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## Editor's Note

Titles are hard. We know this from experience. The six pieces in our seventy-seventh issue vary widely in subject, style, and tone, but each of them has a well-chosen title that intrigues the reader without giving too much away. "My Papa, He Made Me a Frankenstein" sounds wonderfully like a B-horror country song. Who wouldn't want to know "What You Deserve"? (If it's this story, then you've been very, very good.) "At the Old Ball Game" misdirects expectations by appropriating a familiar refrain from Americana. "Omen" lays on the vague dread, while "How They Lost Us" simultaneously raises questions and promises answers. Finally, "Everything that Matters in Life and Death" goes all philosophical on us.

— Laura Garrison

# My Papa, He Made Me a Frankenstein

Steve Sibra

My Papa said, "Boy, you are worthless. I am going to remake you now." I was probably eleven or twelve and I don't know what he expected, but I sure wasn't it. I fed the dog and took out the trash but I didn't break down doors, I didn't frighten strangers. I did run from burning torches, but I guess that wasn't enough.

So my Papa, he says, "Okay Boy, here we go," and he gets me by the back of the head and he drowns me in a bucket of rusty nuts and bolts. "I keep these around just for this sort of thing," he says, and then he whistles while he holds my head down in the dust and old spent metal. I kick and thrash, but it's no good; couple of hex heads and a carriage bolt went down my throat, some screws and washers jammed in my nostrils.

Sure enough after a while I'm not struggling no more and I am dead and limp in his hands.

"Hey, Myrna!" he calls out to my Mom. "The Boy's dead, wanna come see?" But she be dead as well and no answer. Not a problem for my Papa.

"Let's see, what's next? Oh yeah—electrocution." He has to talk to himself now. He drags my corpse to the garage and starts hooking me up to the car battery with jumper cables. He gets a loaf of bread out of the freezer and eats it, bag and all, crunching. I am not sure if this is part of the process but oh well, that's my Papa for you.

He is working it out in his mind. "All right, it's red positive, black negative. Red positive, black negative. Yeah, that must be

right." He hooks the cables to the car battery and the other end to my nipples. This would hurt a lot if I was not dead already and beyond that sort of thing.

My Papa, he jumps in the Mercury, cranks her up. It takes a couple turns for the motor to catch but when she does—Whoop EEE! I am jolted back to life. Just like that.

Only it's not life, really. One of the bolts I swallowed is sticking out through the side of my neck. My skin is blue. My brain is working, sort of, but things seem all clunky. I can walk, but I lurch and my legs are stiff. For some reason my arms stick out straight in front of me.

And I can't talk. I can grunt and groan and go "Rrrrrrrh!" But I can't say real words anymore.

My Papa, he grins from ear to ear. The whole package, it is pleasing to him.

"Oh, Goodie!" he says and claps his hands. "Now you can earn your keep! You are a real nasty looking little monster, Boy. Let's get you dressed for success and we will turn you loose on the villagers! Do you feel hungry? Feel like eating a raw pig?"

I am trying, but I no longer seem to understand what a raw pig is. For me the jury is still out on whether this is better. But my Papa, he is happy. He is beyond happy. So I guess it's all good. I wonder if I have to go back to school on Monday or if that's all done with now too. I feel like turning my old playhouse into a windmill. I don't get it, but I guess I will just go with it.

I have a strong urge to find a mud puddle and look at my reflection.

**STEVE SIBRA** grew up on a farm in Eastern Montana near a town of less than eight hundred people. As a boy his job was taking care of the chicken coop. He now lives in Seattle WA where he has made a living for the past thirty-five years buying and selling old comic books. His work has appeared in, or is forthcoming from, publications such as *Shattered Wig Review*, *NRG*, *Crab Fat Literary Magazine*, *13 Myna Birds*, *Hollow*, *Down in the Dirt*, and others.



# What You Deserve

Tabitha Pearson

Parents would rather see measles-riddled corpses than see me try and say hello, or curl ribbon, or jog. Being autistic is almost as humiliating as working in a deli.

"I'm ready to try again," I say. I wash chicken blood off my arms.

"This time, try to look them in the eye," says Andrew.

"If you make your chicken into a combo, you'll save money and get an extra piece," he says to a customer. I stare at her, taking in every detail of her eyes and face, and can't speak.

As the delighted lady turns away, I itch my hairnet.

