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SILER

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Editor's Note

Laydeez and Gentledudes, step right up and witness the wonders of the fifty-sixth issue of *Jersey Devil Press*, where Everything Is Astounding and Nothing Is As It Seems!

Clap and cheer for C.R. Dobson and his Amazing Albino Beaver! Quake in your boots before Sean Ealy's alternative royal family! Prepare to question the laws of gravity when things get topsy-turvy with J-P Humann! Hold your breath as JDP veteran Bruce J. Berger does some heavy exterminating! Finally, let Gary Moshimer—also returning to this hallowed stage—capture your imagination with a swarm of delicate wings.

You Won't Believe Your Eyes.

— Laura Garrison

One Percent Rumsfoord

C.R. Dobson

We'll watch them do it. The iodine. The scalpel. The cuts. We are in favor of it. Before, we would've watched YouTube. Before even that, Bob Ross. Happylittletrees. What was before that? God sets down his fork and returns to the closet.

I clean the windows. The door. A tiny talon of God against grain scratches. He's working on his calendar again. I spray. Wipe. Spray. Wipe. My view must not be obscured. They work. I learn.

It is the first time we've been together in weeks. The taxidermy keeps me busy. Staring through the glass, I narrate to God.

I see how they pluck away the hair. I see how they baste the skin with iodine. I see how they season the creatures for surgery. God nods. He sees it now, too. His talons tap sadly. He can't pick up a scalpel. I want to bake him with love. But there is no love. There are only sonnets.

I see now the first scoring of the skin.

There is no worry from scalpel to stitch.

Prepare for the foreign flesh application.

Watch the hammer-headed lemur's first twitch.

Someday perhaps, we shall do the same, God.

I will play you and you will play with me.

When divots in dirt are by creatures odd.

My thanks to you will gush so sincerely.

Strange reserves are what the world will get.

You once said, "Canst thou bind the unicorn?"

Because they haven't been invented yet.

Produce the horse and I'll apply the horn.

As I expect. God screeches the glass with his talons. He needs a moment to prepare for the end-couplet. He draws the air over my skin into his lungs. Chills. Goosebumps. He exhales. He is now ready.

World forever changed by our divine craft
Drift away Darwin, set fire to the raft.

The white feathers around his eyes moisten with tears.
Someday, I'll have feathers around my eyes, too.

We have been studying for weeks. The concepts are now attainable to us. I drink coffee, stroking the luxurious pelt of an albino beaver. God is moved by my tenderness. God is so moved by my tenderness. God is so moved by my tenderness that he inadvertently transports me back through time.

I watch the ocean. Fishing boats flee from a marauding bald eagle. They must have something it wants. It's Earth Day 2012. God knows me so well. I have to move inland and find freshwater as soon as possible. Whenever I am, I have the same goal.

I have to move inland. I move inland. I am inland.

There is a stream obstructed by a fortification of timber. This stream, obstructed by a dam, has, on one side, become a deep lake. I stand on the dam and dive into the deep end. I dive until I reach the underwater entrance. I enter the underwater entrance and swim up into the hidden lodge of the creatures who engineered this marvel of engineering. Instantly, I am surrounded by them. Their Uzis poke into my nose and neck.

The beavers are 90% beaver, 9% Josef Božek, legendary Czech engineer. How else could they do this? Bob Ross would be proud. The guns are gone. We stand together at a blueprint (their dam) they unrolled atop a fine tiger-mahogany drafting table. I am

impressed by their ingenuity. The Beaver General is an Albino. He smiles at me and slips away.

We are alone. His pink eyes gaze into mine. I stroke his pelt. He steps back, searches through the white ruff of oily fur at his neck and grasps a hidden zipper. As he unzips his skin from neck to groin, I unzip and remove my jumpsuit. As he steps out of his skin he disappears. His luxurious pelt falls to the damp floor of the dam. I score my skin with the husk of an eviscerated pineapple. I don the pelt and feel it fuse onto my skin.

I exit the underwater asylum into the pond and rise to the surface. I slap my tail and scan the sky for the marauding bald eagle. There's only one thing left to do before going back home.

C.R. DOBSON has put his MA in Writing from Northern Michigan University to good use by teaching literature at a university in South Korea. His poetry and short stories can be found in magazines and journals that you've probably never heard of. When not teaching or writing, he's either reading or exploring the wonderful world with his white chinchilla Persian, Momo.

The King of Green Street

Sean Ealy

The Romeo King of Green Street wiped his hands on his grimy pants and plopped down in front of the meager fire to warm his bones. It was the damp that bothered him the most, made his joints feel like rusted springs and his head like it was stuffed with moldy cotton. But summer would come soon enough, and God bless it when it did.

The camp had been quiet all day, save the sound of the critters in the bushes and the birds in the trees. Soon enough the others would return, and then Romeo's performance would begin.

They called him Romeo because he had been a stage actor once with the Shakespeare Theater down in Ashland. They called him King because he beat Big Bubba with a tree limb until he bled from his ears. That was the way of it in the camp. One man runs the family until another man takes his place. Romeo had taken Big Bubba's mantle by sneaking into his tent while he was sleeping and clubbing him twice before he even woke up. There was a good chance Big Bubba hadn't even known who hit him.

Next morning, Big Bubba was gone and Romeo's reign began.

Scab was the first to come back to camp. He rode in on his banged-up Schwinn, hopped off and leaned it against a tree. Then he pulled a bottle out of the backpack cinched to the handlebars and handed it to Romeo. Romeo took the bottle, twisted the cap, sniffed the contents and then took a swig.

"Well now," Romeo said, tucking the bottle between his legs. "That'll pass." Scab nodded, scratched himself, and then shuffled

back to his bike. He pulled his own bottle from the backpack and sat in the grass.

Violet wandered in ten minutes later.

"New pants?" Romeo asked.

Two paper grocery sacks hung from her fingers. Violet rummaged through one of the sacks and pulled out a dented can of green beans. She handed this to Romeo.

"They left the door open on the Goodwill donation box again," Violet said. "Right there for God and everyone to see. Still had the tags on 'em. You believe someone would give away a perfectly good pair of jeans with the tags still on?"

Romeo looked at the can of beans in his hand and grunted.

"Some church lady with big tits gave it to me," Violet said. "Even got out of her minivan to hand them over. People were honkin' and cussin'."

"What else you got in there?" Romeo asked, lifting his chin toward the bags.

"Couldn't look me in the eye though," Violet said. "They never can."

Romeo pointed at the grocery sacks.

Violet licked her blistered lips. "There's not much, Romeo. Just some dented cans."

"Let me see 'em."

"We gotta eat too. Rooster's sick, so I'm pulling down for both of us."

"Let me see."

"You got your token. Take the beans and let me be."

Romeo stood and Violet took a step backward.

"Let me be," she said, but she bent down anyway and handed both sacks over.

"It's not a token," Romeo said, poking his hand into one of the sacks. He pulled out a box of Cap'n Crunch and set it down next to his beer. "I take care of my family, don't I?"

Violet tossed a glance at Scab, but found no help there.

"It's a tribute," Romeo said. He handed back the sacks, then disappeared inside his tent. When he returned, he held an old pistol in his hand. He aimed the barrel at Violet's right eye. It wasn't loaded, but she didn't know that.

