me talk like this about my own mother, he'd think I was some weirdo. Probably beat me too, but I've seen the way he looks at those pictures. He gets lost in them too, measuring every part of her as though he's putting together a jigsaw, matching tones and ambiguous features, comparing her youthful right eye with the one now hidden behind skin graft. He is estimating the thickness of her lips against those that have been thinned by erosion.

The company who owns the Think Tank worked out of a small industrial hangar on the outskirts of the city. It would take a full charge to get my car to travel that far. Quint knew a few of the old back roads that cut the time and distance down some. The place didn't look like much from the outside, a box of corrugated steel with a small door. No signs. Quint knocked five times and we had to wait another five minutes before we were let in. The air was charged with the smell of chemicals and ground coffee. Quint told me to hang back. He walked over to a large black man fixing an old Goldwing motorcycle. They talked, and every once in a while, they would both look over at me. The black guy guided us to another hangar, one that sat within the larger hangar. Within that was a room. Two men stood at its entrance. The black man held out his ID card and they let us in. There was nothing in this room save for a large tomb-like structure in the center. One light hung above it, cold and naked. A man wearing a lab coat came in and Quint handed him the electronic tablet that contained my birth details, fingerprints, blood group, and family medical history. The man downloaded it into a large computer. I was told to remove all my clothes and change into a dressing gown. Then I had to wait. Quint

sat with me, said it would be okay and that it will all be done soon. To pass the time, Quint asked questions about my family. He knew the answers, heard me speak about my parents since we first met at school. Guess he was nervous too. To make things go quicker, I told him about rabbit dodging.

The main gas line between the east coast and the capital ran through the town where my father grew up. It was shut down after the gas shortage of 2030. The evacuated tunnel was used for the first Vactrain. It was a big deal back then. My grandfather was one of the local men hired to lay down the maglev lines from Yorkshire to the Midlands, and that's about as much as I know about him. Quint knew about the tunnels. Knew they had no air in them because the lack of air resistance was the key to making those trains supersonic. A recreational pastime of bored children would be to open access latches that sealed off the outside from the vacuum beneath. If they timed it right, fresh air would enter the tunnel and the Vactrain would slow enough for one child to hang down from the access and wait there. At the last minute they'd hoist themselves back up, avoiding having their legs taken off by the Vactrain. Authorities got wise to this and sealed the access latches and that was the end of that. But my father was pretty good at it. To celebrate his ninth birthday, he went rabbit dodging and left it a little too late. The train caught his left foot, snapped it back at the ankle. My mother said she would have never noticed my father had he not had that limp. She was a sucker for a wounded animal.

The man in the lab coat threw policies and procedures at me like rice at a wedding. I wasn't really listening. I checked out and that's all that mattered. Before he led me to the Tank, Quint turned to me and shook my hand. It felt final, like that was the last moment he had with me. We didn't say anything. Know someone long enough and you don't need to talk. It's all understood in a stare or gesture of hand.

My mother told me that after she was attacked, they placed her in a body bag. The paramedics on the scene zipped it up and talked about her beyond the plastic. She said it was like being dead, hearing voices from another world. The Think Tank is like that. There is no light. No sound, save for your breathing and the faint echo of a voice that seems to be in another dimension. Water surrounds you. Warm. High salt content keeps you afloat. There is no point in closing your eyes because the eyelid is just as dark as the space before you. A voice squeezes through a speaker: deep and Oz-like. I tapped my heels three times and whispered, *There's no place like home*. Then came more instructions. Hypnosis was delivered under the cloak of relaxation. Count. One hundred to zero. In the darkness, I saw her face again beside that Cadillac. People in the town used to say my mother was too perfect. They assumed she had surgery to make herself that pretty, but the only thing unnatural about her was her taste in men.