"You'll get it next time," says Andrew.

For a few more hours I fry chicken, put whole chickens in the oven, package chickens, and clean inches of grease off chicken pans with steel wool and a dishwasher that accepts one pan at a time. Andrew and Nick are delighted that I'm small enough to reach the part in the top that pops off every third wash. I can also reach the chicken parts that fall under the counter.

"Hey Abbi?" says David as I make my way past him pulling a cart with a broken wheel. "We push carts, we don't pull them." His voice is sing-song and he makes a pushing motion. I wonder if he thinks I'll just run down the aisles flapping my arms.

"Look at her for just a few seconds," says Andrew when the next customer comes, and I force myself to. He tells me to ask her how she is, ask what kind of meat she likes, and wrap it up for her.

I'm trembling so bad at the end that my gloves get stuck in her sticker and Andrew has to rip them off.

Nick passes and laughs. "Those gloves are crazy big on you. You'll get the hang of it." He gets a notebook out of his pocket, where I know he keeps a book of rhymes that he raps to. I glumly wonder if my customer service skills will be a topic.

Andrew suddenly pushes me into the freezer. Whole chickens lay on trays of blood, and bins of raw mixed chicken parts are stacked to the ceiling. We can't wash the scent off ourselves.

Our manager comes in and starts screaming at Andrew that a customer has complained about us up front. He's calm, apologetic, and his blue eyes glance for a moment to the freezer door where I'm concealed.

Nick and I leave Andrew and go on break.

"Do you think I should go back to school?" asks Nick as we punch out.

He takes off his hairnet and flings it above my head. It lands in the basket behind me.

"Three points!" he crows.

"Yeah, it'd be good for you," I tell him.

"I want to make enough to live on, by myself," he says.

Nick is an efficient cook, but his long arms are stretched with scars.

"But you gotta really concentrate on school," he says, catching my gaze. "It costs money, too."

He sits at the table, and I sit beside him and remove my hairnet and filthy apron. The dim breakroom smells like the toilets that are

on the other side of the wall, and we can always hear at least one toilet flushing.

“You’ll have enough money someday,” I say.

“Every moment in our lives is just a repeat of something that’s already happened,” he says.

Andrew comes in and gets a drink from his locker. He smiles and says hey to Nick and nods to me. I look at him like I’m Lenny and he’s a rabbit I want to pet. He leaves again and Nick glances up from his rhyme book.

“You gotta tell him,” he says.

I scowl fiercely at Nick, but otherwise ignore him and begin to re-tie my hair, and he smiles.

“With your hair down, you look like Jennifer Lawrence. Everyone is just a repeat of someone else. You even have the same problems as someone somewhere else. That’s why I hear a different voice when you talk. It’s someone with the same life as you.”

“Maybe, but the person with my voice probably has different genetics.”

“Andrew is nice.”

“They all think they’re nice,” I mutter. “Nice is not good.”

When we’ve returned to the deli and put our hairnets and aprons on, I manage to stutter out “Eggs or cheese on your burrito?” to the next customer. Beside me, Nick is enthusiastically telling another girl one of his theories on how positive people attract positive outcomes. When they leave, Nick grins at me.

“She was kind of pretty.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” I say, putting another burrito in the oven. “Though I do notice that when the girls from the beauty school come over, you’re mysteriously over here helping me, but when the senior citizen bus comes you’re still in the back!”

“That’s not true!” he protests. I hand the burrito to my pharmacist.

Ten minutes ago I picked up my birth control and she called out to me to use condoms. Three days ago when I got my anxiety medicine she empathetically said to be careful with it around equipment, like deli equipment.

“You’re getting better with customers,” he says.

I don’t say anything, just continue to roll up meat. Every day feels like kindergarten, like I’m trying to stack blocks with the other children and I already do it wrong.

“I mean that in the best possible way,” he adds. “I got to go now, my mom is visiting. Bye Abbi, Bye Andrew.”

“You too,” I say.

He pauses by the panini case and laughs.

“You know what I meant!”

I know Andrew’s here, but why does he have to come in while I’m sobbing in the cooler, my granny panties showing as I try and reach turkey on the top shelf? After deciding not to comment on this, he asks if I’ve seen his salad kit and I frantically stutter that I’m trying to help a customer. I’m busy wishing there was an island for people like me when Nick passes me in normal clothes.