"Come on, Romeo," Violet said. "Don't gotta be that way. You took what you wanted, now let me be."

"A dented can of green beans," Romeo said. "Is that all I'm worth?"

"You know it ain't like that," Violet said, almost in tears. She looked at the tent she shared with Rooster, and shame crossed her face. When she spoke again it was in a hush. "I'll give you somethin' later on if you just let us be. Somethin' you like."

Romeo considered this and withdrew the pistol. His face brightened. "Alrighty then," he said, tucking the pistol into the waist of his jeans.

"Wass goin' on out dere?" Rooster's voice was hoarse and full of phlegm, his last word cut off by a nasty hacking cough that shook the tent walls.

Violet picked up the grocery sacks. "Nothin' darlin'," she said. "Right as rain."

"Best be getting on to your husband," Romeo said. He watched her scurry like a mouse to her tent.

"Ain't gotta be that way." Munchy's voice.

Romeo spun on his heel to face the man, the hairs on his neck prickling. He reached for his pistol, but settled when he saw Munchy wasn't talking to him.

"You're a prick," Lou mumbled. "A moon dog."

They came down the river trail, Munchy first and Lou hot on his heels. Rainbow walked at a distance behind them, her arms wrapped around her narrow chest.

"Told ya I was sorry, Lou," Munchy said. "Stop being a baby."

Romeo threw a dead branch on the fire. "What you guys fighting over now?"

Munchy was tall and lean and had skin the color of Georgia mud and a beard like steel wool. He wore a green stocking cap, smashed down over his ears, and boots he had taken off a dead man. When he looked back at Lou, he grinned sarcastically, and his big teeth seemed to glow in the low light.

"Lou's got his panties in a bunch 'cause I took a twenty while mindin' his corner," Munchy said.

"Twas my corner!" Lou said. "And you ain't give me that twenty back. Belongs to me."

"You weren't there," Munchy said.

"Don't see how that matters," Lou said. "It was my corner."

"You were in the bushes," Munchy said.

"Taking a piss!" Lou said.

Lou was wiry and mangy like a starving dog. His face was red and pock scarred, and when he yelled at Munchy the cords stood out on his neck.

"Settle down," Romeo said.

"For three hours?" Munchy spun around to face Lou, but his grin broadened.

"Why did you leave your corner?" Romeo asked.

Lou opened his mouth and then shut it again. The fire danced in Romeo's eyes, as if his soul were on fire.

"Takin' a piss," Lou finally said.

"Gimme the twenty," Romeo said, holding out his hand.

Munchy pulled it from his pocket, wadded it up and threw it to Romeo. "Don't care much anyway," he said. His grin disappeared.

"Assholes," Romeo said. "You're not even like children. You're like monkeys."

"Twas my corner," Lou said.

Romeo had forgotten all about Rainbow.

"Cold over there," Romeo said.

Rainbow shrugged.

He watched her for a moment. Two weeks ago when she had first appeared at camp her hair had been streaked with pink. Now it was almost entirely black.

"What do you think?" Romeo asked her.

Rainbow shrugged again, and dropped her eyes. She was a mystery; quiet, hidden, like her face was a mask. Romeo wanted to take a peek at what was inside, touch it, taste it, dismantle it.

"What do you have for me?" Romeo said, turning to Lou.

"That was my twenty," Lou said.

"You owe me double tomorrow." Romeo stoked the fire with a stick and returned his gaze to Rainbow.

Rainbow pulled a package of white socks from inside her coat and tossed it to Romeo. Romeo caught it with one hand, surprised.

"What's this?" he said. He laughed. "Take note, you sons of bitches. Outdone by a girl."

Romeo broke open the plastic packaging and separated a pair of socks from the rest, and tossed them back to Rainbow.

"Socks fit for a queen," he said, and in the glow of the fire his grin looked carved like a jack o'lantern.

Violet gave him what he liked in the middle of the night, but he couldn't stop thinking about Rainbow.

By early morning light, he had decided it was time for her to earn her way into camp.

He built a fire and then rattled Rainbow's tent. She was already awake.

"Today you're with me," he told her. There was no one else awake yet. Sunday was their day off.

Rainbow sat down at the fire. Her hair hung in her eyes but he could feel her looking at him.

"I'm going to show you the best corner in town." Romeo said, flashing his best stage smile. "It's time you learn from the best."

Rainbow nodded and Romeo searched for any sign of fear she might be hiding. He saw none, and he wondered about that.

"Don't have to be afraid," Romeo said.

"I'm not," Rainbow said, and went back to her tent.

The man in the cowboy hat stumbled into the Green Street camp babbling like a fool. Lou let the man sit down by the remnants of the fire Romeo had left that morning, and they all stood watching him with queer fascination.

"You think he's stupid?" Violet asked.

"Stupid?" Lou said. "You mean like soft in the head?"

"Yeah, like that. Mentally disturbed."

The man in the cowboy hat waved both hands in the air and shouted at something unseen. Lou nodded.

"Yup," he said. "I think he's off his rocker."

"You think he's dangerous?" Violet asked. She shot a glance back at her tent. Rooster was sleeping, but last night he had stopped breathing. It had only been for a few seconds, but it was long enough to make her worry.

"Nah," Lou said. "He's harmless."

The man in the cowboy hat stood up and jammed a long finger at the sky. "You don't tell me!" he yelled. "I tell you!"

"He kinda looks like Superman," Munchy said, grinning.

"I think he's dangerous," Violet said.

"Romeo ain't gonna like him much," Scab said. "You're a fool for letting him stay."

"Shoot," Lou said. "He's alright."

The man in the cowboy hat spun around three times and then sat back down, crossing his legs Indian style. He beat on his chest with the flat of his hand and howled.

"I like his hat," Lou said. "I think I'll take it from him."

Lou stood and walked over to the man. He snatched the hat off the man's head and turned back toward the others, half smiling,

holding the hat up for them to see. When he turned back around, the man was back on his feet, his face only inches from Lou's.

"Aaah!" Lou said, taking a step back, drawing a snigger from Munchy. "What'cha doin' there?"

"I'm not an Indian," the man said, reaching out and pulling the hat out of Lou's fingers. "I don't make trades."

"I was just foolin'," Lou said.

The man put the cowboy hat back on his head. He turned his right hand into a gun, sticking his index finger out and cocking the thumb, and then he pointed it at Lou. He made a puffing sound with his lips.

"Pow!" he said, and then he shot Lou with his hand.

"You're all kinds of messed up," Lou said.

The man in the cowboy hat smiled. He blew smoke from his finger and then he put his imaginary gun into an imaginary holster on his hip. He sat back down and began to hum the Bonanza theme song.

"What are we gonna do with him?" Violet asked.

"Get rid of 'im," Munchy said. "Before Romeo kills him."

"He won't do such a thing," Violet said.

"He'll put a bullet in the man's head," Lou said. "And then he'll keep the hat."

"He let Rainbow stay," Violet said.

"Rainbow has something that Romeo wants," Munchy said.

"Tits and a warm hole. This guy ain't got any of that."

"Pervert," Violet mumbled.