I counted to fifty and the voice told me to picture the place I wanted to visit. Imagine it in every detail, the smell and the sounds. Before coming to the Tank, I found the first Google Earth pictures that had been archived before the earthquakes razed industrial buildings, houses and hillsides. Before the earth yawned and cracked the tunnel in two, I was able to see a moment from the past captured by a search engine: my father's old town. Antique BMWs and the first of the hybrid vehicles. The houses brick, not the composition of fiberglass, silicon, and cinder aggregate used on modern houses. The smell of wild flowers and grass I gleaned from the botanic museum in the city: adder's tongue, toothwort, hawksbeard, foxglove. Memorized all their scents from those fostered in labs or recreated from synthetic perfumes. I spoke with my mother about the clothes and detergents she used, soaps and hair-care products. I recalled the scent of lavender, almonds and citrus fruits. I inhaled the gentle breeze of a summer afternoon that

carried upon it creosote and cut grass. I heard the laughter of children and felt the warm hand of the sun resting upon my head.

My father placed a gold band on her finger and put an embryo in her stomach before she reached the age of eighteen. He then spent the following five months furnishing her cheekbones, arms, and legs in varying shades of black and blue. Mozart and Vivaldi are the preferred sounds to play an unborn baby, but a rendition of harsh profanities became my beat, screams the harmonies, and the wailing and furious words that bled into the placenta the music which aided my fetal development.

Six months pregnant and scared that his fist might strike my tiny head, she packed her bags. He caught her leaving through the front door. Her parting sonnet to him was that she would become a successful model and find a man as beautiful as she remembered herself to be.

You don't know it's happened till you're there. Like a dream, you charter the darkness till shadows are pushed to one side and before you is light, pure and brilliant. The volume of life is turned up again. This wasn't lucid dreaming. The detail was too clear and rendered too perfectly. There was no pocket of empty space filled with anything surreal or out of place. The grass was warm to the touch, the air free of smog. My peripheral vision was untainted by ambiguity. If I turned my head left or right, the horizon remained punctuated by hills and rows of tiny roofs that looked like blackened teeth. Upon the zephyr came the shrill of emergent voices, and on occasion the faint drum of rushing feet. To walk in the past is to walk among an upturned graveyard. There is nothing but death brimming with life.

The landscape of my mother's blistered skin is a terrain better matched to Death Valley. Mesh covered her face for three weeks after the first set of skin grafts. Donated skin from her leg wallpapered the empty socket where she lost her right eye. Further

surgery helped reconstruct a nose around the tapered septum still remaining. More grafts. More mesh. The coffee skin turned the color of shrimp shell before settling into shades of mocha, rose petal, and cream. She didn't smile for a year, and then when she did, no one could tell. Halfway through the painful skin graft operations, her waters broke. The doctors injected anesthetic into the potato peel that was her face to stop her from passing out during labor. Both north and south of her body she was in pain, and now she had a child to feed. Cops found my father hiding out at a hostel in Kendal. Charged him for giving my mother an acid face wash and he served three years. He got shanked in Strangeways after the first six months.

Three boys dressed in sports apparel stood around the aperture of the latch, staring down. They didn't hear me approach, or observe me as I stopped before a wild dandelion, rapt in its simple beauty. As I reached down to stroke the yellow petals, the ground vibrated, earth shifted. The Vactrain was close. Neither boy resembled the pictures I had seen of my father. One of them shouted down the hole, the name of Kieran glued to the end of the sentence. I imagined him down there, hands gripping the safety rail, legs flailing, heart beating out a rate faster than the wheels of the Vactrain. A faint rumble like that of thunder burrowed through the soil. In one motion I ran toward the boys, foot crushing the dandelion. They saw me approach, a glaze of panic coating their eyes. I yelled something that should have been more inspired, brutal and deliberate, but the words were malformed, tumbling out of my mouth and peppering their tiny scared faces like hailstone. Feet began tingling, shins trembling. The Vactrain was a bullet travelling at a speed of 4000–5000 mph. The boys ran off when I raised my fists. I saw their willowy figures set against the rising heat.

