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Editor's Note

Your Halloween candy may be gone, but Issue Ninety-Five is here to keep you entertained through those cold gray weeks between holiday festivities. Dig into Kelsey Englert's "Take Me" with a furry friend, play checkers "After Lunch" with Daniel Warner, have a delightfully absurd chat about "Kafka in Paradise" courtesy of Tushar Jain, and have the pockets of your subconscious picked by Tara Campbell's "The birds are stealing my dreams."

— Laura Garrison

Take Me

Kelsey Englert

Rex is a digger. He tunnels us fast and hard like he's desperate for someplace else. This is probably how he ended up at the shelter, and why the woman with the cat sweater offered to waive the adoption fee if I took him, straightaway.

At first, I fought Rex on the digging. The homeowners' association was already all over me after my wife painted the front door lime green. Rex ripping through the sidewalks wasn't helping my case. His nails sliced through concrete like he was pawing water. Neighbors who could have knocked on my door mailed me bills from cement masons for the newly poured pads. The charges added up, and I yanked hard on Rex's leash when he swiped at the ground.

But some dogs dig. What could I do? And the neighborhood kids liked pushing their palms into the wet cement to leave their prints.

Rex and I tested walking in unpopulated areas. We tried the woods, but the ground was too soft, and he dug fast. I jogged to keep up with him, and the trees trunks collapsed, braiding like latticework behind us.

We left the woods and stuck to abandoned fields of wildflowers. Sometimes I tried to steer him to see if we could make patterns with the tunnels, but then, in the produce aisle of the grocery store, people started hysterically arguing about crop circles and aliens while bruising the peaches they squeezed, so Rex and I cut it out.

I thought swimming might be a better exercise for him. I put him in water. I unclipped his leash and let him part El Roy's Pond. He was Moses, and the startled mallards took flight, abandoning their ducklings. Rex tunneled the pond's bottom, but he scared himself in the tsunamis he triggered to his left and right. By the time he scampered back to me, the pond was empty, every cattail on the bank was snapped in half, and fish flopped in the muddy grass. He flooded the land in every direction.

Rex put his tail between his legs and whimpered on the walk home. He did not dig.

I patted him on the head and told him he was a good boy. We took the ducklings with us and put them in a kiddie pool in our backyard. The one with the broken wing died. Rex dug its grave. Eventually, the rest flew off to someplace else.

Since then, Rex has only dug deep instead of far. No more tunnels, just a massive hole. We have given him the backyard. He comes up from the hole muddy and sneezing dirt. When I wait by the gate to the outside world and hold up his leash, he ignores me. My wife stands on the back patio, hands on her hips, wearing an old tee shirt stained with lime green paint. She watches Rex's frantic pawing for hours. Then she calls the man with the skid-steer. He grades the yard back to level, and we nod to Rex, letting him know he may begin again.

KELSEY ENGLERT's writing has appeared in *Passages North*, *The Citron Review*, *Bartleby Snopes*, and *The Broken Plate*, among other literary magazines. She is a Pennsylvania native and earned her M.A. in creative writing from Ball State University and M.F.A. in creative writing from West Virginia University. She currently teaches at the University of Arkansas at Monticello.

After Lunch

Daniel Warner

They walked out into the backyard. It was elevated, overlooking the lake, with an old-timey stone banister to prevent elderly patients from tumbling down into the water.

They had had lunch, and now she held him by an elbow, leading him carefully past a flower bed and then past a bench. They went farther back, to where picnic tables were, with chess and checker boards.

“Right here, honey,” she said, helping him into a chair.

He didn’t say anything. He hadn’t been speaking for some months now. She doubted he realized where he was, or who he was, for that matter.

“It’s a simple game,” she said, setting up checkers on the board. They played every time she visited, and every time she had to teach him. “I’ll go first, look.”

He did, absently staring at the board, as she moved a piece. She waited, but he did nothing.

A couple passed them then, holding a picnic basket, and she smiled at them. They sat at a table behind them, close to the banister, about to have their lunch.

She moved one his pieces.

He was looking at her, or maybe past her. She hoped it was the former, because she had put on that dress he always liked, the blue one that left her shoulders bare.

“Well, let me tell you how my day was, then,” she said, and started speaking.

Behind them, the couple was unloading their basket: fruit, a drink in a glass bottle, some snacks . . .

A smile touched his lips, because this was the one thing he remembered. All those years ago, her sitting opposite him, talking. “I went to the market,” she was saying, “and there was this small café, and music was playing, our favorite song and then there was this dog a greyhound and then...”

He remembered glancing past her bare shoulder, and there were green apples on the table in the background, three of them, ripe and perfect. And there was a grinder, green and white, pulling the still life together, fixed in the moment. And the sound of pouring wine over her voice, like music to go with the image. He wasn’t quite sure if it was a painting he’d seen, the only picture that had stuck with him through all these years. But he knew now that it wasn’t.