"Hey!" Lou yelled. "What are you pointing at?"

The man's face was tilted toward the trees. He clicked his teeth together and began to count.

"I think it's nice to have someone else around," Violet said.

"Shoot," Lou said. "He's a fruit loop."

From Violet's tent, they could hear Rooster cough. The sound was horrible, and Violet once again thought about last night. Truth

was she would have left the camp a long time ago if not for Rooster. He was too sick to move, too sick to do anything but die.

"Well," Lou finally said. "This asshole can't stay."

The man in the cowboy hat had turned his back to them all, so he didn't see Lou approach him.

"Up you go," Lou said, tugging on the man's arm.

"You should be in bed," Violet said.

Lou turned and saw that Rooster had come out of his tent. His skin looked like sour milk and he had vomited in his sleep, the contents of it now crusted down the front of his shirt and in his beard. His hair hung long and nappy. His arms were trembling. Violet rushed to him and put a hand to his face.

"My god, you're burning up." She turned to Lou and the others, eyes wide. "He's burning up!"

"Jesus help him," Lou said. "Ain't nothing we can do."

"Don't look good, Rooster," Munchy said. "Maybe it's time to see a hospital bed."

"They ain't gonna see him," Violet said. "You know what happened last time."

"Please." The man in the cowboy hat pulled out of Lou's grip. His eyes were red and wet with tears. "Please."

"What the hell's wrong with you?" Lou said.

"Please," the man said. He was bawling like a baby now, snot bubbling from his nose. He stumbled forward, wiped his nose on his sleeve, and then howled. "PLEASE!"

Violet pulled Rooster closer as the man in the cowboy hat approached them. His face was all puffy now and slimy with snot.

"All go away," the man said. He put his hand on Rooster's chest. "Please."

"Let go of my friend!" Lou said.

"Quiet, Lou!" Violet snapped.

Rooster started into one of his coughing fits, but the man in the cowboy hat didn't move.

"You gonna help him, aren't you mister?" Violet asked.

"Don't be stupid," Scab said.

"Please," the man in the cowboy hat said. He closed his eyes and he sucked in air. Rooster began to scream.

"He's hurting him!" Lou yelled. "He's hurting Rooster!"

"I don't think so," Munchy said.

The man in the cowboy hat pulled his hand away from Rooster's chest. He stumbled backward, and then he fell. His mouth snapped open and he puked up something that looked like crude oil.

"You see that?" Lou said.

"We all seen that," Munchy said.

Rooster had stopped screaming. His eyes rolled back into his skull and he would have fallen if Violet wasn't holding onto him.

"What'd you do?" Lou asked. He kicked dirt at the man in the cowboy hat.

"Stop it!" Violet said. "Look at Rooster."

The sores around Rooster's mouth were gone. The veins along his arms and neck were no longer visible, his skin no longer translucent.

"Sick man okay now," the man in the cowboy hat whispered. His stomach made a gurgling sound and he threw up again in the dirt. "Sick man happy."

"Oh my god, Lou," Violet said. "It's a miracle."

Rooster put a hand to his mouth, and when his eyes rolled toward Violet his face lit up, as if he hadn't seen her in a very long time. "Baby," he said. "Baby, that you?"

"It's me," Violet said, wrapping her arms around Rooster and wetting his shoulder with her tears. "It's me."

The man in the cowboy hat crawled back to the fire. He drew his knees to his chest and slowly rocked back and forth. His lips were stained black. He tilted his head to the sky and started to hum again.

"It's a miracle," Scab said. "And Romeo's gonna be pissed."

Romeo found himself in a situation.

"I just don't want to," Rainbow told him.

He wasn't going to beg. He had her pinned behind a dumpster, and he could take her by force, but he didn't want that either. He wanted to smash her face in, destroy the blank pools in her eyes that stared back at him, reflecting his own face. But he wouldn't do that either. He let her go, wiped the spit off his lips, watched as she stood, dusted herself off, and turned away from him. In one quick moment of defiance she had taken his crown.

Romeo kicked a rock and then he stormed out of the alley. She would follow him, he thought. All the way to Green Street. And then he would humiliate her in front of the others. They didn't love her and they never would, not like they loved him. He would tell her to leave and they would agree, and then she would be gone.

He turned down Green Street and once he was on the camp trail his thoughts were cut short by the sound of a man howling like a coyote.

"What the hell?" Romeo began to run.

Lou and Munchy stood next to each other, watching the man in the cowboy hat holler and flip his hat into the air. When Lou saw Romeo he hit Munchy on the arm.

"Romeo," Lou said, rubbing his chin. He whistled and rolled his eyes. "You're just in time."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Romeo asked.

"For the show," Lou said, and pointed at the man.

"I can see the man," Romeo said. "What the hell is he doing here?"

"Birdy birdy," the man said. He flapped his arms, stepped up on the tree stump and took a leap.

"I think he's trying to fly," Lou said.

"You all gone mad?" Romeo said. He could hear Rainbow clearing the trail behind him but he refused to acknowledge her.

"Maybe," Munchy said.

"Birdy!" the man with the cowboy hat bellowed.

"Who let the freak into camp?" Romeo asked. He could feel the heat rising up his neck and into his cheeks.

"He's visiting," Scab said. He was sitting in the grass, next to his bike.

"Get rid of him!" Romeo shouted.

"Can't," Lou said.

"Why not?"

"Cuz he's a hero." Lou nodded toward the edge of camp.

Romeo turned in that direction and saw Violet and Rooster coming up from the river. Rooster was walking without any help, and Violet was laughing.

"Somebody better tell me what's going on," Romeo said.

"Birdy!" the man with the cowboy hat said. He jumped off the stump, landed, and saw Romeo for the first time. His mouth fell open and his eyes went wide. "Agggggg!"

"What the hell's wrong with you?" Romeo asked the man.

"Aggggg!" the man said and fell on his knees. He bowed his head to the ground so that his face was almost in the dirt.

"You're scaring him I think," Lou said.

"Now hold on a minute," Romeo said. He approached the man slowly. "Just hold on."

Romeo put his hand on the man's shoulder, and when he turned back to Lou he was grinning.

"Maybe I was wrong," Romeo said. "The man's kneeling. See? He's kneeling before his king."

Lou rubbed his chin but said nothing.

Romeo patted the man's shoulder. "It's alright. I won't hurt you now. What you did for me was nice. A nice gesture."

"Not for you," the man said, and bowed his head lower, kissed the ground.

"What's that you say?" Romeo said.

"Not for you. Not for you. Not for yoooooooouuu!"

The man shook his head violently. Then he pointed. Romeo followed the man's finger and saw it was pointed at Rainbow. She stood along the bushes, next to the trail opening, her arms wrapped around her chest, her black hair in her face.

"Queen," the man said. "Queeeeeennnnnn!"

Romeo hit the man then, connected clean with the square of his jaw, and the man flew backward with a bark.

"Get rid of him," Romeo said, looking from Lou to Munchy. Neither of them moved. "I said get rid of him!"

"Romeo," Lou said.

"I'll do it," Romeo said. There was a bomb in his head. He could hear it ticking, and soon it would explode. The man was trying to get up off the ground and Romeo gave him a shove. The man fell on his ass and Romeo kicked him in the knee. "Like that, asshole? Does it hurt?"

