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Online Editor: Laura Garrison

Production Editor: Samuel Snoek-Brown

Associate Editor: Monica Rodriguez

Readers: Rebecca Vaccaro, Amanda Chiado

Founding Editor/Publisher: Eirik Gumeny

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Table of Contents:

Editor’s Note	3
Dry Bucket, Kristina Mottla	4
The Binge Watcher, Jonathan Howell	9
Jezebel Behind the Cosmetics Counter at Macys, Allison Thorpe	19
Dr. Bruce, Z.Z. Boone	21

Editor's Note

You know how sometimes you get up for a glass of water in the middle of the night and catch a glimpse of yourself in the bathroom mirror in the dim blue glow of the nightlight and realize you are looking at an alternate universe where everything is almost, but not quite, the same as it is in our world?

This issue has a lot of that feeling. There are three stories about ordinary people—a woman who never cries, a television enthusiast, and an insurance claims adjuster—who have extraordinary experiences, and one poem about an extraordinary person who works in that most ordinary of places, a department store.

— Laura Garrison

Dry Bucket

Kristina Mottla

Endings, beginnings, nights, mornings, they circled about my head, nipping each other's tails. Family left messages. Friends texted. Neighbors dubbed me Scary-Gal-in-Number-9.

The loss of my job, this time to the boss's niece, had turned me into a desert in bleak heat, anger sizzling along my skin, all mirages squashed. How many entry-level LA marketing positions were left for me to crack? The question kept my eyes drier than tinder; my cheeks sandpaper wracked by wind.

As an elderly woman in the supermarket line once said in my youth, tears are for people without strong bones.

Savings accounts ultimately dwindle for the unemployed, and so they did for me. Soon, the sliver of light beneath my door morphed from a flatline into a reprimand. I headed to the mall food court in response. There, years before, behind the counter of the family-owned Smoothieville, I had made my first paycheck, dumped my first boyfriend, lost my first job.

The mall food court ceiling dangled its cement-headed rays across my table. Around me, other groups-of-one settled in similarly, shoulders over their food or paperwork, eyes on their forks or smartphones, each of us baking in our own pans, each of us not thinking of ourselves as hot oil on the edge of popping out. I spent the next five minutes digging into my chicken teriyaki bowl, avoiding eye contact with Smoothieville and planning consecutive mall lunches, from tomorrow's veggie sub to next week's cobb salad, ready to map out the year, when an oddball woman plopped down across from me as if I'd been expecting her. Her dark brown, red-streaked hair burst from her head in tattered braids.

I took a bite of rice, eyeing her but not.

"You, Lyla, need a bridge," she said, leaning forward. Her wrinkles cut trenches beneath her eyes. "I knew it trying on shoes three floors down ten minutes ago."

Behind me a door opened to the mall patio and the smell of burgers and pasta and curry swirled about the food court on a new lease of wind, making a fragrant oddity (curry-burger-pasta?). And how did she know my name? "I'd like to eat my lunch alone, lady."

"Of course you would!" she hollered. A few patrons glared my way. She reached over and grabbed my hands, shaking the fork from my fingers. "Let me see them."

My hands in hers turned my sight into a desert. Suddenly our fleshy digits were miles and miles of bland sand, never-ending and never-beginning sand, heat blurring on the drab khaki tarp, change never on the horizon . . .

"Tut, tut, Lyla. You have misfortune roosting and you need me to *spook* it out." She said *spook* with a forward jerk of her shoulders, so I got hooked in her eyes. They sank deep as wells and pulled me down like a dry bucket in need of filling. Then her voice came soft and twinkly. "You will pay me, and I will save you for my own good."

I nodded, feeling cool inside those deep well eyes, cool as spring water, cool enough to feel a shock of pain coursing through her veins. The words fell out before I could catch them: "I will pay you, and you will save me for your own good."

The woman dropped my hands. "Well done," she said, passing me a paper slip. "Here's my address. Bring two hundred dollars tomorrow at noon."

As she left, her bare swollen feet padded across the tiled crumbly food court floor, her knee giving way every five steps or so and prompting the nearest patron to lift her back to standing. I decided it wouldn't hurt to bring the woman money to help, plus extra for shoes and a cane. Already I felt better than the months before.