“Wow, I’ve never seen you wearing clothes!” I say.

Andrew touches my arm softly when I get back to the chicken counter, and I jump and feel nauseous and scamper a few feet away like Gollum, (he’s touccchhhhed us, preciousss!), but his touch is just to direct my attention to a middle-aged woman at the counter. He hands me chicken tongs. He doesn’t say anything when I don’t look her in the eye.

“You go to school?” asks the luckily nice lady. I tell her I already have a degree.

“Honey!” she laughs. “What did you do to deserve this?”

She gets her chicken. I stare at Andrew; he must have heard. He looks back at me for a moment with some concern (I'm rooted to the spot holding greasy chicken tongs and struggling with speech), then he turns and helps the next customer with a smile. In the back, the dishwasher clunks to a stop as the piece pops off.

I go to help with the dishwasher and bump into Chris, who directs me on how to give a better high five when someone puts their hand up. With the dishwasher attended to and Chris out front, Andrew and I fall to packaging old expired chicken to sell, because people on food stamps can't get hot food.

I ask Andrew what he did to deserve it.

"My grandmother raised me, and I have to be home in the day to take care of her so she can live on her own. I'm almost finished with school."

We package chicken, get chicken grease off the floor, and season chicken for the next day.

As we leave after emptying chicken from the drains, David comes in. David usually shops on company time and gives himself discounts. He doesn't season chicken for the morning shift, and says nothing is important even when we have a long line.

"See you, fatass," he says.

Andrew and I glance at each other. We don't really want to know whom he's referring to.

We take off our aprons and hairnets.

"Listen," Andrew says as we get to our separate cars. There's a long pause where I look anywhere but at him.

"I'd like to take you out to dinner," he says finally.

"No," I say.

"Look at me," he says. I look up unwillingly. I can meet his eyes for only a second, and he reaches for my face, slowly, and supports it so I can look longer if I want. But I close my eyes because I smell so much like chicken. I rest there for a minute before pulling away.

"I don't deserve this."

"The meat delivery guy is a huge asshole," Shaylynnne says. "Sorry your order got messed up, dickhead, but chill. Hey Abbi, go get the load from him, will you?"

The load is several hundred pounds of meat, chicken, vegetables, and salad to put away.

Meat delivery man hairless, which is probably desirable because there's a bin of rotting meat next to our supplies, and if I was a butcher I'd be naked to the bone from the fumes.

I stare at the ground and ask him how it's going.

"Not too good, we're behind schedule. I just hate when this gets mixed up. Can I help you cart this back?"

He offers me a cart, helps me load a few boxes of chicken, and gives me a smile that shows all of his teeth at once, like a chimp.

Shay is still talking about him when I get back.

"So I told that dick, in my nicest voice, 'sorry about that', and he shut up."

She goes to take her first break again. I notice she hasn't done any of her work preparing food or doing dishes.

She comes back coughing.

"No!" Shouts an eighty-year-old woman. "Not that piece of chicken! THAT one." She points at an identical piece of chicken. Sweat pours off me as I rifle through a three-foot pile of chicken on my tiptoes.

"Sorry for being such a dick," a man apologizes after leaving me in tears because we're out of coleslaw.

A teenage boy whistles to get my attention, like I'm a dog.

A manager yells at me Monday for giving an old man in a wheelchair a shrimp sample. Tuesday, for putting the wrong price on a box of food, she wonders loudly in front of a mom and baby daughter what I'll do with my life if I can't even work here.

"Can't you stuff an extra one in for me?" A guy asks. He smirks at his friends.

I don't even blink.

"I've been stuffing them in all day. I can actually fit two."

"Well, what's in them?"

"They're chicken egg rolls."

"What else?"

I tell them vegetables, but I've never made the Chinese food and the cook is gone, so I apologize that I'm not entirely sure.

One of them smiles at me, he's missing a tooth and it's been replaced with a rotted-out di.

"Don't you know anything, you stupid bitch?"

"Hey," says Shay sharply, coming back from another break.

"You can't talk to us like that. Get out."

"I'll complain to your manager."

"Do it."

They leave, and she slaps me on the back.

"Don't let them get to you."

There's a saying hung above our lockers in the break room.

Customers won't forget how you make them feel.

Aurora started yesterday, and as I'm shredding whole chickens and throwing away the dark meat, I hear her cry out again and a fresh line of blood coats her hands.