"Leave him alone," Rainbow said.

The sound of her voice made Romeo pause. He pushed hair out of his eyes and glared at Rainbow over a hunched shoulder. "Fuck you," he said. "You're next."

Romeo kicked the man in the ribs, heard something crack. He kicked him again, the fever in his head now a wild fire. The man bawled, tears dripping from his eyes like rain. Romeo rolled the man onto his back with his foot, and then put a knee in the man's gut.

"Leave him alone, Romeo!" This time it was Violet.

Romeo hit the man in the face.

"LEAVE HIM ALONE!"

Romeo looked up at Violet. She stood next to Rooster, his arm around her.

"Stop beating that man," Violet said. "He's special."

"Thought you were sick," Romeo said, looking at Rooster, ignoring Violet.

"I was," Rooster said.

"That man made Rooster better," Violet said.

Romeo looked at Munchy and Munchy nodded.

"Seen it with my own two eyes, boss," Munchy said.

"Special," Romeo said. "That what he is? Special?" He grabbed a handful of the man's hair and slammed his head into the dirt.

"Don't look special."

"Look at Rooster," Violet said. "He's better. On account of what that man did."

Romeo wiped his face with the back of his hand. "It's a conspiracy. You're all messin' with me."

"It's true," Rooster said, nodding. "He—"

"Liar!" Romeo shouted. When the king shouted everyone in his court trembled. "You're messing with me, Violet. All of you."

"That man saved Rooster's life," Munchy said. "Look at him, Romeo."

"You're dead!" Romeo yelled. "You're all dead! You're messing with me. Stop messing with me!"

He slammed the man's head into the ground again.

"I'm special," Romeo said. "You all forget that. I'm special!" He pulled a knife from his pocket.

"Romeo," Munchy said. "Don't do that."

But Romeo wasn't listening. He popped the blade.

"Teach you a lesson," Romeo said.

Something hit him then. Something hard. Romeo reached toward the back of his head where the pain was blooming, and his fingers pulled away slick with blood. He twisted around and saw Rainbow standing behind him, a large rock in her hand. There was blood on the jagged edge of it.

"Whaaaa?" he started to ask, but then she hit him in the face and he dropped the knife.

"You're dead!" Romeo said. Blood poured from his nose, making his shirt and hands slick. He found the knife lying in the dirt and reached for it. Something hit him in the eye. He blinked, and something hit him in the arm. He turned toward Violet and Rooster, saw Violet's arm go back, saw something fly through the air, and barked as it hit him in the neck.

"Stop it!" Romeo yelled.

The others gathered around him. They all held rocks in their hands.

"Mutiny!" Romeo said. He picked up a handful of dirt and tossed it at the air between him and the others. Another rock zinged him in the mouth. This one came from Lou.

Somewhere he heard a grown man crying, and then he realized it was him. Desperation rose from his chest like fire. He wiped his eyes and focused on the knife, then lunged for it. His fingers wrapped around it and all he wanted to do was slice the world open, watch it bleed. He spun around with the knife, growling, and Rainbow smashed him in the ear with her rock. Romeo gaped, stunned, and she hit him again and again until he fell, and his kingdom fell with him.

The rock Rainbow held in her hand was slimy with Romeo's blood. She dropped it, suddenly sickened by it. She turned to the others, eyes wide.

"All hail the queen," Lou said, dropping his own rocks.

"My god," Violet said.

Rainbow knelt by the man Romeo had beaten. She picked up his cowboy hat and placed it on his head.

"I know you," he whispered.

"Nobody knows me," Rainbow said.

One by one they came before her and knelt in the dirt. She still had Romeo's blood on her hands, and they were trembling.

Violet was the last to come. She touched Rainbow's face gingerly, and then she too knelt. She was laughing, though, as she said the words. Laughing because the world was funny. Laughing because nothing made sense anymore.

"All hail the queen," she said.

And the queen began to cry.

SEAN EALY has been published in *Under the Bed Magazine*, *Fabula Argentea*, *Rose Red Review* and *Menda City Review*. Years ago, he discovered an ancient Hermes typewriter in the garage, and has been lost in the words ever since. Native Oregonian and avid Red Sox fan, you can find him on Twitter @SeanEaly.

Anton Toller, The Man with an Upside-Down House

J-P Humann

Translated from the German by the Author

Anton Toller's early springtime stroll proved to be unsatisfactory. He had intended to observe the beginnings of the new season: the buds on the trees; the green arms reaching out of the brown dirt; the warm, blue sky. However, none of these things were present. The trees remained barren; the ground not yet thawed; the air, cold. The sky was blue when he set out for the walk, but had since become infiltrated by clouds that resembled his former girlfriends. At this last insult, Toller turned around and set forth for home. It is true that he was still walking, but it was no longer a walk of leisure.

Home was not the pleasing refuge that he envisioned. When he turned the corner to his street, he noticed that his house was upside-down. It was not that way when he left it twenty minutes earlier. He took solace that his house had a flat roof and not a peaked one; if it was peaked, it surely would have toppled over in this situation. Even given that luck, Toller was displeased. This was not what he wanted. To begin with, how would he enter? Yes, ceilings would make a fine substitute for floors: they were essentially the same, aside from minor details. But what of his furniture? Smashed upon impact? That would be intolerable. Toller had recently splurged on a piece of art, and grew concerned regarding its status. If it fell off of the wall due to the flip, it may be damaged; if it remained on the wall, it would be upside-down and likely to have lost its visual appeal.

Toller noticed his neighbour, the friendly elderly gentleman Mr. LeBlanc, stood with his jaw agape, staring at the upside-down house. Toller reasoned this was an opportunity for answers.

"What has happened here?" Toller asked the old man.

"Pardon me," the old man replied, "I should not be gawking. Your house has become upside-down."

"Yes, I see, but do you know how?"

"No, I just came out to tend my garden. That's when I discovered it like this. Perhaps another neighbour saw the flip in progress."

"Yes, you may be right."

Toller went to the other houses that had a view of his own. He knocked on the doors and inquired to his neighbours about the recent event. None of them had any information to provide, but they did express marvel at the situation. Toller went back to his house. He tried to enter his home through an upside-down window, but with no success. At this point, he noticed a crowd had gathered on his lawn to see the house for themselves.

"This is not a spectacle!" Toller yelled.

The gathering was embarrassed. Toller was known as a polite man, and so to have angered him they recognized that they must have been acting foolish.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Toller," said a woman from the crowd, "but this is simply remarkable. How did this happen?"

"I'd like to know that too," Toller replied. He scanned the people surrounding him: neighbours, friends, passers-by . . . and criminals? "Are any of you responsible for this? Come clean now, and I will assure your punishment from the authorities will be less severe."

"Responsible?" replied a man, apoplectic. "How could any of us possibly accomplish this?"

"I do not know," Toller conceded. "This is beyond explanation, so I must consider all contingencies. If you say none of you are responsible, can anyone offer a superior explanation?"

"A gust of wind?" offered a man.

"A *gust of wind*?" Toller repeated, in a manner that implied the suggestion was welcome for derision. "You think a gust of wind flipped my house and then placed it back onto the same footprint?"

