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THE SOCK DRAWER

LITERARY  MAGAZINE



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Founded in June 2020, The Sock Drawer aims to collect the voices of contemporary artists and writers. In a world as tumultuous as this one people need an outlet for their voice. With a current of feminism and activism running through the veins of the editors, The Sock Drawer seeks to be a place to release the tension of existence.

Letters & Comments: TheSockDrawerLitMag@gmail.com

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ON THE COVER
“Unnamed Day” by
Megan Ulrich

Hello & Welcome

The Sock Drawer was created with the intention of creating a community of writers that are often ignored, marginalized, or 'pushed to the back of the sock drawer' by society and the publishing industry. We aim to raise up diverse and unique voices that tell stories that are not told often enough. I aim to use my privilege and platform to elevate these voices and bring to light talented individuals through The Sock Drawer. In the wake of ignorance, racism, and violence in the United States and the world it is of key importance that this space cultivates productive, honest, and genuine works. Here at The Sock Drawer, we stand with equality, Black Lives Matter, and many more movements pushing for positive, productive change. It is time to rise past the forced silence and scream. Change will come and we will be here to help facilitate it.

In Hope,

Gracelyn Willard
Founder/Editor-in-Chief

Meet The Team

Founder/Editor-in-Chief



Gracelyn Willard (she/her) is the founder and editor-in-chief of The Sock Drawer. She is a 2020 graduate of Hood College with a degree in English and a concentration in Creative Writing. She was a 2019 presenter at the Hood College Discovering the Humanities Conference. She had a nonlinear college career due to her battle with multiple chronic illnesses. She loves to read Roxane Gay, Valeria Luiselli, Agatha Christie, Terrance Hayes, and Wisława Szymborska. Her quest for the perfect gluten free madeleine is never ending and at times she wonders if she loves coffee more than her boyfriend. Her last job was as a cheesemonger and she identifies as bisexual. Her passion is writing, reading, editing, and bad reality tv.

Nonfiction Editor



Kerstin Holman is a 2019 Virginia Wesleyan University graduate. In order to get the most bang for her buck, she got her BA in three majors: English Literature, Theatre (with a concentration in dramaturgy) and & Women's Gender Studies. Some writers and voices who inspire her to not only speak but listen are Roxane Gay, Da'Shaun Harrison and noname. As TSD's non-fiction editor and contributor, she hopes to continue polishing her writing craft by bringing awareness to and discussing topics including race, gender, sexuality, and existential crises. She recently became a New Jersian and her interests include bowling, watching "RuPaul's Drag Race," and eating sushi.

Book Review Editor



Izzy Peroni is the Book Review editor of The Sock Drawer. She is a recent graduate of Hood College, with a degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing, and a minor in Studies in Women and Gender. Her main contributions to the magazine, as well as the rest of the world, will include poetry, fiction, and book reviews. The majority of the creative media she consumes is either horror or science-fiction, ranging from 70's slasher flicks to often non-traditional ghost stories, as well as practically anything having to do with aliens. She obsesses over the work of Elizabeth Bishop, and unintentionally imitates her biography. Her hobbies include video games and adoring her cat.

Art Editor



Julia Gonzales was voted "Most likely to become an Artist" in 6th grade and knew her love for creativity would never waver. Growing up, she competed and placed in several minor art competitions within her community and enjoyed experimenting with various mediums and techniques. She is currently pursuing a degree in Computer Animation at Full Sail University with the intent to one day produce children shows. She is inspired by works from Damien Hirst, Erik Johansson, Frida Kahlo and Leonora Carrington. Some argue that she loves her cat a little too much and her current drink of choice is iced chai tea.

Tell Us Your Story!

We want to hear from you.
We are now accepting poetry, fiction, nonfiction, book reviews and art submissions for upcoming publications.
www.TheSockDrawer.Net



POETRY

Nomthandao Nxabela

Jane Ayres

Melissa Sussens

Mickie Kennedy

Sinaso Mxakaza

Jamie Grookett

Fizza Abbas

Mackenzie Tucker

Jonathan Shipley

“I’m an artist. Artists don’t need permission to work. Regardless of whether I’m acting or not, I write. I write when I’m tired in fact, because I believe your most pure thoughts surface.”

- Chadwick Boseman

POETRY

uniform homes

By Nomthandao Nxabela

Over 1.5 million homes
have been dug.
They stand uniform
singing hymns
in welcome
of souls
nearing the end of their journeys

These forever homes
of the rich man
and the broke sweeper,
the kind heart
and the political fraudster;
they hold a spectacle of note.
These estates of the lucky
for those with,
or without fault.

In one part of this world,
a man was removed
naked from his tinned home;
and in another
graves were dug.
They stand uniform
singing hymns in welcome
of souls nearing the end of their journeys
to their forever home.

Mr President,
Did you know?
That a man was removed naked
From his tinned home?



selfie soulmate

By Jane Ayres

skinned // my true reflection // flirting // curating reinvention
the calligraphy of the hidden self
evolving *connect connect*

no secrets here mash // brash // vain // witness // posed narcissus gaze
when does a soulmate become a cellmate?

instant effigy // shouting // meta mor(e) phosis
shutterclick // shutterchick pout glitterstick
connect the phantom limb // clone // caricature
never understanding the shiny what-ifs
wanting to be the mirror
to be to be to be
like
d



Alternate Universe In Which Vulnerability Does Not Suck

after Olivia Gatwood

By Melissa Sussens

an annual award show
for *The Saddest Person* is held.
i am not runner up.

empty bottles of red wine
are filled with my tears
& my 0.25 second reply
texts are framed;
sold as souvenirs.

the trees are all weeping
willows & in the grocery store
there is a free tub of ice cream
for every meltdown.

we all have zero chill.
we do not understand
those who remain dry eyed
through *Grey's Anatomy*,
who do not pour from their history
in a steady flow on a first date.

here, feelings are revered.
here, she does not leave me.
i have so much love to give.



obsolete technology

By Jane Ayres

we arrange our pivoting knitted bodies where insidious hills also have ears & mouths /
channelling the spectral malady of airlocked relentless prosody (it has fine structure &
remembers true alchemy) pin-striped shards also need sanctuary / when pulsating seed-heads
prickle & dandelion cocks (bilberry) disengage (no forced entry this time I admire you for
that) / sculpting the gnarled mantra / transgressive orgasms are a grated bonus / when the
fugitive moon is full (& I)

please stay and enjoy the refreshments



Metal Shavings in a Cog

By Mickie Kennedy

On Facebook, the delivery boy at the pizza place up the street
robbed at gunpoint.

Only took an iPhone and a six-pack of coke.

Left the pizzas and the bank bag,
which despite saying held less than \$20 and change,
actually held \$46, including tips.

One of the comments: If he could carry a gun,
this would have never happened.