He looked at her, and she stopped talking, and then he smiled.
“Sally.”

DANIEL WARNER is a published comic book writer and a ghostwriter. He has been working as a ghostwriter for several years, writing in all genres, and has worked on the *Masks* comic book series for Rats and Crows Publishing. He has also self-published two books—*Masks* and *Danny’s Love Letters*—and studies Creative Writing in Orlando, FL. You can follow him at facebook.com/danny00110010

Kafka in Paradise

Tushar Jain

Phone rings.

"Good afternoon, sir! You're talking to Sudesh. Thank you for calling the Paragon Store. May I know who I'm speaking to?"

"This is Dhanakar Prabhakar."

"Thank you for clarifying that, Mr. Prabhakar. And you're calling from your registered mobile number?"

"What? Registered mobile? I don't . . ."

"No issues, Mr. Prabhakar. I have checked and I can see that you are, in fact, calling from your registered mobile number. So, tell me, how can I assist you today?"

"Uh. I ordered this book from your store. I want to return it."

"Oh. I'm disappointed to hear that, sir. May I know the name of the title you wish to return?"

"Kafka in Paradise."

"Thank you, Mr. Prabhakar." *Brief Pause. Keys clack.* "Mr. Prabhakar, I can see that you bought this book five days ago and as per our policy, you are safely within the period of one week during which you can return the book and be refunded fully for it."

"I already know that!"

"Regardless, it is our policy at the Paragon Store to ensure that our customers are well-informed about, well—ha ha—our policies! *Old fart!*"

"What! What did you say?!"

"There's a bit of disturbance on the line, Mr. Prabhakar. I'm guessing it's from your end?"

“Hmm. Work going on in the building . . . ”

“I see. In any case, as I mentioned, you are eligible for a full refund for ‘Kafka in Paradise.’ But first, I am required to ask you some details. Was the delivery not on time, Mr. Prabhakar?”

“Delivery? No, no. Delivery was perfect, totally on time. Ahead of time, to be perfectly honest.”

“Okay, thank you for confirming that. Next question. Was the condition of the delivered book not satisfactory? Did you find a page torn or any kind of damage to the copy you were handed?”

“This copy? It’s great! Glossy. Incredible cover art. Premium quality pages. Publishers these days are really pushing hard against those e-books, huh?”

“Um, I guess so, Mr. Prabhakar. Sir, if the delivery was on time and you’re satisfied with the copy of the book you received, why do you want to return it?”

“I read it. I didn’t like it.”

“Excuse me?”

“I read it twice actually. Didn’t like anything about it both times.”

Brief Pause.

“Sir . . . You’ve read the book?”

“Twice, did I say? Make that thrice. Yeah. Three times. After reading it twice, I thought if I read it another time, I might like it. But no. Hated it every bloody time.”

“But Mr. Prabhakar, if you’re admitting you’ve already *read* the book . . . Well, even if I go purely by policy, we cannot have the book returned to us if you just didn’t ‘like’ it.”

“Why not? You said it yourself! It’s within the seven day period!”

“That’s true. But—”

“It said on your site-thing that you care about having satisfied customers. Well, I’m not satisfied with this dumb book! I want to be rid of it and have my money back.”

“Uh, Mr. Prabhakar, it’s not as easy as that. Since this is a somewhat unique problem, I think I might not be the right person to handle this. Will it be okay if I transfer you to my senior, Mahesh? I’m sure he’ll be able to assist you.”

“Whatever. Makes no difference to me. I just want my money back.”

“Definitely, Mr. Prabhakar. I’m putting you on hold while I transfer the call . . . *Crazy fuck!*”

“What did you—”

The phone is put on hold. George Michael’s ‘Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go’ plays. Someone picks up after a minute.

“Good morning, Mr. Devakar! This is Mahesh speaking.”

“It’s Prabhakar! And it’s afternoon! And I’ve been on hold listening to some awful song!”

“Oh? Oh! That would be George Michael, sir. Our C.E.O. is very taken with the music of the late singer and songwriter Mr. Michael. But that is besides the point. At the Paragon Store, more than their business, we value our customers’ time.”

“Doesn’t seem like that so far! I’ve been held up trying to return this miserable book and—”

“The book, yes! Sudesh informed me about your, um, case and I’m very sorry to say—”

“You’re not taking it back?!”

“I’m afraid not, Mr. Prabhakar. You see, you have already ‘read’ the book. We are past the stage of ‘purchase’ and ‘return.’ You have

already *consoooooomed* the product. You wouldn't have returned us an empty bag of chips if you ate the chips and didn't like them, would you? In that example, you quite literally would have *consoooooomed* the product."

"Why are you talking like that!"

"Talking like what, Mr. Dinakar?"