"It could have been a localized gust."

Toller removed his glasses and ran his hand over his face. He had only just noticed that he had a pounding headache. LeBlanc saw this, and strode over to his neighbour. LeBlanc grabbed Toller's arm in a friendly way.

"Please, Mr. Toller, you're welcome into my home for now. Rest for as long as you like, and make the necessary phone calls," LeBlanc said.

"Thank you," Toller replied. The two men walked into LeBlanc's home. Toller took a seat in a comfortable chair near a telephone, and LeBlanc brought him coffee.

Toller's first call was to the police department. He felt silly for making the call, but also recognized that it would be prudent to report the incident in the event that it was a serial case. The police did not laugh in his face as Toller feared, but they did advise him that they were unlikely to be of any help. They wrote down a description for their records, and placed it in the filing cabinet under "U" for "Upside-down house."

Next, Toller contacted a representative for the city. They informed him that, while they were sympathetic, they could not aid him in any manner due to the house being private property. They instructed him to discuss the matter with a contractor.

The contractor also proved unhelpful. The estimate he gave Toller to right the house was exorbitant.

"What do you suppose I do then?" Toller asked the contractor. "I don't have that money, and now people are crowding along the street just to stare at my home!"

"Charge them," said the contractor.

Toller hung up the phone in frustration.

"This is a mess!" Toller said to LeBlanc.

The old man sat down next to Toller in order to provide an ear of understanding.

"If only my house was back to normal!" Toller continued. "If only it was never like this at all! I would have come home from my walk, taken a warm bath, and felt at peace!"

"That is not how it is."

"I know that."

"No, you don't. Listen to me: that is not how it is. You may have this world in your head of the world as you want it, but that does not make it so. Your house is upside-down, not right-side up. I am an old man, and I have heard much advice in my lifetime. I will now give you the best I have ever heard: take things as they are and act appropriately."

Toller smiled. He felt the peace in LeBlanc's chair that he had wished to have in his own bath.

"Thank you," Toller said.

His next call was to a realtor. Toller put the house up for sale immediately. It took only three days for the house to be purchased by an upside-down man. The transaction made both the upside-down man and Toller quite happy.

Sometimes things work out for the best.

Pest Arrest

Bruce J. Berger

He stripped off his pea-green Pest-Arrest jacket and his pea-green Pest-Arrest uniform, kicked out of his brown Pest-Arrest work boots, shucked out of his underwear, and spent long minutes under the scalding shower until he thought he could no longer smell the mixture of Diazinon and Chlordane on his skin. At the end of a long week, Rusty Locke hated the idea of having nothing to do for two days. Tired of drinking with the other guys from work at the Dragon Bar and Grill, tired of hearing wisecracks about his name, tired of the inevitable game of pool, tired of forcing himself to sleep late on the weekends to use up the time. The uniform made him feel like he was part of a team, dedicated to a social good. But after more than two decades of killing termites, dismantling birds' nests, enduring wasp stings, he was tired of all that too.

Pulling on his favorite blue jeans and Nationals sweatshirt, neither of which he'd washed in months, he turned to leave his bedroom, and the sight of a stranger standing in the doorway made him jump in shock. 'Who the hell are you?' The thought quickly crossed his mind that this stranger was someone he'd seen before, a man who looked to be in his early forties, like Rusty, dark-haired, a bit overweight, again like Rusty, holding an unlit cigar. The intruder's lips curled into a half-sneer.

'You'll figure it out.' That voice! Rusty had heard it before. His mind flashed to his teenage years, when he'd been making out with—Fran?—and her father had chased him the hell out of their house. Was this the same asshole?

'What do you want?'

'I've got a job for you. It's your specialty.' The man waved the cigar towards Rusty, who felt a warm power radiating from it. A peppery taste spread though his mouth, a tingling of anticipation.

'Job?' Rusty thought the man's name, Andrew, and the man grunted in affirmation.

'You'll know when it's time.' With that, Andrew vanished.

Rusty stared at the space where, just a second before, Andrew had stood waving his cigar. A tiny buzzing sound grew in his ears, close to his head. He couldn't see what it was, but opened his mouth, and a small gnat flew in. Rusty swallowed, smiling.

When he started work Monday, checking his emails for the addresses of his appointments and the tasks he had to complete, Rusty had no recollection of Andrew. He felt, however, that something had changed for the better. He could sense a spring to his step, an eagerness to be helpful, a satisfaction that he was good at what he did. He began to think, as he drove the Pest-Arrest truck to his appointment in College Park, that he might be the best exterminator in the DC metropolitan area.

Full of energy, he skipped lunch and finished his rounds by two. He called in for more work, not caring about the extra pay, but hoping to find someone having a real emergency. A smile crossed his face when he heard that an elderly woman in Chevy Chase had just called in a panic, having found a bevy of mice in her outdoor storage shed.

Rusty carried 5% Diphacinone, long banned by EPA because of its lethality to humans but hoarded by Rusty for just such situations. He met the grey-haired client, assured her everything would all right in a few days, and set to work. He cleaned the food sources out first—torn bags of dog biscuits that had been there for years—set the bait, and assured the client that he'd return when it was time to clear out the dead mice, all of which would have bled to the most

painful death imaginable. On the way home he laughed as he thought about their convulsions, disappointed only that he could not see them suffer.

Rusty walked into his house to find Andrew sitting in his favorite chair, feet propped on the oak coffee table in the center of the room. When Andrew saw him, he rose, holding the same cigar.

'You again.'

'Of course. Killed anything today?' He waved the cigar in small circles, pointing its tip towards the ceiling.

Andrew had grown in the three days since Rusty had last seen him. Not quite so pudgy, his face had grown darker, with mottled brown patches on his cheeks and forehead. His hair had grown longer and lighter, the grey hairs of age challenging the darker hairs of youth, now tied in the back into a short ponytail. His voice had crept up a pitch but sounded even more menacing, almost mocking.

'That's what I do. I kill pests. You know that.'

'You're good at what you do?'

'Do I know you? Weren't you Fran's father, a long time ago?'

'Fran!' He spit on Rusty's coffee table. 'That's what I think of her!'

'What do you want from me?'

'Exterminate. I have a job I want you to do.'

'Call our business office. Pest-Arrest. 1-877-GET-THEM.'

That's . . . "

'This isn't about an insect.' Andrew produced a matchbook from a pocket and lit the cigar, then tossed the match onto the table, where it left a dark mark before it burned out. Cigar smoke filled the room. He waited for more information, but without warning Andrew pointed the cigar at Rusty's head. The punch felt harder than a fist, and Rusty staggered backwards against the door and slid to a sitting position, his hands reflexively holding his head.

'You're going to kill a man. I will tell you who and when.'

Andrew took long puff on his cigar, then threw it at Rusty, but it

dissolved to nothing halfway through its course. Andrew faded away.

Nausea rose in Rusty, who struggled to his feet, ran for the bathroom, and made it to the toilet in time for the upheaval of vomit. Kneeling and retching, he saw a cockroach crawling on the tiles. He reached down and it hopped into his hand.