My newborn fingers must have traversed the valleys and skin ridges of her rugged face many times. They must have felt the tears welling in the ravines and gullies that were once a cheek, a lip, an eye. But I have no recollection of this. All that remains of my infancy was the warmth I felt around my mother. In her one remaining eye that watched me warily as I ascended stairs and that pinched slightly whenever my paint splattered hands hovered too close to the wall, I noted only devotion.

The drama of expression is lost on a face deformed by chemical burns. The expression of shock, anger, unhappiness, or joy does not pull so freely on the muscles beneath the skin. I learnt that the slightest dip of an eyebrow implied sorrow in her, the curl of the lip accompanied by the narrowing of the eye was happiness. It got to be that I could read her face much more easily than had she never been burned, which is why I knew whenever she passed a shop window or noted the looks of disgust as she guided me along streets and pathways, that even I could never heal the sorrow that burned her heart.

With toes perched on the edge of the hole, I looked down and saw bone-white knuckles gripped around the bottom of a telescopic ladder. The power of that train was sucking the outside air in. I felt myself being forced into the hole and heard him shout to the boys that the rabbit was coming. The rabbit was coming. He was whooping and yelling. Adrenalin cries. I descended the first few rungs of the ladder and felt my body gain three times its mass. Skin blanched as my hands held tightly to the metal rungs. Bones trembled, organs convulsed. My heart was a clenched fist, banging upon the wall of a prison cell. The first time we touched was the last. My foot crushed his grip and he fell before the passing train. It took me all my strength not to follow him.

The first time I met my father he was nine years old. I extended the ladders down into the tunnel and sat upon steel rails with my

heart bloated with happiness and lungs hungry for air. As first impressions go he appeared small and weak with his body lying bent into many angles. No risk to anyone. The bitterness I had inherited bled out of me just as life bled out of him. He was now no more than a dream. And as shadows united around me, muting the past and erasing me from the future, her face came to me once more. Before her the sun was again a spotlight and the heavens a web to diffuse the light. Once again she was beautiful and would remain that way until the end of time.

CRAIG WALLWORK is the twice-nominated Pushcart writer of the books *The Sound of Loneliness*, *To Die Upon a Kiss*, *Quintessence of Dust*, and *Gory Hole*. He is also the fiction editor of the journal *Menacing Hedge*. He lives in West Yorkshire, England.

My First Curse Word

Amanda Chiado

I pledge allegiance to the war
against the United Faces of Adulthood.
My hand is on my Juicy Fruit,
pocket full of rubber band bullets,
body equal parts blood, courage
and Crush, orange soda.

And to the parents who know
no better, fed by their curiosity
for button up shirts. For which I stand?
I'm not sure, but I stand and curse
for the very first time. *Damn*.

I fight for the banana seat on my bike,
for the freedom in Bazooka comics.
I fight for my tree house with the sign:
 No Boys Allowed.

Don't you tell a soul.
That hole in the ground,
dug in the deep wet of my backyard
to the left of my swing set—
It holds my secret coffee can,
my quiet, collected liberty.

You pinky swear, I tell you,
or they'll find us, and beat us
with leather belts in the name of justice,
and they'll make us
grow up.

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Vital: A Love Story

Ally Malinenko

If there is no reference point it's nearly impossible to tell how fast you're traveling. That's one of the first things you notice about deep space. The second is that when galaxies or, in this case, anything else arrives, they arrive quickly.

"Commander?"

"Yes MAC?" I ask, still standing on the platform in front of all that black. It seems to go on forever, and according to our research it does. The universe is expanding faster than we can track it. One day though, it will stop. And then it will contract, fold in on itself, warping time and space, pulling itself back together, undoing the Big Bang with the Big Crunch. And then it will all be over.

"A reading of your vitals says you didn't take your pill this morning?"

"I have it here," I say, staring down at the little orange pill in my palm. Longevity pills.

"L pills need to be taken within a four-hour timeframe."