Two weeks later, a successful \$1,200 GoFundMe
and charged with filing a false police report
after detectives traced a pawn ticket back to the victim.

Darla Barber, who says she went to middle school
with the boy, says, *Is it just me, or does it seem like the media
and the police are on a witch hunt to bum us all out?*
Seven likes and a comment that she should vote for Trump.

The far-herd pant of progress has slowly retreated,
like the shore sucking back to sneeze a tsunami.
You would have noticed that the indigenous birds and animals
have gone to higher ground, had there still been
indigenous birds and animals.

At the half-opened back door, a woman whispers to a man
that her husband was home sick,
and he should come by tomorrow at the same time.
Being too reliant on any one person, any one man,
is a sign of weakness.

These orgasms, she tells herself, are medicinal,
the frost that actually protects and insulates the plant.

THE SOCK DRAWER

A gaggle of mothers on the sidewalk.
I always knew she'd amount to nothing.
Spent her childhood passing gas and orchestrating ways
to hurt me with maximum pain per square inch,
or something to that effect.
I order a homemade chicken salad sandwich at the café.
She reaches into the fridge and opens
a factory-sealed package and places it on a dish.

The curtain was pulled back a long time ago to reveal
no wizards, no stagehands pulling ropes through metal pulleys.



POETRY

the spirits and lost men

By Sinaso Mxakaza

grandma talked about God like he was a boy
who grew up down the streets but later became a man
and the world poured all this virtue at his feet.
our people never quiet danced the same from longing for his touch

grandma talked about God like a long lost son who married young
and she forgot his phone number like we do when we grow apart
from living in different cities for so long
but if she could remember it she'd call him and he'd come home
everything would go back to normal

so she talked to him anyway certain he'd hear her,
protecting her home
when grandma grew tired
the sun set and she withered away
like a tree in winter

cold flesh came to chop down her branches
leaving a huge gapping hole where her life giving presence used to be
The wind came swiftly
we've had no secure shelter from storms since then

like empty rooms carrying potent air,
lost men are homes for spirits
I pray he lives and finds himself again
we could no longer tell when he was home or tossing in the wind

at times he came in with the night
carrying screaming souls under his breath
he held the knife like a trained butcher
even his mother's sweet calming voice couldn't call him home to himself.
forever restless, the devil danced at the flickering of his eyelids.

evil comes in through the small cracks in our homes,
takes residence in the spaces of loved ones we held so dear
look at the hands that cradle your children's umbilicals
look at the hearts that receive your newborns





"Black Lives Matter" by Shana Hafele

YOU TOLD ME YOUR STORY

By Jamie Groomett

Before, you told me your story was like a hand-blown vase,
with etching and curved drupelets splintering light

If you displayed it on the lid of the ebony grand,
Witnesses would note a void, miss the cosmos confined within

Then, your story was like a consummate Still Life,
Fixed, rooted—significance lost in exhibition

They'd diminish all you want known; distinguish all you
want forgotten—render resentment

Glassy eyes would stare at sharp lines and deep shadows
until figures blurred into nothingness

Your story, it's not a work of art anymore
You stand straight despite the weight of it

When critics lambaste you for truth,
You balance on the souls of women before you

You are a torch bleeding light where only dark
endured, glinting through fissures in their armor.



Heirloom

By Mickie Kennedy

My life presented as a gift wrapped
in banana leaves and left
on the alter, or an old pocket watch
so cheap it will never be passed down
to grandchildren.

I measure the richness of family
in brothers and sisters.
The house where I grew up
has grown up and fled the premises—
scorched cinderblocks where
the first level started.

Memories: the flakes left
in the prospector's pan
after you submerge it in the water,
the cheap novel you read
at the beach and leave in the sand.



Half-Life

By Mickie Kennedy

At the orphanage of baby pigeons,
the only applicant is a cat named Schrodinger
who will either eat them or love them—
but one thing is certain/uncertain:
a steel door and turned deadbolt,
no one is getting through.





"OCEAN" by Jillian Hamilton

The Unburnt Toast

By Fizza Abbas

Unravel the mystery of the half-burnt toast
a slice of brown bread that couldn't succumb to fire.

One day you'll know what it means.

A pale, brown woman with unkempt tresses
walks along the pavement. The asphalt and concrete cracked with age:
A barren thoroughfare of desires - A road to hell in-the-making

Her black eyes look around
the remnants of a half-eaten apple look tempting.

She hides it secretly inside her cleavage -
A feeble attempt at a brutal revenge
those once altruistic soldiers become mannequins.

My poor Pakistani mother in the lockdown
too has feelings, too has rage.

They say have patience, you will get the aid you deserve.
Don't they know the toast has burnt and the jam is now wet?



THE SOCK DRAWER

09/15/75

By Mackenzie Tucker

on my sixteenth birthday i wished to fuck
dyed roots & rosy retrospection

and so i wished, tongue-in-cheek,
lips twisting at the thought (of my own hilariousness)
as if You hadn't been fucking me for years

yesterday You pressed candles on my wrists
like a pack of squares, though somehow
You remain without though

and I hand-pick each one hereafter,
smothering every yellow garland
with charred fingertips

the rest is confetti



young black man

By Sinaso Mxakaza

I am a young man in South Africa,
kissed by the sun
I blend in with the dark night's sky.
When I move people cower
I smile a little to show them I mean no harm.
They tell me to move, go
chase after change and opportunities.
These are but the few ways I don't belong to the body I wear.
They say 'Freedom is here! Live!'
Yet freedom doesn't know my name,
liberation fails to pronounce it
Urbanisation can't look me in the eye
unless I smell expensive
renting an apartment in the city,
breaking my back just to fit in
And going by my second name.
I am Africa, Thabo, Themba, Jabulani,
Lefa, Sechaba, Prince, Avumile, Sfiso, Morena,
Ndumiso, Nkanyiso, Kwanele, Malibongwe
I am every boy who has a name that has so much meaning
but is too hard to pronounce in this here freedom nation.
They feel better when they call me James, Jason, Stephen, Noah, Knowledge
But see my name carries blessings
placed upon my mother's womb
and when she brought me into this world she tied it around my soul
A promise.
A declaration of what I was going to be in this world.

THE SOCK DRAWER

I have become the growing unemployment lines,
the promised change that keeps me voting
The doors ministers knock on every election season only to forget
once the votes are in
The roads to nowhere lead here.
I am the people who breathe past things that kill the soul
I know young boys who lean a little
thinking cough syrup will beat the struggle out of their chests.
That maybe they will forget
When they wake up
they crave an even deeper high.

I am a young son
rising in the broken sky filled with teargas and no rainbows.
Forgive me if when I lean a little
I end up falling into the cracks of a ghetto life
and in my attempts to get back up
I crumble.
I am a young graduate
fully certified, a diploma or degree in hand but still very underqualified
to benefit from the corporate world
A PhD becomes the requirement.
I hustle these streets for means
trying to make a living
A man must provide,
bring food to the table.