"My name's Prabhakar! Never mind. And as far as I can remember, the Paragon Store doesn't sell chips! But it does sell books! Which I'm entitled to return, as per *your* policy, within a week's time if I'm dissatisfied!"

"Ah. Ah. Mr. Prabhakar, again, what we're having here is simply a conflict of *terrrmmms*. I don't think you completely comprehend the complex conundrum of contrary forces involved in market economics. Our present problem though is relatively simple. It is the problem of a man who walks into a 'bookshop' and thinks it's a 'library.' As I said, a problem of . . . *terrrmmmmms*."

"Stop talking like that!"

"Talking like . . . *whhaaaaatttt?*"

"This is absurd! You're telling me you won't take back this horrible book!"

"Not after it's already been read, sir."

"It's your stated company policy! It's written all over your website!"

"Well, yes. That *is* true. But what interests me especially Mr. Dinakar is that you insist you're returning the book because you didn't 'like' it. Now, this is an interesting loophole, Mr. Dinakaran. We *have* reimbursed clients and taken back products based on the 'quality' of the product. For instance, if we sent you a mixer-grinder and it failed to mix and grind, we'd readily take it back and

reimburse the customer. Hmm . . . *hmmmmmmmm*. And you say you didn't like the book qualitatively at all?"

"The prose's stilted! The writing's pathetic! And the characters are cardboard cut-outs!"

"Hmm. This is a very interesting case. But, at my level, I think I will be of no use to you. I'll transfer you to my senior, Hitesh. He is the man for the job. Even if I were to consider your request as valid, I don't think I can reimburse you such an amount on a whim."

"The book's only a hundred and fifty rupees! Yours is a multi-billion dollar company!"

"And January is a month of thirty one days. All good facts, Mr. G. V. Dinakaran. But one has nothing to do with the other. You'll be put on hold while I transfer the call."

"Don't you *dare* play me any George Michael son—!"

The phone is put on hold. George Michael's 'Last Christmas' plays. A minute passes.

"Hello, you're speaking to Hitesh, Head of Sales! How can I help you today?"

"The book! I want to return this damn book!"

"Oh yes. Mr. Prabhakar, right? Mahesh told me about you. Don't worry, sir. I think I am in a position to help you."

"You are?"

"Absolutely, sir."

"Thank God!"

"Yes. I'm glad you're relieved, Mr. Prabhakar. At the Paragon Store, we *deeply* value our customers."

Brief Pause.

"So?"

“Oh. I thought I was being quite clear. Mr. Prabhakar, there’s no way we’ll be taking the book back.”

“You bastards!”

“There’s no need for language like that! Please let me clarify. Mahesh informs me that the question being raised here is about the *quality* of the product as a basis for a full reimbursement, right? Now, sir, here’s the snag. The Paragon Store takes *full* responsibility for the products we sell. But it takes absolutely none for the *contents* of those products. It is this dichotomy, Mr. Prabhakar, that is causing us so much trouble. Between the ‘product’ and its ‘contents.’ Those are two very different things and we at the Paragon Store are only responsible for one of them. The product. Not its contents. The bag of chips. And not the chips.”

“It’s just a hundred and fifty rupees!”

“Please don’t interrupt, Mr. Prabhakar. It’s very rude for a man of your age. Where was I? Yes. So now, since you have raised objection to the *content* of this product, I will revert you to the third party who is to be held solely responsible. In this case, that would be the author of this book.”

“No, no, there’s no need to —”

Keys clack.

“It’s no bother, sir. It’s part of our protocol. Rest easy. ‘Kafka in Paradise,’ wasn’t it? Yes, yes. The name’s showing up. The author is . . .”

Brief Pause.

“Mr. Prabhakar . . .”

“Yes?”

“Mr. Dhanakar Prabhakar?”

“Speaking.”

"Sir, um, it says that . . . *ahem* . . . have *you* written this book, Mr. Prabhakar?"

"Yes. And I want to return it."

"You are not satisfied with it?"

"I think it's awful! I don't want anything to do with it!"

"But you wrote it!"

"I know that! Don't keep telling me that! Now will you give me back my money or not?!"

"Well, this is . . . It was quite simple before, Mr. Prabhakar but . . . If you have a problem with the content and you *yourself* are responsible for the content. I'm not entirely sure I know what the company policy says about that. Mahesh was right. This is a very unique case. Frankly, I don't think I am at the right level to handle something like this. I think I'll have to transfer you to the Head of Sales."

"What?! I thought *you* were the Head of Sales!"

"Me? No, no, no. Sir, I believe there has been a miscommunication. My *name* is Hitesh Hadoff-Sales. I have a Welsh father and my mother's from Catalonia."

"What are you doing in India?!"

"Chasing a dream, sir. I have long aspired to be the Head of Sales."