"I know that MAC." I know it's not possible, but his voice sounds concerned. As if he was capable of emotion, of empathy. As if "he" were an actual he. I toss the pill in my mouth and swallow. "See?" I say. "All gone."

I know he can track the pill though my system without even touching me. Everything about this ship is state of the art. It's an honor to be selected. I knew that. And it still is, even now, even so far from home, so far from my own galaxy. I still believe in the mission. What little boy didn't dream of going to space? To be picked for a Longevity Mission was the highest possible honor. I still wake each morning with the same delicious feeling that today

could be the day that I find what I was sent out here to find. Except that hasn't been the case. Not for one hundred years.

"Commander?"

"Yes, MAC?"

"Are you exercising or would you like nutrition?"

"Exercising."

MAC says "nutrition" instead of "food" because we don't have food. But we do have nutrition. Prior to my mission, I hadn't eaten meat in ten years. And yet, out here, all I want is a hamburger. Nutrition, like longevity, comes in pill form. So do mood stabilizers, but I stopped taking those a long time ago. The stabilizers made it easier not to miss things, like food (and conversation with actual people), but I found that wanting things like that reminded me that I was here, alive, in this moment. Being alone for so long, you can forget those things.

"Commander?"

"Yes, MAC?" I ask, hopping onto the treadmill, pulling off my shirt and applying the sensors across my chest. MAC will do a full body analysis, make sure everything is functioning as it should be.

"There is something coming in over the satellite com."

"It's probably gravity static from an asteroid."

"I don't believe it is, Commander."

"Turn it up," I say, picking up the speed on the treadmill. MAC dials up the volume and it takes a second before it fills my ship. It's music. Classical music.

"This is what you're picking up?" I ask.

"Yes."

We'd sent out tons of eggs over the years—capsules full of information for any possible life form. They were filled with a history of our way of life, our planet. Messages in bottles tossed into the deepest reaches of space. We had never retrieved one—

never had a response from them. That's why the manned missions were started. That's why I was here.

"It's probably just an egg," I say.

"Negative, Commander. Listen." MAC turns down the reverb on the violins. "Behind the music is this."

I stop jogging. Strain my ears but I don't hear anything. "MAC you have to dial it up. What are you reading?"

"The sinusoidal wave is at 180 hertz."

"That's impossible." I pull the sensors off me, and put my shirt back on.

"I'm afraid you are incorrect, Commander. The fundamental frequency is in fact 180 hertz."

"Music doesn't play at 180 hertz."

"Correct."

"Dial it all the way up, MAC." I wonder if I'll even be able to hear it with my heart beating in my chest the way it is. But there it is. Soft at first, then louder. It's the sound of a woman humming along to the piece that was playing.

"Are you getting a reading?" I ask.

"Indeed, sir."

"Show me."

When the image flashes up on the screen my breath catches. It's a Z-82 Airbird. The exact same model as my ship. It was another Longevity Commander. I can't help but run the numbers in my head, the likelihood, or more so the sheer impossibility that I would run into another Longevity Commander out in all this space.

"This isn't possible," I say.

"Negative, Commander. The likelihood of finding another Z-82 is one in—"

"A trillion," I answer.

"Correct, Commander."

How many times had I sent out that call? In the beginning I would sit in the chair and randomly press that button, the one that sends out a beacon searching for another Commander.

It never found anything. And now, I've just run right into another AirBird.

"Can you patch into its com?" I ask MAC. It's a stupid question. Of course he can.

"We're in," MAC says. There is a feedback-like squeal that fills the ship.

"Connect with the operating system and send a link request."

"Link confirmed and approved."

I lean over the microphone and say, "This is Commander Shield. Do you copy?"

There is another high squeal of feedback before I hear a voice. A woman's voice. "Evening, Commander. This is Commander Evans."

My heart is racing in my ears. There are so many things I want to ask her I'm not even sure where to start.

"I can only see you on the satellite," she says. "How long you expect until we have visual confirmation?"

"Send MAC your coordinates."