POETRY

A WEED

By Jonathan Shipley

There is probably a poem in that sunflower
that has bloomed alone in my backyard.
I am filled with such despair and I
know that it's unfounded, to a point.
At least I have a job.
At least no loved ones (yet)
have died. No one has
ever died of despair.
Some would argue that countless have.
It's okay to have debates such as these.
There are questions about what defines
a weed. The sunflower will be in
full bloom in a day or two, I
imagine. We have failed - our
leadership, our neighbors, ourselves.
A year of our lives will be taken
away from us. We have all suffered
deaths these months. A metaphor
is different than a ventilator, different
than a window, and a grave.
I am not worthy of that yellowing bloom
and yet here I am
trying to define what weeds are.



THE SOCK DRAWER

girl, 9,

By Jane Ayres

dies in tragic hit & run / survives hit & run

in our dream

she walks guileless on the twisted road
bare feet skirting tarmac
floating over broken glass
a fluffyfurred dice of giant proportions
dangling in each jammyhand
every taunting throw a promise

of blueskies
perhaps

the tenacity of randomness
a monster in the room
always

spreading corrosive itch / in dark corners
too many oughts & shoulds / tricks & un-spilled treats

jellied overthink



POETRY

THE DUENDE

By Jaime Grookett

Even if I pound on your door,
you won't let me in.
You stand in your kitchen eating chips from the bag,
block out my knocking—
logic dominating your soul,
so I creep through the frame
 of your door—
a whisper, a tap on your shoulder.
You swat me like a fly, or
If you spy me, you run,
sprint down side streets without looking both ways,
but this is no race.
 I exist for you as long as you are, I am.

You fear me,
 a Greek bearing gifts that aren't your type.
You hide them in your nightstand,
 ashamed you're not the kind of girl who can pull off rubies.

You deny me, like you deny
the shine of your anorexic glow,

the scent of bitter almonds
 in your elderberry tea.
Like an ancient hairshirt
 I offer discomfort, ecstasy.

The closest pen you found was dead, so
you typed your suicide note
 tossed it on the cluttered desk.

I would free you, if you'd let me.
A pause between notes in a song
 that pulls the emptiness out of you.
I linger in the space between knowing
 and feeling
and I am your greatest gift.



FICTION

Quinn Forskitt
Courtney Harler
Jenna Byers
Diane Culp
Jim O'Loughlin

“To be visibly Queer is to choose your
happiness over your safety.”
- Da'Shaun L. Harrison

Butcher Hog, or Pigs Day Out in a Fashionable World

By Quinn Forskitt

Tuesday

The chorus of screaming pigs was the only sound louder than a hundred captive bolt pistols in the hall. The hiss of gas, the piercing crack of the animal's skull and the thud of the vegetative pig hitting the blood and shit stained ceramic tiles was a daily occurrence for Christopher Heywood. Except for Sundays, the government sanctioned day of rest. Even on those days the trains that passed by Christopher's garden, scheduled to haul their loads to Great London, did not make a sound or rattle the steel of his bedframe. It was inevitable that he would start thinking about the screams of swine and the silence of man in the factory at some point every evening. That is why Christopher, along with the rest of middle and lower divisions of Great Britain, was prescribed TRUST. Soon the screams would fall silent for the night, ready to be replaced with the final cries of pigs in the morning. Except on Sundays. The government had to keep the population happy, to combat insubordination, achieved in the form of amphetamines, barbiturates and one day off every week, courtesy of Her Majesty's Great Union Movement, amongst other things.

The piercing drill of the factory's bell rang out three times. Shift ended. Pigs were herded back into their holding cells. Men trudged through the filth dripping from their overalls into the showers, into the changing rooms and walked however long it took to walk through the smog-ridden streets of Great Sheffield. For Christopher it was only twenty minutes at a fast pace in the October fog. The Heywood household of 47 Rydal Road could not be called humble. The same red brick front as the rest of the street, as the rest of the houses this far north of Great London. It had running water, just not hot. The two bedrooms were comfortable for one person, but each held two alongside most of the family's belongings. The girls had the street side bedroom. It was quieter, with more walls between them, the grinding of the train tracks and the occasional nights that their father cried himself to sleep. The warmth and stale smell of his home invaded his senses along with the twins wrapping themselves around his knees. Jane sat in the parlour, listening to the evening broadcast, wrapping her head around Pound's Cantos. "Dinners in't stove. Girls were too hungry to wait."

The benefit of working with pigs was the extra rations of bacon each week. The stove kept the slice of bread, watery porridge, rasher, mushrooms and egg warm. The egg

THE SOCK DRAWER

was overdone, much to his displeasure, but he could not complain. Waste was frowned upon by his neighbours, wife and the local authority who would fine the Heywood's if any morsel was found in their bins. The kitchen was cold. By the time it came to Sunday he was too exhausted to fix the broken window. It wasn't likely they could afford to fix it either. The slightly off-tune radio drifted into the kitchen.

“...days after Great Britain's tremendous success at the opening of the Games, residency applications from Europe and the Commonwealth have increased. Do not fear, however...”

“Turn that drivel off, me head hurts.” Knowing all too well his request would not be met, he said it just as incoherently as the radio was, chewing on the slice of bread, soaked in the grease of the plate.

“...borders are safe. God bless Queen Margaret, God Bless the Union, and God Bless all of you...” Silence followed, then the national anthem accompanied by his chewing. Nine bells rang out, marking the end of the days broadcast. A static filled silence lingered in the house. Christopher moved into the living room and sat across from his wife on a lime chair. The walls were covered in peeling beige wallpaper, windows draped with thick grey curtains that looked like jumpers hung out to dry. Plastic flowers added some colour to the dreary interior. The abattoir had more life to it than any of the houses on Rydal Road.

“The Russell's got their letter this morning” at this point Jane was just staring at the words on the page, taking nothing in. She liked Mrs. Russell. They had worked together at the school, and only lived one street away.

“Their eldest boy offed himself. That's why” her monotony expressed the indifference of her opinion, a part of her, just as it was with every citizen, since birth. If there was any time for individuality or emotion to stir in this woman, it should have been now. No longer would she see the closest thing she would have to a friend. She would not even be curious as to where they would go or who would fill the bleak space left in the Russell household.

“I don't remember seeing Nick during first break” Christopher admitted thinking nothing of it at the time, as was the law. “Not our problem. We shouldn't even be discussing this, I'm heading bed” He kissed his wife on the head and without making a sound made his way upstairs, checked on the girls. “Funny how one snores and t'other don't” he thought to himself before leaving them for his own bed. The blanket itched as it had always done. His earliest memory involved a blanket that itched like this one. He

could not complain as owning a blanket was better than not owning one. He would sleep peacefully until Jane ripped it from him in the middle of the night, as she does every night.