* * *

Tears in my youth I mostly remember as streamlets down my cheeks, or disappearing pools in my palms, nothing that risked my vigor, my growing older. But after my mother shredded her business suits and said crying was for less than babies, after the supermarket woman told me about the tears and the bones, then I put the tears away for good.

This isn't a pity tale. Overall I'd been fed, sheltered, clothed my life's entirety. I knew I had it better than many, no matter I grew up latchkey, no matter teens called me Loose Lyla in high school, no matter I'd never been the prettiest, my nose a sliver too long and my eyes a degree too wide; no matter the world seemed to shove as hard as I shoved back.

The Hollywood Hills dipped and climbed as I drove through them, bushy foliage padding the front yards of bungalows, Tudors, modern mansions. The mall woman's cottage was especially hidden on its woodsy bend, although any passerby could see through the trees how its frame leaned as if with a bad back. The door knocker, a thick silver loop, boomed.

The woman from the mall opened the door and appeared behind the threshold. I must have looked puzzled, since she reached and patted my arm. "It's me, dear. Gadnes." Then she gestured to a woman beside her, a near twin. "My sister Borna." The sisters crossed to the front stoop, huddling next to me. Gadnes gestured to the side gate. "To the backyard, Lyla."

Borna clapped her hands together as I turned.

Spiny shrubs, willow trees, abundant grasses, wildflowers, the smell of them filled me like an unexpected but welcome visitor. A quaint garden bridge, its slats and ropes withering, spanned a barren ditch in the back corner.

"Stand in the middle of the bridge," Gadnes said.

Borna pointed and clapped at the request, and I didn't want to disappoint, not Borna especially, not the sister who'd lost her voice box in the trees and seemed to fancy me. ("An occupational hazard," Gadnes later said.) And so I stood in the center, peering at the dry ditch the size of a koi pond beneath, wondering whether the sisters would fill it, maybe even with a rock garden. That's when two slats and the ditch beneath them suddenly broke free and sent me falling until I caught myself. A mile of air now separated me and the ground; my hands gripped the bridge's ropy edge.

Far below, on land, a smattering of greenish creatures snapped at the air. From somewhere in the bushes, Gadnes shrieked, "Why!?" Then she came close and shook the bridge until one of my hands let go. "Why? Why?"

I shook my head, shifting my grip and bringing the free hand back to the rope. "What?" Words, like the clouds above curling in waves, crashing.

Gadnes whooped, "Wrong!" and threw her head back and laughed and laughed, until her mouth foamed and I thought she or I might vomit.

It was then my tear ducts felt as though they would bust open and let everything tumble out, my veins and heart valves, my job losses, my dry eyes, my parents and friends, my intestines, my nights, the issue of this woman Gadnes making a horror scene of me and not caring if I died. Then sweat streaked down like tears, down my temples, down my nose, down my cheeks like invisible roads, and what of my situation now?

"There, there," Gadnes said, coming close and pushing a strand of wet hair from my eye, "now don't you feel better?"

And Gadnes pulled me up, and Borna pulled me into her arms, and there I wept and wept until the koi ditch filled and the yard filled and Gadnes and Borna took my money and we were swimming together and diving like whales.

KRISTINA MOTTLA writes fiction and poetry. She has a BA and an MFA. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in such places as *Barnstorm*, *Hartskill Review*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *The Raintown Review*, and *Potomac Review*.

The Binge Watcher

Jonathan Howell

Franklin Paul sat on the couch barely aware that it was a clear night. He had one hand on his iPhone and another on the remote. Through the window the moon hung full and large with a bluish tint as if illuminated by a billion LEDs.

Franklin was not fat and not slim. He had a cherub-like quality that made him look younger than his true age. He felt young too, although he didn't exercise or play any sports. He preferred to be lying down, and if that was not possible, sitting.

He had slunk from the dining room to the couch that evening after dinner with his wife and child. His movements were even more efficient than usual as if he were conserving energy. He slowed down his breathing and widened his eyes to take in the bright pixels and deep digital blacks of the flat-screen television. It created a warmth from his toes to his brain. His wife went to tuck their daughter into bed, leaving Franklin alone in the TV room. It occurred to Franklin that he could watch the entire last season of *The Fuse* that night.