They flash on the screen, mapping out her path. Evans just left the galactic center of Abell 4415. Based on her current course in two months we'll pass each other.

"So it looks like we're destined to meet after all?" Evans says. Her laugh bounces off the walls of my ship and suddenly I feel faint. I run the numbers again. I try not to think about how long it's been since I've heard another human voice.

We talk. We trade stories about life back home. That fills the first week. I stand up on the platform edge waiting to see her ship appear in the darkness. But for now it's just dotted with the stars of the galaxies before me.

We talk. Constantly. All day and well into the night. Or what we call night which is really just logged rest hours. In the second week, after we've already said goodbye, her voice comes back on.

"Commander? Are you sleeping?"

I open my eyes, lift my head towards the platform. Still just blackness. "No, what is it? Are you alright?"

"Have you ever thought about why you did this?"

"The mission?"

"Yes."

"It's an honor," I say.

"Company line. Tell me the truth."

I sigh and get out of my pod. As soon as I move, MAC fires up.

"You are awake, Commander."

"It's fine MAC." I tell him. "I'm just talking."

He runs a diagnosis of my vitals, an image of my body appears on the screen.

"Commander Shield?" Evans asks again.

"I'm here."

"You didn't answer my question."

"I did it because it's the chance of a lifetime. I did it because I'll see things that no one else will ever see. I've been traveling the universe for over a hundred years now. It's an honor."

"Alone."

"Excuse me?"

"You've been traveling the universe alone."

Not any more, I almost say but don't.

"The chance of our paths crossing is incredible, you know?" Her voice is soft.

"I know," I say, but so quietly I doubt her com even picked it up.

"It's just incredible, you showing up now."

"Why's that?" I ask, still gazing out in the dark.

"I almost . . . I've been thinking about . . . you know, not."

"Not." I repeat. I close my eyes. Hadn't I also been thinking about not?

"Yeah," she says.

"How long have you been out here, if I can ask."

"350 years."

"My god, that's . . . that's . . . incredible."

Evans laughs and the sound of it makes my stomach flutter.

I think about the longevity pills. It's always been our choice. We take them. Or we don't. The mission lasts as long as we want it to. When we're done, when we're ready to not, we just stop taking them. It doesn't take long and it's utterly painless. Our ships return to port on their own. They will be empty by then. Our bodies will be disposed of before docking.

"I'm glad you didn't," I say. Evans doesn't answer and I fumble. "I mean, for all that you've seen and sent back to home. The distance you've mapped. It's . . ." I struggle for a word. "Vital."

"Vital. Yes."

I think of those men, millennia ago, who set sail and mapped our home world. We are cut from the same stone. There is something that keeps driving us forward, constantly. We leave our own lives behind just to know what's out there.

"Commander?" she says.

"Yes."

"I apologize for waking you. I'm going to get some rest now."

"Okay."

"We'll talk tomorrow."

"Of course."

We talk every day. She sends me data from her journeys to galaxies I haven't seen yet. I send her mine. Neither of us has ever found any sign of an alien life. Never a blip on the screen, never another ship. Nothing but space.

We make jokes.

She makes me laugh.

Each day I watch the blackness for signs of her ship. When we map our paths again, we see that we are seventy-two hours from passing.

"How close will we be?" I ask but what I want to ask is *Will I be able to see you?*

"MAC calculates that we'll pass within fifteen feet of each other. Will you be on the platform, Commander?"

"Enough with the Commander. Please call me—"

"No." Evans yells. "Don't tell me your name. I don't want to know until I see you."

"But when we are within that range, our frequencies will overload. We won't be able to talk. The coms will go static."

"I know."

We come up with a plan.

I can see her ship from the platform now. A silver orb wobbling in all that dark. I don't feel like a Commander watching her ship get closer. I feel like a teenage boy, going on his first date.

MAC warns me that communication is going to cut off soon.

"Commander?" I say.

"Yes?"

"I guess this is goodbye for a while."

She laughs. "Oddly enough it's also hello."

I smile. The static builds.