Tonight was different. He would not fall into a deep sleep after his usual twelve hour shift. He thought of the Russell's, and the repercussion their boy's simple action would have on that family. In a month's time no one would even recall their name. He could only guess the boy's name was James. Maybe John. The Russell's were nothing now. He forgot about the law, as do most people who contemplated ending their lives, those that wanted to escape. The law had been in place since Mussolini's rule. Thinking about it, the boy's name might've been Ben. A few weeks ago he had considered suicide. That thought stuck with him since. But the thought of what would happen to his girls after he was gone haunted him every time he held his bolt gun to a pig's head. He heard of death camps during the war. He couldn't imagine his girls suffering. He even had soul enough to not want Jane to suffer a fate like that all because he killed himself.

Even if it looked like an accident there would be an investigation. The shame of that would push Jane over the edge; he just knew she would follow him into death, leaving the girls alone. It was hard to get away with an accident, seeing as most places where accidents occur were off limits. The railway was forbidden. The factory could only be accessed during shift hours. The entire nation was being watched. Even an inopportune time to become roadkill would be monitored. The investigation would lead to Jane's suicide, or a letter being sent to 47 Rydal Road.

Wednesday

The radio came to life. Seven bells rang out through the narrow corridors and thin walls of 47 Rydal Road. Seven bells rang out across all the houses on Rydal Road. They were all the same, inside and out. Seven bells rang out across the nation. Christopher Heywood made his way to work, eating a sandwich that only had butter in it. He passed the Russell's house. He did not slow down; he had to be at work. The chorus of screaming pigs was the only sound louder than a hundred captive bolt pistols in the hall. In his stained overalls, Christopher began to contemplate life and death. The power he held over the pigs was terrifying. It was just as terrifying to hear that they hold as much a control over his life. During the breaks he heard of rumours stemming from other abattoirs. The pigs there were vicious, men losing fingers, as soon as they held the pistol to the pig's skull. They could easily kill a human, contributing to filth on the blood and shit stained ceramic tiles. It would be just as barbaric as the bolt cracking open the skull, blood streaming from the black blemish between its eyes. That was a luxury for the pigs; men

THE SOCK DRAWER

wouldn't get that treatment from them. They would be killed outright. We stun them and slit their throats. Day after day Christopher's overalls would become stained by the dried, brown pig blood. The pigs would die eventually after one last meal. Christopher wished for the same.

The alarm rang once. Lunch was another butter sandwich from home, and an apple from the Government. He saw another man cut his apple and put the slices into his own sandwich. Christopher decided to do the same. He had never felt such happiness from such a natural, simple incident since the day the girls were born. The alarm rang twice. The sound of boots hitting the floor in unison was a precursor to the hall of horrors beyond the door. Before every stun Christopher stared into the eyes of each pig before pulling the trigger.

The walk home was silent. The radio could be heard through the open windows of the empty vessel that was the Russell household. "In our state the individual is not deprived of freedom". The mantra faded off as Christopher walked by, but he knew how it ended. Recited time after time in his school days alongside the rest of the Union Movements teachings.

"In our state the individual is not deprived of freedom. In fact, he has greater liberty than an isolated man, because the state protects him and he is part of the State. Isolated man is without defence."

Now more than ever, Christopher believed these words. He was isolated and had no one to help. He had to stay strong for his girls. Home at last, he took his TRUTH with his meagre dinner, same as the night before. Same as always. Christopher went to bed the same time as Jane. He lay by her side, thinking about his earlier conversations with the pigs and the radio host. A train, diesel, ran by. His bed frame rattled. Jane groaned. He eventually fell into a light sleep, only to be disturbed by one of the girls crying, about an hour before the radio would start at Christopher's guess. She had a fever, kept crying about how she makes friends only for them to stop going to school a few weeks later. The other one began to stir. He calmed her. "That's just a part o' life sweetpea" he stroked her hair back. "People come and go, even me and your ma will have to go someday. Remember when Nana went on holiday? That's what we'll all do someday" with that she smiled "I love you Da".

Thursday

The chorus of screaming pigs was the only sound louder than a hundred captive bolt pistols in the hall. The day felt slower than any other. Both the pigs and his daughters

FICTION

were on his mind. The bell rang once. The drilling sound drowned out both child and pig crying throughout lunch. The apple sandwich was not satisfying. The bell ringing could have had something to do with that. In the days before the Union Movement, perhaps Christopher would have been diagnosed with melancholy, and sought the treatment for it. In this day and age, drawing so close to the millennium, that was not possible. Instead the Government introduce Nick Russell's replacement, a much younger man by the name of William. All Christopher heard from his employer was the hiss of gas forcing the piston into his own skull. The replacements high pitched voice marked him as hardly out of his teens, a piglet in this hogs world. The day flew by after lunch. Pig after pig, he pulled that trigger and slit their throats. Catharsis for not being able to slit his own. The piglet followed Christopher home, leaving as he got to the Russell household, greeted by its new resident at the door, cooing him for completing his first day at work. The piglet got his looks from the sow. "did you make any new friends petal?"

"But, as you know, we are modest. That is to say that we have it now." The politician interjected on the radio.

"Yeah, a few. It's a bit odd in there"

"We are the happiest nation! Cantril can't be wrong!" The host sounded as fake as the news. As he always did.

"Don't worry about that dear, come in take your TRUST"

TRUST. The country was fuelled by TRUST. Why should he have to take it in the first place. Christopher got home. One leg wrapped by his daughter, the other could be heard coughing from upstairs.

The walls are so thin. How could the government get away with such accommodation? How can they force us to eat what they decide or die starving and get fined in the process? And the trains. Why do the trains have to run throughout the night and why was I forced into this marriage? That poor piglet will have to man up soon enough. Of course something was odd about the abattoir. We slaughter pigs in return for drugs and a measly wage and an apple a day. Those god damn drugs.

TRUST.

TRUST. TRUST. TRUST. TRUST. TRUST. TRUST. TRUST.

He checked on his daughter, ignoring the radio and his wife telling him the exact same thing every night.

“I love you pet, your sis too.” With a kiss on her warm forehead, he left the room for his own. He tore the sheet from the bed and left it on the floor for Jane to pick up. He did not want to be disturbed tonight. Christopher Heywood went to bed without eating and without TRUST...