"Enough! Do not transfer me to another incompetent idiot! Transfer me to someone who can make decisions around here!"

"Actually, sir, you're in luck! Fortunately, our C.E.O., Mr. Paresh, is here today! He comes over for inspections sometimes. I think he will be the best person to tackle this particular issue. Please stay on hold while I transfer the call."

"Wait! Don't put me on—"

The phone is put on hold. George Michael's 'Careless Whisper' plays. Two minutes pass. Someone picks up.

"I've had it with this!"

"Ah, Mr. Prabhakar! This is Paresh here. The C.E.O. of the Paragon Store. I hear that my boys are feeling quite stumped by your case."

"Oh, that's an understatement!"

"But it's no cause to worry, Mr. Prabhakar. This is the very reason I'm here, getting in touch with the everyday customer. Reminds me of the days when I was just like Mahesh or Hitesh. No different from Ramesh or Dinesh. Sitting in a cubicle next to Suresh or Ganesh. One of the boys, you know. But today, I'm here to set examples. To solve trying problems like yours."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"What am I going to do about it? Ha! Right to the heart of the matter! I'll tell you what I'm going to do about it. The Paragon Store will send an agent down to your residence today itself and collect the book from you. Within the week, the money will be fully reimbursed to your bank account."

"Wha . . . Just like that?!"

"Just like that, Mr. Prabhakar. You see, this is the difference when you talk to someone who can make quick decisions and take action."

"You — You're a very reasonable man! Thank you!"

"No problem at all. It was my pleasure, Mr. Prabhakar. Now, I can see this red light blinking here which means there's another tough case waiting for me to handle, so —"

"Oh yes, yes! Please go ahead. I'm glad this is done with! I mean I just wouldn't have been able to take one more horrible George Michael song. *Haw haw haw!*

Brief Pause.

"Hello?"

"What do you have against George Michael, Mr. Prabhakar?"

"Well, *haw haw*, what would *I* have against a dead m—"

"Yes, yes! I know he's dead! You needn't point that out to me, Mr. Prabhakar!"

Sudden sounds of muffled snivelling is heard on the line.

"Mr. Paresh?"

"George Michael was a visionary, you know! A musical genius! Singer, songwriter and—and that hair! His influence on Western music and culture is unparalleled!"

"Oh, come on. That's stretching it a bit, don't you think?"

"Okay, that does it!"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm sorry to say, Mr. Prabhakar, but I don't help homophobes."

"Homopho—I'm not a—!"

"We have our Complaints Department for that sort of thing. Please stay on the line while I transfer you to one of my juniors."

"No, no, please no! No more transfers! *Listen!* Mr. Par—!"

The phone is put on hold. George Michael's 'Faith' plays on high volume.

TUSHAR JAIN is a poet, playwright, and author. He was the winner of the Srinivas Rayaprol Poetry Prize, 2012 and a winner of the Poetry with Prakriti Prize, 2013. Subsequently, he won the RL Poetry Award, 2014. He was a winner of the DWL Short Story Contest 2014. He won the Toto Funds the Arts Award for Creative Writing, 2016. His work has been published in myriad literary magazines and journals such as *Aaduna*, *Papercuts*, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *Antiserious*, *Raed Leaf India*, *The Young Ravens Review*, *The Bangalore Review*, *Streetcake Magazine*, *The Sierra Nevada Review*, *Into the Void Magazine*, *The Cape Rock Journal*, *Miracle*, *Dryland Magazine*, *Edify Fiction*, *Gramma*, *decomp Magazine*, *Priestess* and *Hierophant Magazine*, and elsewhere.

The birds are stealing my dreams

Tara Campbell

The birds are stealing my dreams
they whirl above my bed at night
and settle on my headboard
ruffling feathers
twitching wings
cock silent heads
to track my breathing
slowing, deepening
they know to wait until I sink
slowing
until my eyelids flicker
deepening
until I weave the dreams

The birds hop to my pillow
and tug things from my ears
nightmares—sharp, dry sticks
tinsel-shred adventures
tuft-of-down romance
throughout the night they take it all
my slumber's residue
they weave their nests
and bear their young
in shiny hope and sticky fear
dust-bound regrets
and shimmering delight

I used to write my dreams
into lined-paper cages
or tell them into amber
now all that's left is glitter on my pillow
or a thorn
a twitter at the window
the birds wake me with the sun
to sing my dreams back to me.

TARA CAMPBELL [www.taracampbell.com] is a Washington, D.C.-based writer and an assistant fiction editor at Barrelhouse. Prior publication credits include *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Litbreak*, *Masters Review*, *Luna Station Quarterly*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, and *Queen Mob's Teahouse*. Her novel, *TreeVolution*, was released in 2016, and her collection, *Circe's Bicycle*, will be published in fall 2017.

On the cover:

“UFO”

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