We have to go up to the counter to help customers, and pull fried chicken out, and baked chicken out, and keep up with the chicken shredding and rib packaging. Aurora does each task about 30 seconds each and sings snatches of songs. The same songs loop over the speakers. I'll be hearing "Can't Help Falling in Love With You" and an advertisement for avocados about fifty more times before I go home.

"Can you believe these satanic packages?" she says, eyes streaming as she rinses the cuts.

A few customers come, and she bounces over to help them, and I follow more slowly.

"Out of the way!" she says, hip checking me as we bump into each other behind the counter.

A manager has already come by once tonight and told me to be more bubbly because customers don't expect deli workers to be tired and sad, especially at 6 p.m.

When they leave we go back to ribs and chicken, and I glance at Andrew, who is doing dishes that go up to the ceiling. He hasn't talked to me all day, except once to tell me to clean out a drain, and another time to keep a tub of pig blood from falling on me (Carrie-style).

"You've got those stickers on you again," says Aurora, ripping about six off my pants. Watching me with the sticker roll is a fine motor control nightmare.

"Hey, it's better than yesterday, when they were all over your butt," she says.

"Andrew didn't tell me they were on my butt!" I say indignantly.



He's leaning over a huge tray of whole chickens, but even from behind he's turned red.

"We need a big strong man to lift the chickens." Aurora winks at him.

He mutters that he has to go to the bathroom.

"Make friends!" she calls after him. I watch him leave for so long that Aurora nudges me.

"To think I used to like ribs," Aurora says. She's pulled out the chickens and left them on the counter, so I package them.

"What do you mean, make friends?" I ask her, puzzled.

"I make friends wherever I go."

"What did you do to deserve this?" I ask as she applies the tape again.

She smiles at me.

"I want to work here."

The slicer at the deli has a warning sticker, alarmingly, of a hand with all of the fingers severed above the third joint, akin to setting it to the widest setting, putting your hand in as far as it will go, and using the other hand to turn it on high. But when I know Andrew will be coming, I have to turn it off and do something else so I won't accidentally do just that.

I'm closing with David, and he makes me filter the oil in the fryer, but when it makes a loud sound I jump and burn my hand. I hear him mention Valentine's Day is the same day as his girlfriend's birthday, so he's "double screwed." I stare at him intently and wonder how any girl could look at him without vomiting onto themselves and then him.

“Use the scraper,” he says. I kneel on the floor and he stands over me with his legs apart. I look at the floor, layered with chicken wing stains.

“I’m sorry,” I say, “I don’t like the scraper. It’s too loud.”

He grabs it from me and scrapes it down the side of the fryer. It screeches like biting into foil.

“Stop!”

“Just ignore it,” he says, continuing to scrape. “I just ignore the sound.” As I stagger up to run away, he shouts that he’ll get the manager if I do, and she wouldn’t like to know how bad I am at the fryer.

“Here she comes now,” he says with satisfaction as we hear footsteps. But it’s just Andrew.

“She’d also probably like to know you steal from the food counter,” he says. He offers me a hand and I take it, and he takes me to the sink and runs my burned hand under the cool water. We go to the breakroom.

“I don’t need you to save me,” I snap the moment David is out of earshot.

He doesn’t say anything, just gets the first aid kit and helps treat and wrap up my hand.

I can still hear everything. Whole chickens getting slammed into an oven, Aurora crying out as the packages slice her hand, the scraper going down the side of the fryer. I can hear bitch and hurry up and you can’t even do this, you’re worthless.

Touch is almost as painful as sound, but before we go back and put our hairnets and aprons on, I gingerly sit in a rickety chair beside him and touch his shoulder briefly, and he puts an arm around me as Aurora might. I put my head on his shoulder and

take his hand. He kisses me and I close my eyes. I whisper that I'm sorry.

"Take out the trash for me would you, before I get yelled at again," says Aurora.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm going." I slice another piece of brie for a sandwich, remove my gloves, and drag the trash out of the bin.

She briefly rests her hands on my shoulders and I don't shrug away from them.

"Have I ever told you you're the best?"

I tell her to get out of here and get her bus before she's trapped like the rest of us.

As I drag the trash to the cart, I pass a group of three coworkers talking about an order for 70 pieces of chicken they've just had to refund because there was no record of it.