Friday

He woke up with a nosebleed and a headache, pulsing from his temples. Christopher was blind to the world, but he could hear the rain against the single pane of glass between him and the freighters heading north to Great Newcastle. His legs ached. They never ached with TRUST, but after years the pain, built up over years of indentured servitude, released itself on this bleak Friday morning. The shivering soon began after waking. Already cold without the blanket, Christopher felt like 47 Rydal Road had become the cold stores of the abattoir. The world soon brightened as the sun began to rise. The sun pierced through the projection between the same grey curtains in the front room. Its light was different than its regular autumnal orange. Through the haze of his eyes, the sun was green. The room was larger. He turned to look at Jane wrapped in the blanket, back facing him, her hair constantly shifted yet her body did not move. He rose to the sound of the bells, reverberating throughout the house. They were deeper than they usually were. The sound wubbed throughout the house. The walls shook violently with each chime of the subterranean bell, the doors motionless. The room was smaller now, smaller than it had ever been. He held his body to the door and sidled his way into the upper landing, crawling on all fours down the undulating staircase. He looked back; the pulsing had stopped when the bells stopped. The radio host was incoherent, only static mumbling. The walls calmed as he calmed. He could hear the man on the radio now, though it made no sense “Un estado totalitario armonizará en España el funcionamiento de todas las capacidades y energías del país, que dentro de la Unidad Nacional, el trabajo estimado como el más ineludible de los deberes será el único exponente de la voluntad popular.” Ingrained memories of his school days resurfaced.

“España, no. we are in England. WE are home. WE are Great Britain.” He stood to salute. “Why am I in Spain?” he lost his train of thought. He saw the cold cut of meat left from the night before and began to eat. It was flavourless. “Why is this a luxury? The pigs, piggy. I will march for you”. With that thought he left the house. The streets were busy. Birds strutted along the road, their insignificant curtain grey plumage was sprayed with waves of colour unlike any Christopher had seen in person. Red bricks danced about him, the countless houses he passed pushed him into the middle of the street. Only one did not strike out at him, the Russell household, now home to a fascist piglet and its mother. Who

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knows what else is inside? *An abattoir?* He did not know what reminded him to continue on his path to work, but whatever it was, it stopped him from barging into the piglet's house. The far off sound of the trains reminded him of home. He ran from them, their horns beating at his throbbing head, the screeching whistle of wheels on tracks scratched at his ear drums.

"Heywood, you're late. Why?" the boss's voice corralled Christopher into the hall, the pig's chorus in harmony with the oscillating walls and ceiling of the factory. The blood a vibrant green, then violet and at last resting on red when it was not observed directly by Christopher. The tiles where no longer square, their grout seemed to flow. Christopher was silent. The captive bolt pistols were silent. His nose had not stopped bleeding since he woke up, staining his pyjamas and face. The employer saw this. "You fool. You utter, utter fool. Somebody take him out back. NOW!" Directed at the abattoir security, they did as ordered whilst the employer went to his office. The security scared Christopher, so he dropped to the floor, played dead. If he could not observe them, neither he nor they existed in the out-dated world Christopher Heywood had invented. It did not stop the guards from dragging him into the back office, where the employer waited for him.

"Tell me why Chris? You're an idiot you know that?"

Christopher began squealing like a pig, interjected with a hiss and thud of a bolt pistol. His body shook each time he made that sound, as if being struck like the neighbouring pigs. "Chris stop" the guards restrained him as their boss found a vein on Christopher's arm. As the needle pierced his arm he let out a cry of pain and uttered "you clumsy butter boy" shortly before passing out. Two bells rang out.

Christopher found himself grounded into the harsh reality of the office. His memories of the past few hours, hazy as they were, scared him. The pains that struck his body in the morning had faded into a drilling numb ache. His nose stopped bleeding at some point, but it was tender to the breeze coming in through the window. He could hear the pigs crying next door, waiting in line to be the next victim of the governments regime, just as William, the Russells, everyone who worked at the abattoir and lived in this great nation did. It began to rain. He cleaned up before leaving. He knew he would not be allowed into the factory. He walked home, rain dampening his hair and clothes. Christopher did not care whether the puddles were deep or not. A sock that is wet is just a wet sock. Pigs love the rain, he thought.

Christopher put his key into the door, and it opened for him. She was waiting for him. The scowl on her face was the most emotion Jane had expressed for a long,

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long time. She handed him a red envelope. Relief, nausea, fear. All this and more found themselves travelling between the synaptic clefts of Christopher Heywood's mind. He took it in his shaking hands when Jane decided to speak in a low vicious tone. "Why? Why Christopher? How could you do this to me?" she started to cry as she thought about what will happen to her. His fear turned into dread seeing this. It was his fault, his family shouldn't be reprimanded for his actions. He too began to cry. He opened the envelope. On eggshell white stationary, the Union Movement's salient lion was embossed and inked in with navy. *The Great British Lion eats the pigs, while the Eagles of Europe watch over us all, doing nothing perched on their mighty bundle of sticks.* He could not even take his family's death sentence seriously. He stared blankly at the writ. Once he began to pay attention, his grip slackened, the paper threatening to gently fall onto the ground. "It's just me"

"It's just me" he let out a just laugh "It's just me" he placed the paper onto the side, at the bottom in her own hand, lay Queen Margaret's signature.

"Don't tell me you were worried about me or those little shits" Thus began the Heywood's tirade.

"Clearly I care more then you. How could you call 'em that, they've done nothin' but love you?"

"You only think about yourself"

"I think about meself? I didn't off meself weeks ago because I didn't want what was done to the Russell's done to you or the girls. Where you really worried about only your well bein'?" He held back tears and pushed past her into the kitchen. He turned on the stove, and began to fry some bacon. The smell was intoxicating, as was infuriating his wife.

"You nothing but a pig, Christopher. You disgust me"

"Face the facts. The real facts, not that pig slop you sit about listening to all day. We're all pigs Jane, only some of us treat each other like humans every now and then" She left the kitchen, then the house, slamming the front door behind her. A smile found its way onto Christopher's face as he began buttering some bread.

Christopher ate his sandwich in the silence, his breathing steadied. The radio was nearing the children's programming. "Together in Britain we have lit a flame that the ages shall not extinguish. Guard that sacred flame, citizens, until it illuminates Britain and lights again the..."

As Christopher began laughing at the absurdity of the speech, the door opened, the

girls ran in “Daddy” they screamed in joyful unison. His smile did not disappear, only broadened when they came in. Even Jane’s spiteful presence wouldn’t curb the love he had for the girls. He made them dinner. He read them a story after they finished their school work. They fell asleep by his side, one by one he carried them to their bedroom. He kissed them both on their heads. He lingered momentarily before heading downstairs. Christopher sat in his sickly, lime chair and took his TRUST. He listened to the national anthem, then the nine chimes marking the night, and closed his eyes. He exhaled. *I was a good citizen.*

Saturday

The first of seven bells rang out. Christopher stirred in his chair, he slouched during the night. A pain formed in his lower back. After the seventh bell, he was wide awake. The door began to shudder, four knocks rattled it in its frame. They were here. Christopher was ready, he had already found peace within the situation and bid his farewell to the girls as he put them to bed. Jane was waiting at the end of the hall, she did not sleep. She could not sleep without Christopher by her side. Before opening the door, Christopher Heywood gave one last look at his wife, and silently said farewell to his life in 47 Rydal Road. Two men waited for him, either side of the door. They wore overalls similar to his work ones, only cleaner. They towered over Christopher by a head, but he was not intimidated. With his hands bound he was helped into the back of a van, white and oversized, like the ones that come to the factory every morning. A man and his young girl were the only other belligerents in the van at this point. As it bound its way through the pot-hole ridden streets of Great Sheffield, the cargo doubled in size. It was black as night in the van when the doors were closed. He only knew the dark of night tainted with the glow of the halogen street lamps across the city.