'Sayonara, little guy.' He crushed it easily between thumb and forefinger, wiping his palms with the juice. The nausea vanished. He rose, hiccupped, and went in search of supper. The smell of cigar smoke, almost sweet, permeated his house.

Rusty thought about calling in sick but decided not to. As he drove to his first appointment, he pondered what had happened. He had a vague memory of being told to kill a man, and wondered whether he should report Andrew's break-in to the police. Both break-ins. But, after thinking about it, he saw that course would be unwise. Who would believe some guy — whom he hadn't seen for decades — would magically appear and disappear twice? Who would believe the guy could hurt him badly by waving a cigar? Rusty didn't think anyone would believe him.

His thoughts spun backwards to Fran. She'd hated her father, hated his cigar, hated his overbearing manner, hated that he'd never shown her an ounce of love. Fran. What the hell had happened to her? He'd seen her once or twice at parties in the summer before she went off to college, but they'd already drifted apart, and she was always attached to another guy. She'd been great fun when they'd been together, his first sex. Where had she gone? Why hadn't he thought about her at all for more than twenty years? The questions stayed in Rusty's mind as he worked his way through the day.

It was a day challenging even for someone of his prowess at killing. It started easily enough with clients who had squirrels

running through their attic in Takoma Park. They hadn't realized that branches had forced their way under the roof. He crawled through the attic until he found a nest of babies, placing them into a sack, and set a trap for the absent mother. He killed the babies by forcing the sack into a trashcan filled with water. Then the day grew more complicated: a bed bug infestation at a glitzy new hotel in downtown Silver Spring, a silverfish swarm in the basement of the Wheaton Public Library, and a restaurant in Greenbelt with a horde of beetles running rampant in its store room. By eight in the evening, when Rusty had finished, he was exhausted, looking forward to a night's sleep.

Sleep did come easily, but Rusty awoke around midnight when he felt someone sit down heavily on the end of his bed. He knew it was Andrew. The angry red tip of the cigar gave that away.

'Get dressed. We have work to do.'

Rusty jumped up and pulled on clothes without reserve. When Andrew stood, Rusty could see that Andrew had grown in height but had lost more weight. The ponytail had lengthened, the hair had whitened, the half-sneer had deepened.

None of this surprised Rusty, who expected Andrew to fly or explode or melt if he chose to. Rusty felt as fascinated as he did when discovering yet another hornet nest that seemed larger than life. A universe that could create a community of thousands of hornets organized into a society that built a nest that large could create Andrew and his ray-gun cigars.

'OK, now what?'

'Follow me.' Andrew led Rusty out of the house, and they began to walk briskly, but in seconds Rusty no longer recognized the neighborhood. The small houses of Aspen Hill had been replaced by mansions, homes for the wealthy.

'Where are we?'

'Potomac.' On one side of an exurban road a white wood fence bordered an undulating field. A golf course? Someone's backyard? On the other side of the road stood the three-story houses with

rows of pine trees shielding their fronts. He hurried to keep up with Andrew, who grew taller it seemed with each long step.

‘Why are we here?’

‘You’re stupid, aren’t you? I thought so when you fell for that tart of a daughter. You don’t know much about anything except killing, do you?’

‘What happened to Fran?’

Andrew’s laugh burst from him, loud enough to wake anyone in the nearby houses. ‘You’re kidding, right? I paid good money for her to go to UVA and she gets knocked up first semester. Can you believe that? Gets an abortion, but I only found out about that after she bled to death. Couldn’t come to me for money to do it the right way. Come on.’

‘I . . . I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. I knew she was bad from the day she was born, but all the same, we’re going to kill—you’re going to kill—the guy that killed her. Just for fun.’

‘We’re . . . what?’

‘You heard me. See that house?’ He pointed to the mansion they were approaching, a house fronted by a low brick wall upon which sat glowing glass globes every twenty feet. ‘He lives there. Dr. Madone. G.U.R. Madone. You kill him, then I’ll leave you alone.’

‘But . . .’ Before he could say anything else, Andrew sizzled in a dazzling white light accompanied by a loud crackling sound, like the buzz of thunder from miles away, and shrunk until he could no longer be seen. Rusty looked around and saw that he stood alone, not in Potomac, but in Aspen Hill, four blocks from his house. He shivered in the damp night air.

Once inside, he realized that he was covered entirely with a sticky slime. He rubbed some off his arm with a finger, then put it into his mouth. Odd. It tasted like milk, but had to be washed off. He showered, pulled on pajamas, and as he looked into his

medicine cabinet mirror, he saw behind him, hanging on the wall where minutes before there had been nothing, a stuffed raccoon.

When had he last had to trap a raccoon? He couldn't recall. The raccoon's expression was one of bewilderment. Rusty brought it into his bedroom and hung it from a nail that had once held a picture of Rusty's father.

The next morning Rusty could barely remember his encounter with Andrew. The raccoon stared at him from the wall with an angry glare. Rusty recalled that he was supposed to do something very important that day. He would have to kill someone. A pest.

But who? Someone in Potomac, but who? Some doctor? Of course, the doctor who had killed Fran.

He sat at his kitchen counter sipping black coffee, letting his thoughts drift back to Fran. He had a vision of a pretty girl with smooth skin, regular facial features, and reddish brown hair that fell below her shoulders. He could see her climbing with him into the back seat of his Ford Fairlane station wagon, inherited from his father when he died suddenly of a heart attack, with the Select Shift automatic transmission and the FM/AM radio, a cool car. He could see her unbuttoning her light green blouse. A hot dish is what his father had called her before he died. A spring night, the car parked at Cabin John park behind the baseball field, the radio playing Tina Turner's 'What's Love Got to Do With It?' He could hear it in his head. *'It's only physical.'* That's what he thought then and still thought. But she was a good kid with a mean father. And now she was dead, had been dead a long time, hadn't she? He knew what to do.

He logged onto his computer, jumped on Google Maps, exploring street-level views of Potomac. After an hour, he found a road that looked like the one he remembered from the night before. Piney Meeting House Road. Exactly where a rich abortionist would live. He moved his view up and down the street until he spotted a

house that looked like the one he'd seen, circumscribed by the low brick wall with the glass globes. He copied the address and hurried to his Pest-Arrest truck with no idea about what he'd do when he arrived.

Parking two football fields away from the house, Rusty used binoculars to observe. Long, wide driveway leading to three-car garage, standard. Kid's tricycle on front lawn. A family guy, but maybe with a young wife.

'What are you waiting for?' The imperious voice startled Rusty. He turned to see Andrew sitting next to him, holding an unlit cigar. Andrew had grown taller, so big that he barely had head room. He stank of a chemical smell that Rusty could not place. 'You think he's just going to walk up to your truck and give himself up to you?'

'Of course not.'

'You ever see a rat lick the poison out of your hand?' No answer was necessary. 'Ever see a baby mouse that drowned itself because that's what you wanted? You've got to go get him.'

'How do I kill him?'

'You're the expert. Figure it out. You always do.' With that, Andrew grabbed Rusty's left arm and traced a line on the forearm with the unlit cigar tip. A sharp fire pierced his arm, and Rusty looked down to see a line of blood welling up.