His job as a property manager allowed for some flexibility. Tomorrow he could sleep in and come in late. But it was more than the ability to sleep in or actual interest in the show that fueled his desire. He saw it as an Olympian intellectual feat in focus, a marathon of entertainment. After watching the entire season in one sitting, he was sure he would obtain some new revelation or understanding that would not be possible if he watched the show over a longer period of time; a binge-watching session would intensify his understanding of the complex series. He wanted to know how it worked.

Franklin put a pillow behind him and sat upright to stay awake and focused. He detested people who fell asleep watching shows, as if they were sleeping on the job. He planted his feet firmly on the ground, set the remote nearby on an arm rest, loaded up the Netflix

app on the television, and pulled up *The Fuse*, season three, a gritty detective procedural taking place in Oakland, California. The first episode focuses on a young man who goes to a party, buys some drugs, and overdoses. The wealthy, grieving parents are at his funeral, and in the background is Lydia, one of the show's main characters.

The episode ended, leaving Franklin intrigued. When the countdown appeared during the credits, Franklin clicked to skip to the next episode. Now, the show re-introduces the rest of the main characters: a male police detective named Brad, the police captain, a city councilman, and, of course, Lydia, a female private investigator hired by the family to figure out who sold the drugs that killed the son. The show cuts to Lydia losing focus while interviewing the dead boy's parents. It was a familiar story: good student, athlete, never did drugs before. Meanwhile, Brad is at the police station bored out of his mind typing an arrest report for a small-time robbery. The police chief drops a new case on his desk—the overdose death of the boy, the same case as Lydia.

Like the prior two seasons, these characters would find themselves in situations where they were forced to share information, work together, and deal with their sexual tension. When the second episode ended, Franklin's wife came down. It was just after 11 p.m., and she asked him if he was going to bed. Franklin told her he was not tired and planned to stay up late.

The Netflix menu showed a total of ten episodes, two down. Each episode was a little less than an hour long. If he watched the rest of the episodes, skipping credits, he would be done by around 7:00 a.m. He could sleep for two hours and be at work by 10:30. Franklin smiled. He was pleased with himself and his plan. The world was filled with amazing shows of such high quality, and he was lucky enough to experience it in the way it was intended: an unbroken stream of story. He again straightened himself and prepared for complete attention like a scholar opening a seminal text. For a brief flash, he imagined himself impressing colleagues and friends as he recounted the plot lines of each episode with great clarity and continuity. He clicked the

next episode. The male police detective, Brad, interviews people who were at the party and eventually arrests a teenager who is believed to have brought the drugs. Lydia finds out about the arrest and that Brad is now on the case. She gets upset with Brad for not telling her about the arrest earlier.

Franklin's phone vibrated. It was a text from a friend in his fantasy football league looking to gloat over some recent success. Franklin paused the show and began to type a message back before stopping himself. If he was ever going to get through the season tonight, he would have to cut out distractions. He put his phone on silent and placed it face down on the coffee table. He resumed the episode and watched as it cut to a city councilman working with local business leaders to push a pro-business initiative. The episode ends with Brad in the interrogation room with the drug-dealing teen. Lydia watches through a two-way mirror.

Franklin felt comfortable. The couch seemed softer, more luxurious. He felt awake, alive, and hungry for another episode. Netflix queued it up and counted down. Franklin waited eagerly. The binge watching was turning out to be as good as he expected. The sum of the episodes was greater than its parts.

Just before the next episode started, Franklin sprung out of the couch to get a coke. The cold can felt good in his hand. The pop and hiss when he opened it sounded crisp. It tasted sweeter. His senses were elevated. He felt more alive. These were signs, he knew. I love it when a plan comes together, Franklin thought.

The next episode delivered. The drug dealer confesses after an intense interrogation that includes some mild physical violence and light psychological torture. The drug is called Twilight, he tells him, a new synthetic compound not yet on any police or DEA radars. He's getting it from an employee at a chemical factory just outside the city. Lydia and Brad share an intimate moment and she lets it slip that she doesn't like her clients, the wealthy parents who didn't seem to care about their kid until he was dead. The relationship between Brad and

Lydia heats up and he tells her to stay out of the investigation because he is concerned for her. Of course Lydia doesn't take orders from anyone, man or woman. The episode ends with her going undercover as an employee of the chemical factory. Brad is completely unaware of where she is and unable to help if something were to happen.