It was nearing the nine bells when they alighted from the van. The sky was that grey blue hue of old navy uniforms. No stars could be seen at this hour, or any at the camp in the valley. Floodlights ran at all hours. The huts had barren windows, paned with a sheet of glass. There were no thick grey curtains to keep the light out and keep the prisoners sane. Christopher had no idea where he was. There was no indication as what direction they left the city in, no one talked. They either slept part or all of the way, or sat silently in the darkness. It was cold, but the whole country would be cold this time of year. The logical place would be along the border, north of Great Newcastle.

There was no one in sight. They were guided to a shack, still manacled. Three wooden bunk beds lay, headboards against a barren wall, opposite the flaring light coming from the windows. Each cot had a thin, itchy blanket. They each climbed into a bunk.

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Christopher struggled to sleep. At least there were no trains. Unless it was a Sunday.

Sunday

It was Sunday. A series of fire alarms rang out throughout every hut in the camp. The piercing metal ring pained Christopher's ears, everyone else in his hut groaned at the din. It was artificially bright outside. The sun had not risen yet. He marched out, and beheld the camp. As far as he could see into the valley, people were emerging from the same huts as he did. At varying intervals along the fences keeping them in, watchtowers sat, adorned with floodlights. They followed the guard to the food line. Grey porridge, stale bread, an apple and a canteen of water. TRUST. Christopher ate very little compared to his cohabitants. After breakfast seven bells rang aloud on the tannoy system. He was still in this fascist nightmare. There was very little to do in the camp. No books to read, only the radio to listen to. Guards broke up larger groups of people talking. Christopher walked through the main avenue, looking left and right at the rows of huts on stilts, and the broken people sitting at their steps.

By noon the sun was getting to Christopher, surprisingly hot this time of year, but maybe the floodlights had something to do with that. After hours of walking he saw nothing to hurt himself with. He skipped the lunch service. More gruel bread and fruit. The canteen could be topped up at any of the pumps throughout the day. Whenever the radio fell silent, he heard the soft murmur of people about him. Thousands, if not more, were present. Christopher felt uneasy, nauseous. He walked along the fence, topped with barbed wire. In the near distance he saw a second set of fences alongside a few rows of houses similar to those at Rydal Road. He saw a large warehouse. Guards stared at him if he lingered in one spot for too long. He stared back and moved on. He got to his hut and lay in the bed. His clothes began to smell. No one had a uniform. They must wash their clothes here.

After the dinner service the others returned. The father and his daughter first. Then came two men, who did not know each other, and a man and woman, husband and wife presumably. It was bleak in the hut. The walls were untreated wood, splinters galore, as the child found out soon enough. It was silent in the camp, except for the radio. No one paid it any attention. That was, until after that evening's nine bells. A voice, different than the one Christopher or anyone in the hut had heard before in their years of tuning in, began to speak. It was a woman's voice, rather stern, unforgiving.

"Zone one, houses twenty five to forty eight" silence followed.

"Zone four, houses twenty five to forty eight" Christopher did not know what his

huts number was.

“Zone seven, houses one to twenty four” he could hear a terrified gasping and panic come from across the avenue, from the hut that mirrored the position of his. It soon settled into a sob, just as the mysterious woman said “That is all. God bless Queen Margaret, God Bless the Union.”

Christopher could not fall asleep, he was curious, just as much as he was scared. *Zone eight. I must be house one zone eight.* He listened at the wind whistling through the cracks in the hut. He did not notice that before. He was deaf to the world. He heard whispers in the bunks next to him. One of the single men was talking to the father of the girl.

“I found a man, he’s from Sheffield too. Been here less than a week” *Nick?*

“Did he say anything else? Anything important?” *yes, did he?*

“Arrived here in the morning but got separated from his family. All the beds were full in their hut, so he was put in’t one next door. He went to bed and heard the radio say his family’s house number, twenty three I’m guessing. The house was empty the following morning. Hasn’t seen them since” *At least the girls will be ok. What will Jane tell them?*

“Oh god, we’re going die. My little girls going to die” the father began to cry. The man tried to calm him down before his daughter woke up. He sobbed quietly into the pillow.

“I don’t know how to tell you this but it’s worse than that. You see the big sheds? That’s where they off us. The man said he could hear screams coming from it. Said he could hear saws and pistons or something. Called it an abattoir. He knew the sounds of an abattoir, used to work in one before his kid got them-” the father threw up before the other man could finish his sentence. It was mostly digested and watery. Seeping into the gaps between the floorboards, the stench filled the room.

“The...the...” the father couldn’t finish his sentence. The other man looked at him in pity, bowing his head confirming the words he was trying to get out. All that came out was more vomit. There was always a rumour that there was a pig farm that only the rich ate from up north. *This is it. This is how the upper echelons stay fat. They don’t kill us that’s a waste.* Sweat began to bead down Christopher’s cheek. A knot began to swell in his stomach. *They give us a taste of luxury to keep us going, treat us like royalty, treat us like pigs before they get shipped off to us. Do they even stun us, give us mercy in our last moments alive, so our blood won’t spoil our meat?* Christopher threw up. His chest tightened as he curled up underneath his blanket. He began to cry. He missed his girls. He missed killing his pigs. He missed the piglet and his mother a few streets over. He wished he saw Nick. He missed Jane, and the lime green armchair, the grey curtains and the room they shared in 47 Rydal Road. This Sunday was the last one he felt at ease.

Days passed, only eating apples avoiding the long pig served at the dinner service. He saw others avoid it just as he did, sharing the same look of terror on their faces. Every

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night he he vomited before entering the hut. He no longer knew what day it was, just the time whenever it was declared on the radio. Every couple of nights the tannoy called out a different set of houses, the woman still nonchalant about sending people to their deaths, into the bellies of the rich. She was just as malicious as before. It reminded Christopher of his wife during their last conversation. This was his last thought before he knew for certain his time had come. He listened calmly to the tannoy, hopefully. The woman's voice was seductive tonight, as she began to announce the lottery. *This is it.*

“Zone three, houses twenty five to forty eight”

“Zone five, houses twenty five to forty eight”

“Zone eight, houses one to twenty four”



Get The Seed Out

By Courtney Harler

Jack sat on Molly's side porch and picked an infected chigger bite. He didn't seem to mind the peeling paint and sagging floorboards, or the railings that had fallen off into the yard by the ancient cistern. He didn't seem to mind the broken chairs, or the likely possibility of splinters in his ass, either. He just sat flat on the floor, rather like he belonged there. "You have to get the seed out," he said.