"Oh, who do we hate?" I ask them.

"The manager."

"Oh yes, I've heard that before." I continue past them around the corner and sign a few items off Aurora's checklist for the brie and trash.

"And I had to work with Nick again this morning," I hear my nice shift lead say. "He's so annoying."

I frown at my checklist.

"Don't let him get to you," says David with a laugh, "He's actually crazy, with his schizophrenia. You don't want to see him off his meds."

"Well..." says Chris, "I guess there's different degrees, and we don't know much about mental health."

“Trust me,” says David. “He’s definitely fucking crazy enough to be on meds.”

“Yeah, haven’t you seen him get crazy about his rapping? And all that stuff about reality and the voices? He’d be fucked up without them.”

I look around the corner with the clipboard and glare at David. I consider beating him to death with it, but I always hate when autistic people are on the news for rampages.

Then I look uncertainly at my nice shift leader who covered for me once when I iced over all the freezers.

So I don’t say anything to them, like that they should drop dead, or that the voices in MY head were telling me that they were assholes, or that they should shut the fuck up. I just go back to making sandwiches.

Aurora left me a dripping pesto sandwich, and I’m on break eating it when Chris sits at the table next to me. His girlfriend comes in a moment later and I try not to stare at her too much. I mean, Chris is the nicest guy I’ve ever met, but she’s drop-dead gorgeous. I read my book but I can still hear their conversation. He asks her if her work was going ok, and she hands him a piece of paper.

“Work was fine, but they just sent the final notice for our power bill.”

“I know, I paid it just a minute ago. But we’re still going to need toothpaste this week.”

“Well, and don’t forget, we need to get formula.”

Under the pretext of looking out the window, I steal a glance at Chris’s face, which is half-buried in his hands.

I spend all week dropping wraps and sandwiches, and I'm a mess interacting with customers. My motor skills on the cash register and stocking day deserve their own autistic deli worker comic strip. Chris has helped me every day with every one of these things, and he tells me I'm good and not to worry about it. He even let me and Aurora share an unauthorized slice of cantaloupe behind the freezer while he did dishes. I've never seen Chris frown before.

There's no trace of a smile on his face now. But she puts a hand on his arm, and it reappears quickly.

"It's been a hard month, but we'll be ok."

I wait until he kisses her goodbye, then I take out my last Alexander Hamilton and stare at it, before saying goodbye and slipping it into his locker.

"I'm going to be a pharmacist," Nick announces to the breakroom. We look up from our chairs set around the crumbling folding tables.

"Dude, that costs a lot of money," says David. A middle-aged manager just shakes her head and goes back to eating an entire six-pack of muffins.

When we get back from lunch, we both put on our hairnets. Nick stops me as I'm weighing chicken.

"Do you..." he lowers his voice, and glances around to make sure nobody can hear us.

"Do you think I can do it?" he asks quietly. He clutches at his fried chicken container, and his rhyme notebook is out. He's staring at me.

"You can do anything you try to do, Nick," I say.

**TABITHA PEARSON** is an autistic adult who strives to be high functioning. Her life's work is in the service industry making people sandwiches. She lives in Oregon with her cats and has taken writing classes at Oregon State University.

# At the Old Ball Game

James Wade

It wouldn't have been our national pastime if I didn't get to eat some peanuts and see an octopus throw a whirly-wowzer. That's all I could think about. I had taken care of the peanuts early on. I'm a good planner. "Always thinking ahead," that's what my birth mother probably could have said once.

While the fellas and the redfish were taking turns swinging the sticks and getting loose, I dodged a few soul-suckers who were prowling around above the mezzanine on my way to buy somewhere between one and thirty-seven pounds of peanuts—unshelled.

I was pretty happy with myself when I made it back to my seat with at least one shoe and a foam finger that said "we're #4." Problem was, the baby on the pitcher's mound was fooling all the batters on the home team with his dribble ball, and I was getting worried the octopus wouldn't be needed.

After twenty-four innings, it looked like the tables might turn. Slammin' Sammy Magoo drew a walk on eight straight pitches, and I thought maybe the baby needed a nap or his bah-bah.

Turned out it was a con job.

As soon as Sammy took his lead off the first-base beanbag chair, the horned-monster playing second opened its jowls and swallowed him whole. I was outraged, but fair is fair. Although, I'm pretty sure I saw that cocky fucking baby wink at the girl that would've been my girlfriend if a lot of things had happened differently or at all.