Franklin nodded as the credits rolled. He had an urge to applaud Lydia for her tenacity but didn't want to make too much noise and wake his wife. With each rolling of the credits and the brief moment of reality between episodes, Franklin knew this level of tension and release, this level of entertainment, was only achievable through a marathon watching session. Spreading these episodes out over a month seemed criminal in comparison. If you were going to space it out like that, why even bother, Franklin thought, and he shook his head, certain of this profound truth.

The next episode opened with Lydia snooping around the factory. Within a few minutes, Franklin's stomach felt ill. He readjusted to maximize comfort but then hesitated. A slight nausea swept over him. Sugar, caffeine, carbonation, caramel coloring, liquid, something was upsetting his stomach. He paused Netflix to use the bathroom. He passed through the kitchen in the dark and groped along the wall until he found the light switch, then squinted when the light came and paused a moment to let his eyes adjust. He moved quickly to relieve himself. As he was standing in front of the toilet, he noticed the bathroom was not quite right. All the fixtures were there and in their right places, but things were missing. There was no mat in front of the tub or toilet. There was no hand soap. There was no towel. Even the little vase and fake flower his wife had put out were gone. Franklin was at first concerned, then shrugged it off.

He returned to the couch, pulled a blanket around himself, and settled in staring at the screen. He felt a bit unsure about what to do next. A general uneasiness still pressed upon him like the feeling of waking from a vivid dream. He rubbed his eyes, shook it off, and continued the episode. Franklin groped out around the coffee table for his drink but remembered that he had finished it.

The episode continued, flashing between Lydia as an undercover employee and Brad who is looking for her. He has some key information that has not been revealed. Franklin grew bored. The episode dragged and had no rhythm. It didn't maintain the tension he craved. The episode ends with Lydia about to open the door to a room where drugs are being stored. The camera fades to black and the credits roll.

Franklin leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. He loved the show. He loved talking about the show. He liked breaking down and analyzing the conflicts, characters, and the plot. He liked mulling over their problems. This episode, however, was undeniably underwhelming. As an avid watcher of television, though, he was unperturbed. Perhaps they had a lesser director handle this episode in the middle of the season. Franklin yawned and itched his stomach. He watched the next episode, which was equally underwhelming. It focused on the city councilman and his growing interest in the investigation. There was less action and more long-winded speeches between the councilman and the police chief.

Franklin grew weary and went to the kitchen and popped open a new diet coke hoping for that same enhancement of the senses he'd experienced earlier. Thunder clapped as he took a sip. Franklin stood in the kitchen, puzzled. He had to remind himself it was the middle of summer. Perhaps it was due to the humidity, he thought. Although he couldn't remember the last time there had been a storm this time of year. He walked to the kitchen window but couldn't see outside. The stars and moon were not visible. Earlier it had been a warm sunny day with clear skies. The storm brought a dense cloud cover. There was the faint sound of a drizzle. He put his hand against the glass and it was cold, almost icy. Franklin shivered and retreated to the warmth of the couch.

He sat back down just as the countdown was finishing and the next episode was beginning. He watched the opening sequence followed by a short recap of the previous episode. Before the recap was over, the

episode paused and a little spinning wheel appeared. Franklin bowed his head. This was the spinning Wheel of Delay. The wheel that told Franklin the Netflix inner workings were trying to solve some problem. The wheel then stopped. A message appeared on the screen. The connection to the Internet had been lost.

Franklin grunted angrily as he pulled himself out of the couch. He began a troubleshooting ritual. He turned off the television and disconnected the wifi receiver, counted to ten, and then put it back in. He walked over to the cable modem and router and did the same. When everything had happy blinking lights he turned the television back on and tried to restart the episode. The Netflix app loaded straight into the spinning wheel and then the error message. Franklin slammed his hand on the couch. He was going to call and find out what happened.

His cell phone wasn't on the coffee table where he thought he had left it. He found it on the kitchen counter near a pile of mail. One of the envelopes had been ripped open. It was an unemployment check addressed to him. He held the check, reading his name and the amount. The letters and numbers seemed to scramble in front of his eyes. He had never collected unemployment in his life. It was late, and it must be some misunderstanding. He put the check down and pulled up the cable company's website on his phone. It showed no outages. He dialed the customer service line and was told they were closed. However, there was an option to leave an emergency voicemail that would be forwarded to some late-night technician. Without delay, Franklin pushed the button to leave a message. Before he finished it, though, he heard a sound coming from the TV. He hung up the phone and went back out to the living room. The channel had changed and it was an infomercial for starting an Internet business.