Molly watched Jack delicately dig at his leg with a pocket knife. He wore pleated khaki shorts, not cutoffs like all the other local boys. *City sissy*, they called him, but they really didn't know him. They didn't know he'd spent summers in the "country" for most of his life. In fact, not only did no one really know him, no one really liked him, either—thought him uppity. And weird. For Molly, some strange was exciting, something new and dangerous to sort out. She liked puzzles and games—she was about to turn thirteen, about to call herself a teenager. She knew Jack was a bit older, already started in high school, and his presence on her porch thrilled her, though she kept her expression stern and tight, like when she told a dirty joke. She never—never—laughed at her own jokes, and she never let a boy know she liked his face.

She sneaked glances at Jack's raised eyebrows, his focus centered on his calf with the swollen bug bite. He sat there splayed, knees bent and feet pulled into his crotch. Molly could see dark shadows under the cuffs of his shorts—swim trunks, maybe. She flicked her eyes away, averting her gaze to the watery stream of blood that ran toward his sock, the pinkness gathering there in the pristine white cotton.

"There," Jack said, and held up his gleaming knife blade for her inspection.

Molly flinched, turned to look into the yard, and further, into the horizon of pasture. Over her shoulder she flung, "You're so fucking gross, Jack. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

She could feel Jack's darting eyes on her, boring into the sunburnt skin of her neckline. When she turned, deliberately and finally, Jack still held the knife aloft, frozen like a soldier's statue in salute. Molly crouched and peered at the sharp metal flecked with blood, despite Jack's stupid blank expression. (Jack, too, had a pure poker face, which Molly admired.) Amid the blood she spotted what could only be termed a seed, a little white seed. Was it the bug? Or the baby of the breeding bug? Molly couldn't know for sure. She pushed the hand holding the knife down toward Jack's lap, then put her hand on his

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shoulder. She nudged at him until he came out of his stupor. His eyes were like wet glass, like mirrors, and Molly saw her own wide nose in his jet-black pupils.

Molly said, “Well, are we swimming? Or not?”

They hiked the wooded pasture to the upper pond, which was cleaner and clearer than those below. Still not much more than a glorified cow tub, it reeked of frogs. Several croaked and jumped at their approach. Trees shaded the shallow pond, made the day seem longer gone than mid-afternoon.

Turned out Jack forgot his swimsuit entirely, wearing striped boxers underneath instead. Molly sniggered—because she’d never betray herself with a blush—at Jack’s fancy black drawers as he stripped nude and dove, touching bottom within seconds, or so Molly assumed, given the way the pond had shrunk in the recent dry heat. He rose to the surface again with a smile on his face, his teeth so white and straight and sharp they looked almost carnivorous.

“Come on in,” he beckoned to Molly, waving his arms backward, high over his head. He tipped his body to float on his back, his nose bobbing above the surface.

Molly slipped off her printed sundress and adjusted her suit, gingerly plucking at the bottom from both sides like a lady, rather than grabbing one-handed at the bunched fabric in her crack and squatting, as usual. When she felt ready, she waded through the soft black muck at the edge of the pond.

Jack lifted his head and said, “You could skip the suit,” but Molly said, “Tough luck,” then belly-flopped and swam out to Jack in four quick strokes. She looped her dripping arms about his neck, kissed his surprised, laughing mouth, then pushed him down to the bottom of the pond again, her hands on his shoulders, then her feet on his shoulders, the knobs of his spindly bones digging into her soles. She stood shakily, feeling three times as tall, all her body above her knees out of the water. Jack held her ankles, her calves and thighs, steadying her wobbly legs while she looked up and took in the muted colors of the pond’s grove. Gray-green cedars rimmed the pond, their tips blunted against the azure summer sky. They were alone, no cows in sight.

Without warning Jack threw Molly into the muddy water, the grit stirred by their flailing. He broke into the air with a gasp, one that twinned Molly’s as she gulped a breath, then splashed and sank. Molly wondered if Jack would worry he’d hurt her, drowned her, but then knew better than to think Jack would care, either way.

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Molly swam like an eel toward Jack's legs, her eyes open, burning, but marking her prey. She plowed forward and wiggled her head into the center of him. Even under water, Molly heard Jack bellow, a muffled, ambiguous sound. She rose up to find Jack bleating with scrunched eyes, his chest pimpled with gooseflesh, his hands huddled together underwater. He seemed to be trying not to chortle as he howled at the same time.

Molly took his jaw in her hands and kissed his cheekbones, his eyelids, his hairline. She licked his neck, nibbled at his collarbone. She couldn't know how she knew what to do, but she did it, regardless. She put the tip of her tongue in his ear canal, tasted hot yellow wax. She spat and Jack laughed but lowered his face, gently caught her lips with his perfect teeth.

Soon Jack let go of his delicate parts and clutched at Molly's breasts. His hands traveled to her shoulders and pulled the straps of her suit down to her waist, then to her thighs, where the suit stuck. He dipped one hand down between her legs and Molly said, "No, not here."

Jack didn't listen.

Molly thought of tadpoles, but even their slimy little bodies, their grotesque spermy tails, couldn't make her make him stop.

Jack broke Molly open with his long fingers that day in the pond. "There," he'd said, "nothing to worry over now." After, she'd gotten her first yeast infection. At the exact moment of penetration, Molly had felt a minor pinch, but it had been overridden by so many other warm sensations—the swelter of the frog pond in summer; the sublime heat of her own body, inside and out—that she wasn't sure what Jack had meant, and she'd left off caring in the moment, anyway. In the following years, while Jack was tucked away at reform school, Molly would reconsider their choices that blistering day, but she'd never regret them.

They didn't meet again until many summers later, in the barn. In the loft, the square hay bales stacked into a prickly bed. No one else knew where they had gone in the moonless night, when they were supposed to be sleeping.

Jack had said that no one cared what he did; Molly thought of Jack's mother, the woman who had paid Molly to iron Jack's stepdad's button-up work shirts when she'd broken her ankle. Jack's mother had sat on the couch, her foot elevated, directing Molly through creases and cuffs. Molly thought then of her own mother, snoring through her

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snot, propped up by an allergy head cold in the recliner in the living room.

Molly'd snuck past in a nightgown, out the kitchen door, over the warped boards of the side porch, onto the cold dew-wet grass, and then onto to the footpath speckled by chicken shit. The hens snuffled under their wings in the walnut trees, harangued to sleep by the rooster who had crowed into the purple sunset hours ago.