"I'll see you soon," she says.

"Yes." There are so many things I want to tell her. I almost try but then the static screams through the ship and I tell MAC to dial it down for god's sake. I can see the nose of her craft clearly now. Soon our platforms will face each other and then I will see her. I stand at the furthest end so that as we pass, I can walk the distance of the wide window. So that I can see her for as long as possible.

“Pull the panels back, MAC,” I say and he does. The solar panels that protect me contract and now the window doubles in size. The nose of her ship fills my view and I gasp at the sheer size of it.

Her platform window comes in to view and there she is. Dressed in the same Commander blues as me. Her hair is cut in a shoulder-length bob. She smiles at me. I laugh with the sheer joy of seeing her, alive, in front of me. She mouths the word “hi” and gives me a little wave. I do the same.

Ready? she mouths.

I nod.

We each hold up the signs we created.

On mine I’ve written Eirik.

On hers, Monica.

Hi Monica, I mouth.

She laughs, her head thrown back and my stomach summersaults. We have to start walking now as our ships pass. She presses her hand up against the glass of her platform window and I do the same. It feels, for a brief moment, like I’m actually touching her and the sensation makes me dizzy. I close my eyes for a second and then open them, terrified of missing something. I can feel myself shaking. She’s so beautiful and alive and right here. She must be thinking something similar because she wipes at a tear. Monica is younger than me. She must have made Commander early. So smart. So brave. Monica.

My Monica.

I suddenly love her so much. I remember everything we’ve talked about this last month. I remember why I did this to begin with. I think of all those people back home, and how they are sleepwalking through their life. How they don’t appreciate every single second they’re given. Every single beautiful person they are privileged to know. Monica reminds me of that just by being here,

alive in all that stretching darkness. How lucky we are, just to even have this moment together.

I want to tell her all of this. But instead I tell her I love her.

Her smile widens. I love you, too, she mouths.

I've reached the end of my platform now. I press myself against the window wishing I could slow our ships down.

"Goodbye," she mouths.

"Hello," I say and then again, she laughs.

Her ship passes completely and darkness fills my window. I sit down and think about Monica. About how lucky I am. I feel dizzy with joy.

"Commander?"

"Yes, MAC?"

"Communication link has been restored."

"Hi, Eirik." Monica's voice fills my cabin.

"Hi, Monica."

"I think that might have been the best moment of my life."

"Me too."

What now? I wonder but don't want to say. We'll probably have another month or so before we're too far apart and our link is broken. Instead I tell her a story about the letters that Captain James Cook used to drop into the sea as he sailed to the bottom of the world. He addressed each one to his wife, Elizabeth. After he died exploring the Hawaiian Islands, they say she waited out on the shores of England for the bottles to return to her.

"That's a sad story," Monica tells me and I can hear that it's upset her.

"It would be," I tell her, "if she never found the bottles."

Monica laughs a bit, clears her throat. "Now you're just making things up."

"No, I tell her. It's the truth. When Elizabeth died, amongst her possessions were three letters from Captain Cook. All dated while

he was at sea. It's been authenticated. Somehow he found a way to still talk to her. A way to love her. A way for them to still be connected even over all that distance."

"I like that," Monica says.

"Good. You keep taking those longevity pills, okay?"

"You too," and then after a beat she says, "It's a big galaxy though. I mean the chance of us seeing . . ."

"Not that big. Not impossibly big. Not so big that two people won't see each other again. No bigger than the ocean was for James and Elizabeth, right?"

ALLY MALINENKO writes poems and stories and occasionally gets them published. Her first novel for children, *Lizzy Speare and the Cursed Tomb* (Antenna Books), is available on Amazon.

On the cover:

CRYSTAL ELERSON earned her PhD from the University of North Texas and currently works as a Senior Lecturer in Technical Communication for the University of Texas at Arlington. Elerson's research interests are in the writing style of historical American documents, collaboration practices during the American Revolution, environmental sustainability studies, and game theory in communication.