Franklin took a few deep breaths and bowed his head. He would not let this stop his marathon session. He was determined. He looked at his phone and decided the screen was too small. However, he had an iPad with a cellular connection. He smiled, pleased with himself. He was not going to give up. He imagined himself as a famous explorer

crossing Antarctica experiencing hardships and persevering. Franklin took the iPad and fired up the Netflix app. He was back in business. It remembered where he had left off.

Once again Franklin made himself comfortable on the couch, pulled up the blanket and started to watch the show. The quality of the video was markedly degraded compared to the television. Cellular technology was just not the same as a cable into the television. The audio was also poor coming through the tiny speaker. Franklin made a point to find his headphones as soon as the episode was over.

In the show, Lydia goes into the storeroom, finds the drugs, and is nearly out of the building before she is caught by security. Fortunately, they think she is just a trespasser and don't know about her discovery. The cops arrest her, and Brad finds her in jail. All of this happens quickly, within the first twenty minutes. Then the episode makes a turn for the sappy. It becomes a feel-good Christmas episode. Among the decorations, mistletoe, and general cheeriness, Brad and Lydia admit their strong feelings for each other. Her arrest and subsequent release unlocked Brad's deeply buried feelings. The episode ends with Brad convincing the DA to drop any charges against Lydia, invoking the holiday spirit.

Franklin was not happy with this episode, and he was growing wearier of the season. He had been drawn to the show for its gritty realism. He liked the hard-charging attitude of the characters. He liked their inner tensions that were never really expressed but always present. This episode had destroyed much of that.

Franklin felt tired and weary. He yawned and blinked slowly. Perhaps it was time to call it a night, he thought.

He stood up to stretch and saw the countdown for the next episode. He watched as the numbers changed. One more episode he thought. Just take it one step at a time. He jumped a few times and punched the air like a shadow boxer. No, he thought, I am not going to quit.

He paused the countdown and went to the kitchen for something to drink. He felt a strong chill that made him shiver. He walked to the thermostat and saw that it was off. He tapped the screen a few times and shrugged. Something was wrong; no heat, no Internet. Franklin didn't want to think about it. He would be comfortable enough with the blanket.

In the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator, which was almost empty. A bottle of ketchup stood alone in the middle of a shelf. On another shelf was a shriveled-up orange next to a Styrofoam take-out box oozing green liquid. In one of the door shelves sat a can of Red Bull. He was sure he had seen more food there earlier. All the cokes were gone. He stood looking at the refrigerator, trying to process what he was seeing, cycling through memories. Hadn't his wife gone to the supermarket yesterday? Where had all the food gone? He looked at his watch but had difficulty reading the time. The numbers blurred together. He grabbed the Red Bull and drank it quickly before returning to the couch and resuming the countdown.

The next episode starts with Brad getting a tip from a confidential informant, a concerned businessman who saw suspicious activity near his warehouse. He wants to meet in-person to give Brad printouts of a picture he took with his cell phone that supposedly shows a well-known gang hanging out at a building in downtown. He believes drugs are being manufactured there, maybe even this new one he heard about on the news. Halfway through the meeting the informant drops the photos on the ground. When Brad goes to pick them up, the informant spikes his coffee with some powder. Shortly after the meeting, Brad slumps down in his chair. He has been slipped a lethal dose of Twilight. He is rushed to the hospital where Lydia stays by his side. Meanwhile, the city councilman and local business leaders have a press conference about new proposals to increase jobs. In the background is the owner of the factory as the screen goes black and the credits roll.

Even though Franklin felt sick and cold, even though he felt lightheaded from the sugar and lack of sleep, he didn't stop. The

episode was better than the last, and he was getting back into the show. The TV room felt eerie with just the glow of the iPad. He adjusted in his seat, but his thigh rubbed on a piece of the couch frame where the cushion had worn away. He covered it with a nearby pillow and continued watching the show.