'You didn't have . . . ' Rusty cut short his complaint when he realized that he sat alone in the front of his truck. Andrew had left his cigar on the seat. Rusty reached behind him, pulled out and donned his neoprene gloves, and picked up the cigar. It weighed twice what a normal cigar of that size should have weighed, but he could find nothing else abnormal about it.

Rusty drove closer to the house, parked next to the driveway, left the motor running, and walked to the front door. He waited a minute after ringing the bell, but no one answered. He decided he would come back that evening. He had to obey Andrew. He returned to the truck, packed the cigar into a plastic container,

wrapped the container in a blanket, and tucked it all behind his seat. Tonight, he told himself.

Back at his house, he unpacked the cigar and placed it on his kitchen counter. He stared at it, then checked all the doors and windows to make sure they were locked. Rusty found two bottles of Bud in his refrigerator and sat in his favorite chair in front of his television to wait. When the bottles were drained and nothing had happened, he saw that Andrew intended to give him no further instructions. Andrew had told him to 'figure it out.' Rusty was frustrated, wanting to do as Andrew had commanded, yet feeling that he'd not been properly advised.

Rusty was just about to head to Potomac when he heard the whimpering of a child from his bedroom. He grabbed the cigar and slowly approached. Upon entering the bedroom, he could see that the raccoon he'd hung where his father's picture used to hang was twitching, and the unearthly noise came from the raccoon's mouth. Rusty drew nearer, then spun to see if Andrew had snuck in behind him and had been playing a cruel trick. The room was empty, but Andrew's words flew at him from the raccoon in the voice of a six-year old girl.

'I told you to kill the doc.'

'I know, but . . . '

'But nothing! You're a wimp, aren't you?'

'No, I'll kill him. I'll do exactly as you say. But how?'

'You gut him with your knife.'

'Will you go away forever if I do it that way?'

The raccoon fell silent, its twitching stopped. It seemed as if it had never talked, yet Rusty knew what he'd heard. He reached into the drawer where he kept his Cold Steel SRK with the black blade and handle. He'd almost never used it, just had wanted it nearby. Rusty thought it odd that he'd never reached for the knife when Andrew had first confronted him. If he had, maybe Andrew would have disappeared and not taken over his life.

It took but a half-hour for Rusty to drive to Piney Meeting House Road and find the house again. It was dark, but the house and its grounds were well lit. He placed the heavy cigar into the breast pocket of his pea-green uniform shirt, stowed the sheathed knife in his pants pocket, picked up the tool kit he often brought with him on jobs, and marched to the front door. A black Porsche with Maryland 'MD' tags sat in the driveway. He rang the bell.

'Yes?' floated a weak male voice from behind the door. The pitch was higher than Andrew had expected.

'Pest-Arrest. We're the new pest control operators your housekeeper called.'

'Pest . . . ? There must be some mistake.' The door began to open.

Rusty pushed his way in and plunged the SRK into the stomach of an elderly man with long, unkempt white hair wearing blue pajamas. The shock on the man's face as he felt his insides being torn apart by the twisting metal amused Rusty. It reminded him of convulsing squirrel babies that he had drowned. He had done well to comply so quickly and competently with Andrew's orders.

Screaming female sounds now surrounded him. Two women rushed into the room. He brandished the knife.

'Oh my God! What did you do to Dad?' yelled the older of the two, a woman with reddish brown hair, vaguely familiar. The other, a college age kid, pounded the buttons on her cell phone. She was dark haired, a bit overweight.

'He's a murderer. He's the doctor who killed Fran! I'm doing what I should have done years ago if I had only . . . '

'Doctor? He's not a doctor! Fran? Oh my God, Mom.' The younger woman ran off, and Rusty could hear her sobbing, gasping for police and ambulance help.

The older woman knelt by her father, trying to comfort him, then looked up at Rusty, stared him in the face, and shrieked.

'Get out!'

He was confused. The woman reminded him of Fran, now that he'd had a chance to look more closely. The guy he'd just killed reminded him of Fran's father, not the monster who'd been showing up claiming that identity and calling himself Andrew. Not the magician who'd been urging him to take the next step forward in his life's calling.

Rusty convulsed with laughter. The hilarity of the situation struck him so forcefully that he could barely stand. He grabbed the doorframe for support, even as he heard the sound of approaching sirens.

He took the cigar from his pocket, lit it, and inhaled the sweet tobacco smoke.

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Moth Man

Gary Moshimer

My mother called to say my father had come back as a tiny flying man and was sexually harassing her. "He's like Tinkerbell. His wings are pretty, purple with white spots, but he has that dumb head he had when he was forty. That alcoholic's nose."

Now I worried about her mind, although she was just seventy, and was fine yesterday. "Did he say anything?"

"No. He just flutters, with a little shit-eating grin. He only comes when I'm in the shower or in bed. He's a pervert, touching my ass and boobs with those skinny legs, and feelers, and antennae . . . and what's that long pokey thing . . . a *proboscis*."

"Mom, have you changed your medicine?"

"No. I'm perfectly fine. Except for him. He comes into my bed and tries to tickle me with those wings, and probe me with that thing, in every place imaginable. He's trying to seduce me. He never touched me this much in all the time we were married. I finally have to smack him so hard that he goes away. But then he hides. I can't find him."

"I'll come over. Maybe I can get him."

My father was a hard ass, a prison guard who liked his power, a kind of control he brought home with him. He roughed me up, wanting me to follow in his footsteps, as his only child, but I veered from the path, as far as I could get from him. I became a dancer, just to see his head explode. He took to the bottle, and his liver eventually caught up to him.

I went to the studio and found this giant net we had used in a production. In that show, I had caught a mermaid with this net. It was white with rainbow sparkles. I folded it into my backpack. Then, just for fun, I put on the Moth Man costume. That was my most famous dance. I could still fit into the skin-tight white leotard. I carried the glittering silver wings along and hailed a cab. The driver didn't bat an eye as I gave my mother's address.

My mother jumped when she opened her door. "Oh my god, I thought it was him!"

And for a second I glimpsed myself in the hall mirror. My head was covered with the stretchy material, so only my face showed. My resemblance to him made me gasp. Even the nose, because I'd been drinking more and more lately, a forty-year-old man alone, having lost the mermaid. (She was the only one for me.)

My mother sat, looking tired and bloated.

"Sorry," I said. "I thought it might attract him." I fluttered my wings.

"He may come to kill you. I remember when he saw you dancing as the Moth Man the first time. Jesus, that put him over the edge."

I smiled, recalling him leaving from his VIP front-row seat.

"So," I said, "how do we do this?"

I folded my wings and hid behind the dresser; my mother got into bed. It wasn't long before a blue glow emerged from the closet. He was lit from within, flying erratically around the room, about six inches long, beautiful except for the pinched, devilish face. He landed on the bed and walked slowly up the curves of her body. Then he collapsed himself and slipped under the covers. He grew brighter; I saw the light working its way up from her feet. I

wondered if a part of her was liking it—he'd never been tender. She was very still.