I don't bite my nails anymore, maybe you've heard. Instead, nervous as I was, I freed the peanuts from their casing and gnawed on the shells. I couldn't breathe, and I wasn't sure if it was because the peanut pile was moving past my neck, or because the corporation that sponsored the seats in the left field had gone belly up and demolished the grandstand in the thirty-second inning with those poor bastards still sitting there. I was down the third-base line, obviously, but now the whole ballpark was filled with dust and screams.

People were losing their shit. The Commissioner himself had to bring out the nine-fingered glove worn by Digits Donaldson during the epic Series to End All Series. That pretty much restored order.

My father passed away sometime before the thirty-seventh-inning-stretch, which was a disappointment because I can't drive stick and we were in his truck. We had a small funeral near the cotton-candy machine. Many of the people in our section came for a minute or two, but they left again after they got their cotton candy.

The crowd roared when the baby turned two-years-old and was thereby ineligible to continue pitching. We were all thinking the same thing: octopus time, and are those the good Russians or the bad ones?

They were the good ones, so the teams put their broken bats away and continued the game.

Unfortunately, the octopus didn't crawl in from the bullpen.

Instead, the hot dog vendor changed uniforms and became the new ace. It was a true rags-to-riches story, played out in about twelve minutes, so the crowd cheered and someone made a movie that won all the awards a few innings later.



I didn't pay to see it on the jumbotron. I was here for two things and two things only: peanut shells and the octopus. And it looked like I was running low on shells.

**JAMES WADE** lives in Austin, Texas, where he writes fiction for his wife and two dogs. His wife is encouraging, but the dogs remain unimpressed. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Skylark Review*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *After the Pause*, *Potluck Magazine*, *Through the Gaps*, *Yellow Chair Review*, *Typehouse Magazine*, and *The J.J. Outré Review*. Visit him at [www.jameswadewriter.com](http://www.jameswadewriter.com)

# Omen

Christopher Morgan

The villagers took hammers  
to the black mountain.  
Broke the granite  
until it was barely alive.  
Made an example  
of its rocky skin, carried  
home in suitcases.

Just after the air came alive  
with hunger. Birds fell  
in clumps, softly pattering  
the ground. Deer shrieked,  
terrified whistles. Vegetables  
and fenced fruit rotted. Wells  
sourred. Cattle dropped  
where they stood. Eyes sprouted  
where clouds had been.  
It was a bad night  
for sunsets—that night  
it almost didn't happen.  
The sky locked its gaze  
upon the villagers  
during the whole procession.  
Atop the earth's ridged spines,  
the town began to rumble.  
The suitcases poured forth stones.  
And each stone sought out a man.

**CHRISTOPHER MORGAN** is the author of “Shadow Songs” (Sad Spell Press 2015) and the Co-Manager of *Nostrovia! Press*. He grew up in Detroit and the Bible Belt of Georgia, before settling in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he received his M.A. in Creative Writing and American Lit. The Reviews Coordinator for *Alien Mouth*, he also edits for *tNY Press* and *Arroyo Literary Review*. He loves fables, hiking in the redwoods, and happy hour margaritas.

## How They Lost Us

Eleanor Gallagher

We plotted the shape of our rebellion in the back of the bus on the last day of Billy's suspension.

"We could put packs of gum in all *their* desks." This was my brilliant idea.

"Shut up, Tattle-tale."

It had been my nickname since kindergarten. I couldn't help it; I thought lying to the nuns was the same as lying to God. When they pinned me with that look—and they had learned pretty quickly that I was the weak link—I blurted it out, whatever it was.

What the other kids didn't know that day was that a crack had already appeared for me between God and the nuns. I no longer trusted their infallibility, those wives of Christ. I was starting to think their marriage might be more like my parents', where my dad punished me for doing things that only made my mom laugh. How could Jesus have agreed with what they did to Billy?

At St. Ambrose, the rule against chewing gum was enforced as if the stuff were the Devil's own invention. Violators were made to clean all the bathrooms in the school; it'd take you a whole day and at the end of it, you'd be wet, smelly, and quite sure you never needed to chew gum at school again. I could buy that God didn't want us to leave it under the desks, making work for the janitors, dirtying up His Creation. And of course he didn't want us to be distracted from our lessons. But why would He care about gum that wasn't being chewed?