The next episode starts strangely with Brad sitting in a movie theater watching a movie about his life. After watching scenes from his childhood, an usher leads him to another room with two couches. On one couch is Lydia, and on another is a man. His face is dark and distorted like it is coming through a bad television set. Lydia is trying to tell him something, but he can't understand it. Brad feels an urge to run but can't move his legs. He falls down, sinking into the floor only to awaken inside a cathedral. He is in a line walking toward a priest with a large hat and ornate robes. Another priest is next to him wearing more ordinary clothes. His face looks familiar but Brad can't place it. As he gets closer he can see that the plain-dressed priest is giving everyone pills—*Twilight*. Brad tries to move, but he can't; it's as if he is on a conveyor belt. Eventually he is up front. His mouth opens involuntarily and he receives the *Twilight*. With that, everything goes dark. Brad opens his eyes again to see he is in a hospital room with Lydia by his side. He has been in a coma for two days. He and Lydia talk about his dream and what was happening with the case. When he takes a moment to look at the flowers and get-well cards, he sees an old newspaper. On the front cover is the city councilman and behind him is the man he recognizes from his dreams—the priest, now the owner of the factory.

The episode ended, and Franklin paused Netflix. The show was so weird and out of character that Franklin needed a moment to process his surroundings. It was like he was dreaming with Brad. Everything seemed surreal. This is what it must feel like when explorers are deep into foreign lands, unaccustomed to their surroundings, Franklin thought. He tried to stand up to stretch but felt weak and dizzy. He braced himself on the side of the couch and took a rapid succession of

breaths that nearly caused him to pass out. Franklin was still confused from the dream episode, so he decided to lie back down and power through the remaining two episodes.

The next episode has Brad and Lydia following the factory owner. Eventually he goes to a storage location. Brad and Lydia come back to the site later to confirm that the pills have been moved there. The episode moved quickly, and Franklin had difficulty paying attention. Without realizing it, he was already halfway through the last episode where Brad and Lydia recruit the district attorney because they no longer trust the police department. This leads to the arrest of the factory owner. The city councilman undergoes an investigation and disavows any knowledge or support related to the owner or the drugs. Whoever poisoned Brad remains unsolved. The season ends with Brad and Lydia opening a private detective agency together.

The credits rolled, and no more countdowns appeared. The expedition into the long stream of entertainment was over. Franklin felt weak from sitting for so long, his legs numb and tingly. He put the iPad down and took the blanket off but shivered from the cold. He picked the blanket back up and wrapped it around him. It seemed thinner and more worn. Now with the morning light coming through the windows, the house looked different. The furniture looked old and dusty. The walls were dingy and yellowing. A bookcase appeared to be missing.

Franklin made his way to the bedroom holding the blanket around him. He peeked into his daughter's room and saw it was empty. There was no bed, no dresser, no dollhouse. A single pair of pants lay on the floor.

His bedroom was similar except a sheet lay sloppily over the bare mattress on the floor. His wife was gone. There was nothing else.

JON HOWELL lives in Los Angeles with his wife and two children. His sacred writing space is his car in traffic on the freeway.

Jezebel Behind the Cosmetics Counter at Macys

Allison Thorpe

A queen reduced to this:
debating the shape of an eyebrow,
weighing the merits of lilac lips
or persimmon frosted nails,
lingering the air with scented lures.

I know something about adornments,
what a strong-willed ambitious woman
needs to survive in the arena of men.
There are others more beautiful,
more wily in the ways of selling,
but the customers come to me.

I nude their mouths for boardrooms,
scarlet the lips for hungry nights,
line the eyes in smudge and smoke,
coat the lids with shadow green envy
like some graceful knowing cat
whose preening tongue
creams the shapely limbs.

A painted woman before my time.
Who knows what I could have achieved
in this world, this age that expects,
even demands, perfection.

I could warn them about the dangers,
the tightrope that drive and desire walk,
but a girl needs coin on the dresser.

So I peddle the wares of passion,
heighten the cultured gaze,
whet this desire for the power,
the feasting of wild dogs.

ALLISON THORPE is a writer from Lexington, KY. Recent work can be found or is forthcoming in *Two Hawks Quarterly*, *Misfit Magazine*, *So To Speak*, *Crab Fat*, *Literary Juice*, *Yellow Chair Review*, *Poetry Pacific*, and *Gingerbread House*.

Dr. Bruce

Z.Z. Boone

I am not comfortable with dentists. Not even my own, Bruce Costello, whom I've been seeing since I was a kid. He's a storyteller, this guy, and some of his tales have proven to be less than factual. I've even found a couple, recapped almost word-for-word, on an "urban legends" website.