When he reached her neck she turned the covers back slowly. He circled her throat and she arched her back and made the slightest sound. I jumped out and tossed the net, which opened to cover the entire room. He dimmed, pulsated, but could not turn himself off, so I had him. My mother rolled free and I dove and pinched closed the section that held him. He fluttered with fury and made tiny coos and squeaks. He emitted a sticky, smelly goo. My mother turned on the light, and I held my empty whiskey bottle, squeezed his fragile body to fit him in. Once inside, his wings beat the glass violently, and the short chirping could only be the accumulated curses of his lifetime.

My mother studied him behind glass, and I stood on the bed to treat him to a little of the Moth Man dance, but I was rusty, and too old; my knees cracked and my legs cramped, and one of my enthusiastic kick-turns sent me crashing to the floor. My wings were broken.

"There," my mother said. "Take him home with you."

I put the bottle on my dresser. Already his wings drooped, looking more like a colorful, shiny cape that Liberace might wear. His light was going out. He hung his head and tears dripped to the bottom of the bottle. His flickering put me to sleep, like the night-light he never let me have: he believed real men slept in the dark, but it had made me afraid. Now I felt peace.

In the morning his eyes were closed. His face had changed, too, no longer showing anger. I knew he was gone. I'd preserve him in this bottle.

* * *

"I'm terribly sick," my mother said. "You have to take me to the hospital."

Her belly was huge and tight. The doctor did a CT scan, which showed, "Hundreds, maybe thousands, of small tumors." He gave us the card for an oncologist, and we left.

"Your father had that *thing* in me," she said, on the way home. "I feel these things moving. They are not tumors. They are cocoons!"

She gave birth to a roomful of moths, most in my father's colors, others black or tan with the eyespots, some white, all with their light inside which pulsed rapidly, tiny beating hearts. Their bodies were furry, the heads male or female baby versions of me. My brothers and sisters settled on every surface, covered both of us, and softly vibrated.

I enjoyed it, but my mother said, "Creepy! Get them off!"

"I love it."

"Then take them home with you."

"It's a miracle."

"Take them!"

So I did. They clung to me, no one left behind, and I walked home. I started spinning on the sidewalk, doing a little Gene Kelly dance. It was dark and their lights left trails. I could make this work as a routine. I could make money.

I went to the studio, fixed my wings, and put on my costume. I set up my video camera, started the music, and performed the Moth Man routine. They clung to me throughout. When I watched it, it was better than I thought. They were all slowly beating their wings in unison, so it looked like my body was breathing. Oh, this was good. I looked at some of the faces. They were maturing rapidly, looking teenaged already, complete with my zits. I knew they wouldn't live long. What could I do? I should not have let my father die.

* * *

I was excited to upload my video to the internet. After I completed that, I put down bowls of water all over my apartment for them to drink through those long curved tubes of theirs. I opened a new whiskey bottle and had half to celebrate, and several of my siblings insisted on a capful. I told them they were too young to drink, and that they had responsibilities now, they had the dance. Barely audible, their mutterings were like a hum of electricity. It lulled me to sleep. They covered me like a blanket. I dreamed of being delicately probed, and of having every one of their faces pass before my eyes.

In the morning I discovered we had 100,000 hits! I jumped around. I made some coffee. Everyone zoomed around. I gave them coffee as well.

A man called and said he was from Letterman. I swore it was Sal from the studio, but he kept insisting, he wanted to meet and see the act, he had full control to book. I gave him directions downtown. Ten o' clock. They latched onto me and each other (I swear they were growing) and we were like a big tree floating down the sidewalk.

The agent was treated to the most amazing performance yet, because the moths were stronger and had figured things out, had applied their own nimble yet air-controlling brand of physics which rendered me their doll, flying and flopping me around. It was like they were taking after their father, who had always wanted to do this to me, make me the dancing fool, a weak tool of others. I was dizzy and breathless, and fell when they put me down. The agent clapped and thought it was awesome. He even used the term, "epic." "The way they pulsate," he said, "that kills me. How do they do that?" I assured him that I had built them, and it was all done with batteries. He shook his head. "Those faces. They really are ugly fucks."

* * *

I got my mother a ticket, but she said it was sick, she wouldn't be a part of it. "You always needed the spotlight," she said.

"Money, Mom."

On the day of Letterman, they got into my energy drink, and then I had to get them into boxes for the short Limo ride. They were going crazy in there. I kept one out to ride with me, the one whose face wasn't all weird; the one I decided was my sister. She was white, green-edged with green spots. She had a beautiful face, and black hair wound at her forehead. I named her Lily. I could tell she didn't want to hurt me. She perched on my shoulder and the driver eyed me nervously in the mirror as the boxes thumped.

It was a disaster. The first thing Dave said was, "Look, ladies and gentlemen. Mothra and friends." Something about him really pissed them off. They flew me about fifty miles an hour and we dive-bombed him so he had to go under the desk. Paul was still making up one of his stupid songs: "It's the moth man . . . the moth man . . ." We knocked his glasses off, chased him behind a curtain. A security guard came to spray us with a fire extinguisher, but just then Lily came from the wings and butted him between the eyes. The audience loved it, but we didn't stick around. They flew out the exit and carried me home.

It had taken a lot out of them. Their lights were fading, the pulses slowing. They lay on their backs in formation with their wings touching and put their feet in the air. Their faces shriveled like dried fruit.

"Lily?" I said. She was on my shoulder. Her wing brushed my face. I held her in my hand and noticed her face was not aging. "You're different," I said.

I was tired and felt pain in my chest. I lay on the bed and she fluttered onto my belly.

My chest throbbed and I couldn't breathe. I felt like I would vomit. Lily tried to fight what came out of my mouth, but it enveloped her

immediately in its darkness, and then wrapped her tightly in a sticky thread. I retched one after another, pitch-black moths, evil inbred mutants; some two-headed, some without heads; some with red eyes, clawed legs. They smacked my face with their wings, lashed at my throat.

I was about to lose consciousness when my mother appeared. In her hands she held my father's blackjack. She swung it like a baseball bat, her thin arms suddenly mighty, to avenge all the hurt in her life. She hit home runs, the creatures exploding off my wall in black dust. She yanked them from my throat one by one and bashed them until they were gone. Winded, she sat next to me. She looked at all her dead offspring on the floor and asked, "Is this over now?"

"Lily," I said.

"Who?"

"My sister." I extricated her from the stickiness, unfolded her wings. She opened her eyes. She had a tiny round mouth, which curled into a smile. Hesitantly, my mother rubbed her soft furry body.

"She's pretty," she said.

She helped me get some boxes and we stacked the other bodies in them. I wasn't sure what I'd do with them. Then she studied my father in the whiskey bottle. He was starting to fall apart, iridescent flakes of his wings covering the bottom. His face had collapsed, leaving what looked like an empty black hoodie. She tapped the glass. "Let's go get rid of him."

We walked by the river, Lily riding on my shoulder. It was a pleasant evening, and her wings stirred with the breeze. My mother shook the bottle, turning my father to dust. She emptied him into the water and tossed the bottle into a dumpster.

She took my arm and said, "Now. Let's get something to eat."

I jumped onto the concrete wall and danced.

GARY MOSHIMER's recent stories appear in *Frigg*, *Molotov Cocktail*, *Pentimento*, and *Camroc Press Review*.

On the cover:

“SERLING”

Buzz Siler

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