Last week, Billy Flynn had tested the letter of the law by keeping an unopened pack in his desk, and he got away with it for a week until Sister Elizabeth found it and dragged him by his ear to the Mother Superior. He protested that he wasn't actually *chewing* gum, but Mother Superior caught him on a grammatical technicality, explaining that chewing was a participle and an adjective, not a verb, and did he need to repeat Sister John the Baptist's English class? Billy was suspended for a week, which to us was a crime given what Billy faced at home. Whether the nuns didn't know or thought a few beatings would do him good we never knew. All we knew was that such injustice made rebellion requisite.

It was the new girl, April, who told us it wasn't open revolt that we wanted, but to get away with something right under their noses.

"That way you can look at them every day and know that they don't know."

April was exotic, with a name from the calendar instead of the Bible, and she had lived in Hawaii, a place we thought was only for vacations. Her hair stuck out from her head like spun sugar. I sat behind her on the bus and reported eight distinct shades, from silver to copper to ash to something like sparkly dust.

"I'll be the first," she said. We listened as she outlined the three steps. First, the size had to be impressive. Anyone could blow a tiny bubble and suck it back in before someone noticed. That was not going to give us the thrill we were looking for. "It must obscure the eyes," said April. We held our fingers in front of our faces, to see how big the bubble would have to be. We said we didn't believe a bubble could get that big, so she showed us the meaty chunks of

gum she would use, like bites of flesh.

"And it can't pop in your face, you have to suck it back in all the way." A lot of us didn't know this could be done either. She said it would help prevent us getting caught, which was the most important step of all. "No one can tell, and if they do, they'll have to be the next one to try it." I could feel all their eyes on me.

"Tomorrow at lunch," she said. "Be sure Billy saves me a seat."

We sat at our usual tables in the sea of the lunchroom. The nuns stayed on the edges, only wading in if there was trouble. Ten minutes before the bell, April said "Ready?" to Billy, who was her lookout. The frozen look he'd returned to school with had vanished when we'd told him about our revenge. April had been chewing the gum all lunch to get it ready, pretending to eat her sandwich while slipping me pinched-off pieces under the table.

Faster than we would have believed, the bubble was huge. It grew past her nose. Her dirty blonde curls splayed out like a degenerate halo, looking more unruly than usual against this fat forbidden thing she was making for us.

"Blow, blow, blow," rose up softly from the surrounding tables and we all heard the hiss of her breath inside the bubble, echoed by our own intakes and sighs. We were one with that bubble and the girl behind it. I fought the urge to check if any nuns were coming; the effort cramped my stomach.

Another hiss and Billy said, "One down. Do it. Now." We'd all seen the thin places that could spell doom. April's mouth opened and she began reversing course, the trickiest part of all. At the edges of our eyes we felt the nuns converging. Had they seen or did their preternatural sense for trouble draw them?

"Hurry, April," someone whispered but she was too good or too

wicked to panic. We saw her unwavering focus when her eyes came back into view crossed and pinned to the orb as she tipped her head back to keep it from catching on her nose. How did she not run out of breath? I held mine so tight, it hurt when I let go, so relieved to hear the soft pops like a muffled gun and see it suddenly gone behind her pursed lips. "Got Two," whispered Billy, and some of us saw her throat move just before Sister Patrick's black presence drew all our attention.

Our attention, but not our eyes, because Sister Patrick was the best of all of them—she could see a lie before it formed on your lips. She said nothing, which told us she hadn't seen. She was waiting for a confession. We fell silent, finishing our lunches, crumpling our trash. April picked up her apple and ate it bite by bite as if she had all day to enjoy it.

By now the tables around us had fallen into the same trap with their respective nuns and it was a game of chicken or hide-and-seek between equally determined competitors. My heart was thudding—we had not talked about how to accomplish Step 3; we had been too enthralled with April's part: how she would do it, if she could do it, what the nuns would do to her if she didn't. I knew I had to keep my mouth shut, and even though my blood rushed, my lips didn't twitch. Someone surely would have broken open but God bless Mary O'Malley for knowing what to do.