I've stayed away for over two years. Besides the physical discomfort, there's the expense accrued thanks to no dental plan. But that day at work when I bite into a pistachio and suddenly feel an unfamiliar sensation in one of my back teeth, I quickly pick up the phone and call Westport Dental Clinic.

At the clinic, Dr. Bruce—as he insists on being called—tells me I've cracked a molar. He says he can give me a temporary cap, but that I have to come back a week from tomorrow for the permanent. I apologize for being away for so long, but Bruce doesn't seem to care. He shoots me up with Novocain, straps what looked like a miner's light to his forehead, cranks back my chair. There's an attractive middle-aged dental hygienist named Holli—a woman I'd never seen before—assisting.

"So," he says. "How's things?"

Things have been shitty. Shittiest of all is the fact that my girlfriend has moved in with some veterinarian and taken my dog with her. The dog I can take or leave. My girlfriend I want back.

"Things are good," I say.

"That's cool," Dr. Bruce says. "A lot can change in two years. Hell. A lot can change in a day."

Holli gives me a look like hold-tight-for-this-one.

"You ever drive on the Merritt Parkway really early in the morning?" Bruce asks. "Six-fifteen, sun just coming up? It's like a ghost town. You might not see another car between here and Greenwich."

His eyes shoot over toward Holli.

"When was it? Last week?"

"Wednesday," she says.

Dr. Bruce pulls up a stool and takes a seat next to me while Holli arranges instruments on a stainless steel tray.

"So I'm driving north on the Merritt, lonely as a clam, when out of the corner of my eye I catch something. It's a car. A Kia. This weird color. Yellowish-green, like a lanced boil."

I think to myself, *doesn't he have another patient he can look in on until this Novocain kicks in?*

"It's pulled off on the shoulder and I'm like, 'Hey. Thank God for cellphones.' Am I right?"

I make a noise that I hope sounds like agreement.

"Except it hits me. We're on the Merritt. A dead spot every three miles. So I try my own phone and there it is. No reception. I think to myself. What's the last thing I need? A headline in some newspaper saying *Medical Professional Blows Past Stroke Victim*. So I pull up behind the car and I walk up to the driver's window which is tinted almost black, and I tap."

Dr. Bruce stops here and turns off his forehead light either to preserve the battery or add an element of foreboding. I'm not sure which.

"The window rolls down and there he is. Broad forehead, wide-spaced eyes, teeth gaped far enough apart he could floss with rope. We're not just talking ugly. We're talking circus ugly."

"I'd have taken off running," Holli says.

"Which is what any sane person would do. Not me. I ask the guy if everything is all right and he tells me he's run out of gas and asks if I can give him a lift to this service station up at the next exit. He says he knows the guy who runs it."

Bruce is on his feet now, his hands going, acting it out.

"Immediately I'm thinking about those stories. You know the ones. Shovel to the back of the head, wallet lifted, shallow grave in the woods. But I'm also scared to say no."

"The road to ruin . . ." Holli says.

"Next thing I know we're back on the road. The exit he wants is maybe three miles north, and we get there in no time. The guy gets out at the service station and he asks me if I mind waiting for a second. He pops inside and he comes out with this."

Bruce takes out his wallet and removes a piece of paper folded in half.

"It's a lottery betting slip and it's already filled out. 'Play this on the sixth,' he tells me. 'Not before, not after.' And he turns and starts back inside which is when I notice for the first time . . ."

"Wait for it," Holli says almost to herself.

" . . . that this guy is not wearing shoes and that he has no feet. He's like a goat. He's got these cloven hoofs he's walking on."

"Probably just the angle," Holli says.

"I know what I saw."

For a few seconds, all I can hear is the gurgle of the spit sink.

"So what are the numbers?" I say, my lower lip already swelling to the size of a breakfast sausage.

Dr. Bruce smiles and returns the betting slip to his wallet.

"Oh, I can't tell you that," he says. "Because suppose these numbers *do* come in. Suppose I tell all my patients who decide it's worth a chance. The more winning tickets sold, the lower the individual payout."

Bruce raps on my back tooth with the handle of one of those pokey things they use. I feel nothing. He looks over at Holli and she sticks that saliva sucker in my mouth as Dr. Bruce flips his light back on. They hover on either side of me.

The sixth, I realize, is two days from now.

The morning of the seventh, a Saturday, it's all over the local news. One of winning tickets was sold at The Beverage Boutique out on Old State Road. The winner has yet to step forward, yet to collect just

under four million dollars. I figure there's no way, but I call the clinic where voicemail informs me that *Dr. Costello isn't in, please try again during regular business hours, call 911 if this is a dental emergency.*

I hang up and go outside to run the weed wacker.

Monday morning, at work, I get a call. My appointment for the permanent cap needs to be rescheduled. The receptionist says she can set me up at 4:30 on Friday with Dr. Addis.

"I always see Dr. Costello," I tell her.

"Dr. Costello is no longer with us," she says.

"Where did he go?"

"That information is unavailable," she says, and I get the impression this isn't the first time today she's delivered this update.

"May I speak with Holli?"

"Holli is also no longer here."

So I reschedule.

Later, on the way home, when I stop at Gulliver's to pick up a take-out dinner, I see the headline on the front page of *The Evening Advocate*: AREA DENTIST STRIKES GOLD. And there's this picture of Dr. Bruce grinning and holding a gigantic check with Holli standing maybe two feet off.

My girlfriend, Kimberly, calls me that night. I'm hoping that she's going to tell me that she's figured things out, that this whole deal with the vet was just a senseless fling and that she wants to come home. Be that the case, I won't hesitate to forgive her. But it's not. What Kimberly wants is half the money in our joint checking account. It isn't much—a little over a thousand bucks—but she has it figured down to the dime.

I go dramatic. The spurned ex-lover from some *Lifetime* TV movie.

"Is that what this is about?" I ask. "Money?"

"I don't know," she says. "Partially, I guess."

She wants to know if I can write a check and leave it in my mailbox. She says she'll buzz by for it tomorrow while I'm at work.

I work as a claims adjuster for this grade-Z insurance company. You've seen our commercials. The giraffe on the motorcycle? *We stick our neck out for you?* That's us. My job keeps me on the road, and the morning after Kimberly tries to shake me down, I myself am driving north on the Merritt Parkway heading toward Stratford. It's raining and it's just after eight and traffic is heavy. I'm on my phone when bam. Call dropped, GPS goes blank-screen.

And immediately, I see it. A yellowish-green Kia pulled off on the shoulder up ahead. We're moving slowly enough that I have no trouble throwing on my flashers and pulling over behind it.

Please, I think to myself.

I get out and approach—the rain beating down soaking my suit and flattening my hair like a wet shag carpet—but that's not what I care about. I can see white exhaust and the model name—*Soul*—in chrome-plated script. I can see that the car is minus tags. I'm close enough to almost reach forward and touch the tinted rear window.

And then it takes off. Just pulls into traffic and in seconds disappears. I want to call out, but what would I say? All I can do is stand there looking.

Follow it, right?

Except that when I get back to my own car, it won't start. I pump the accelerator furiously, but nothing. A state trooper finally spots me and stops. I tell him the story, but of course, not the whole story.

"Try it again," he tells me. But the shitbox I drive refuses to turn over. "Flooded," he says. "Give it ten or fifteen minutes and try it again. I'll come by later and make sure you got off okay."

He leaves and I wait and sure enough, the engine fires up.

I ease into traffic. I'm shivering, confused. My bad tooth is throbbing. I don't even have a goddamn dog anymore. I know who I

am, but for a second—just for a second or two—I forget where I’m going, why I’m here, what I’m looking for.

Z.Z. BOONE's fiction has appeared in *Jersey Devil Press*, *New Ohio Review*, *PANK*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Potomac Review*, and other terrific places.

ON THE COVER:

"Stich"

Gerardo Cazares

GERARDO CAZARES was born and raised in San Antonio, Texas. The black sheep of the family as far as his culture and beliefs, like metal concerts and blasphemy, he felt like an outcast and went through a rebellious phase which still lingers. He joined the army at 20 in 2008 and deployed to Iraq in 2010, Germany in 2011, and Afghanistan in 2013. Since returning from active duty in 2014, Cazares has been producing and selling his art for a living. You can contact him about his work via Facebook ([facebook.com/devoutsatx](https://www.facebook.com/devoutsatx)) and Instagram ([instagram.com/dfordevout/](https://www.instagram.com/dfordevout/)).