She grabbed the apple from her brother Peter's hand and took a huge bite. He yelled HEY and slugged her in the arm, and then Mary kicked Rachel Wiggins under the table and Rachel emitted her signature siren wail—and with this familiar signal of chaos, we knew how we could win. Violence was officially punishable, but the nuns generally ignored it as long as there wasn't too much

blood. I'll give them that: they seemed to recognize the hypocrisy of punishing us for what they did in the name of God every day.

Sluggings erupted around the tables and the nuns flew into a tizzy trying to figure out what was going on. What a relief to let out some of our energy, to make noises which weren't confessions but which loosened our throats. The power of our majority filled us. Maybe this thrill was proof they had been right about gum all along.

I snuck a peek at Sister Patrick and her eyes were waiting for me as they always were. Instead of seeing God, though, I saw inside that nun to the ordinary woman she was. She crunched her eyebrows in a renewed effort to nail me, but I held our stare just long enough to let her know she would never again penetrate me. When I looked away, I slammed my open palm on the table to punctuate the point. "Three," I said.

April, who had seen it all between Sister Patrick and me, held her half-eaten apple across the table and I took it like it was communion. I saw a tiny string of bright bubble pink caught in the chapped skin of her lip, which stretched to the breaking point as she grinned at me like the sun.

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# Everything That Matters in Life and Death

Christopher Allen

Why would anyone really experiencing a matter of life or death call the 911 center—where we save the world one call at a time—and say “We’re experiencing a matter of life or death”? These people scream something like “Oh fuck! My baby!” and “Blood! Blood! Everywhere!” Not “We’re experiencing a matter of ya-dee-ya”. The caller didn’t even request assistance or give me an address. It popped up on the screen; that’s how they found this matter of life or death, which by the time they got there was only the latter.

If the caller had screamed for dear life or screamed in the throes of death—if she’d screamed—I’d be able to file this one away, but her calm alto dogs me, like a serial killer after she’s taken selfies with the splattered walls and placed the polished cleaver back into the knife drawer.

My dreams are all matters of life or death now, which, according to the company psychologist, are *unresolved* matters of life or death: when life becomes more dying than living, whether the release of dying is worth all this trouble. That kind of stuff. The company psychologist has a reputation for being a whiny existentialist. How, I ask him, can the dreams of a 911 operator be about anything but death? I don’t call death; death calls *me*. Every night now.

I’m manning an old-fashioned operator’s board. It’s lit up like Christmas in Alabama. I can’t reach the cables. My hands are tiny and blue. I’m a mouse. A blue one. One by one, the lights fade, the

board ices over. A woman whispers, "We're experiencing a matter of life or death."

Someone's dying and dying and dying. I'm needed. Four hundred tiny mouse claws crawl over my body. The mice scream-squeak "We are experiencing a matter of life or death!" I can't move, but my mind wheezes for help as the air thins and the mice fall dead, their hands limp but claws protracted, keening like mourning mothers.

I have the honor of giving the eulogy for each mouse who sacrificed its life in last night's dream. Colonies have died trying to wake me, to save the world one call at a time. My task tonight is to try to express, in hundreds of individually intimate ways, why life matters.

I cower, overshadowed by a statue of a blue mouse in some Old World square. The mouse is portly, made of hard plastic. His nose is cast to twitch, sniffing for the food he can't possibly have: he's bolted to the ground. He's not a warrior or a king; he's a gaudy eyesore still-life, a monument to the ridiculous *absurdity* of life. *My* life. And because no one is paying attention to anything I say or do, I climb onto his fat blue hard-plastic back and proclaim this big blue mouse to be everything that matters in life. And death.

**CHRISTOPHER ALLEN** is the author of *Conversations with S. Teri O'Type (a Satire)*. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Eclectica Magazine's 20<sup>th</sup>-Anniversary Best of Speculative Anthology*, *Night Train*, *Indiana Review* and others. Allen is the managing editor of *SmokeLong Quarterly* and lives in Germany.



ON THE COVER:

**"Nick and Nora"  
Allen Forrest**

Graphic artist and painter **ALLEN FORREST** was born in Canada and bred in the U.S. He has created illustrations and cover art for literary publications and books. He is the winner of the Leslie Jacoby Honor for Art at San Jose State University's Reed Magazine and his Bel Red painting series is part of the Bellevue College Foundation's permanent art collection.

Forrest's expressive drawing and painting style is a mix of avant-garde expressionism and post-Impressionist elements reminiscent of van Gogh, creating emotion on canvas.