Jack and Molly lay together, just talking, not kissing. Jack spoke of his longtime girl, the one he'd met at a party up north, in the city. He only saw her about twice a month, said she squeaked like a mouse when he loved her. He took Molly's hand and said, "But yours are warmer. Softer."

Molly let him hold one hand but slapped him with the other.

"Hey now," Jack said, and rolled on top of Molly. He held himself up by his forearms, and Molly felt like she couldn't get close enough, couldn't get to the meat—the heart—of him.

Jack kissed her then, feather kisses that didn't quite make contact with her lips, her neck. She felt Jack's soft baby mustache more than his actual lips. She wanted his tongue, his saliva, but he gave her dry pecks, like he couldn't quite decide what to do with her. He felt at her breasts with light touches that drove her mad—she covered his hands and squeezed, but he let go as soon as she released them. She tried to find his erection, tried to skim her fingers over the core of him, but he shifted his hips and held her face in his hands.

"Stop," he said.

Molly first thought of the pond, how he hadn't stopped, how he'd taken what he wanted. Then she thought Jack's girl, how a squeaker couldn't be much of a real woman, and suddenly, Molly wanted to protect that girl—that girl she'd never be.

Molly lay still and Jack rolled away. He talked and talked again, and she kept listening, for hours, until the black sky relented and the stars faded. Molly took hints of sunrise as her cue, leaving Jack to make his own way home. She last saw him hunched on the floor, tying his shoes.

Back in her bed, Molly wondered if he'd jumped from the loft into the barnyard below, if he'd run through the fields or walked along the country highway home, if he'd lain in drainage ditches to avoid the oncoming headlights of morning traffic. Molly slid a hand into her panties and thought about how best to break up with her own longtime boyfriend in the morning.

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You merely kissed a boy all over his body and he swore he owned you, Molly thought. Except Jack, who refused to own or be owned. He never came around when she expected him, though he lived less than a half-mile away—when he was actually living with his parents, at least. He seemed to disappear for extended periods. Molly was afraid to ask.

In the meantime, Molly went to school, then to after-school rehearsal. She played a serviceable alto saxophone in the jazz band. She'd joined to share a stand with her boyfriend, but she was alone now, a single in a school where singles were losers, wherein marriage was an acceptable post-graduation option. Molly did feel lost, but also, in some way, biding her time.

Jack phoned on a winter night. Molly had turned seventeen in November. Jack was—twenty? Molly couldn't remember, exactly. They'd never spent his actual birthday together, despite being friends, or some kind of friends, for the better part of the last decade. Molly didn't even know the date of Jack's birthday, which she instantly found odd, hearing his voice again.

Molly took the call on the porch despite the weather, wedging the spiral cord into the door jamb. He said he'd pick her up in twenty, to dress warmly. Jack said he'd bought a boat of a car after his dishonorable discharge from the US Marine Corps; he wanted to take her for a ride. (Is that where he'd been? Camp Lejeune?) Jack told her he worked in a local factory now that he was "an adult" (his exact words), but was living at home to save money to repair and repaint his vintage oversize muscle car. Molly rolled her eyes and cut his idle chatter short, telling him she'd be waiting. All along, Molly knew Jack wanted to tell her his big news, to brag about his pending nuptials, but she didn't care just now—she just wanted out the door. To see his face. Boys make their own choices, she told herself.

Molly met Jack at the bottom of her long gravel driveway. Jack had the heat blasting and some mild seventies rock cranked up on the stereo system. Molly tried to wear her seatbelt and found it didn't extract or expand the way it was supposed to. She scooted into the middle of the wide front seat, right next to Jack, and used the lap belt there. Jack grinned and sang along with the radio, then looped an arm around her shoulders. He hugged her head to his neck for a quick second then loosened his hold on her. Bundled up and too warm, she looked out through the windshield, then back at his profile. She crinkled her nose at him when he glanced her way—a kind of question, one he still understood, even after all these years.

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“We’re not going far,” he said, then took the next right way too fast, squealing the tires. Molly clutched his thigh, bracing herself, but Jack casually guided the car with his one free hand, like he’d been practicing this particular turn for weeks. They passed one dented mailbox before the pavement turned to dirt. Jack drove on and Molly felt carsick, rumbled by the rough road and overheated in her winter coat and scarf. She unwound the itchy wool from her neck and tossed it into the back seat. She unzipped her coat and shuffled her arms out of the sleeves, trying not to nudge the wheel. Jack gave the enormous wheel a deliberate shimmy, but the car barely registered his movement. “She’s steady,” Jack said. “Not sensitive, like some girls I know.”

Molly stifled a nervous giggle, frustrated with her coat now, feeling stuck and vulnerable. She wasn’t sure she wanted to go to some mystery location with Jack. He’d said “dishonorably discharged,” hadn’t he? Jack wasn’t one to lie, but he wasn’t one to tell the whole truth, either. She wanted to ask him what he’d done, but she had to wait until he got soft with her in the dark. He was a shit-talker, but he talked truth in the night, when being awake late felt like dreaming, like swimming.

About five miles out they reached the dead end of the dirt lane, where the road widened into a parking lot on the bank of the local creek. A lone log cabin stood on the opposite bank. The property looked dark, except for a security lamp mounted high on a wooden telephone pole. Jack cut the car’s engine and its lights. A peace fell like wet snow around them, and as her eyes adjusted to the single lamp’s orange glow, Molly could see a narrow rope bridge cast high over the creek, swinging in the winter wind. When she opened the passenger door to step out, she heard the water rushing, felt the cold air hit her neck. She ducked back into the car and zipped her coat again. Jack reached for her scarf, watching her pull mittens from her pockets.

“Won’t they hear us?” Molly asked. “Run us off?”

“Gone for the season,” Jack said. He shrugged innocently, like a little boy in church.

Molly squinted her eyes. “How do you know?” Molly looped her scarf and pulled the tails through the loop.

“Some of Mom’s friends from the city,” Jack said. “Wanna check it out?” He winked, and Molly wanted to pinch him.

Molly stuffed her mittened hands into her pockets and asked, “The bridge, or the cabin?”

“You think I break into houses?” Jack slapped his own knee, a move Molly knew

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to be one of Jack's tired attempts at self-deprecating humor. Or some kind of low, base humor that never truly amused Molly. She guessed that's why she and Jack had never worked as a couple.

Molly shrugged, mimicking Jack's earlier false innocence with a blank, stoic face. Never let a boy know you like his face. Never.

Jack laughed out loud then, genuinely, and said, "Let's just start with the bridge, okay?"

Molly hated heights but felt she owed Jack something for showing her this strange place. She'd lived just down the road her whole life and never known someone had a "vacation home" tucked back in here. Leave it to city folk to think going rustic could be fun. This part of the county didn't even have city water yet—did they haul it up from the creek?

Molly tried to stall, fidgeting with her mittens again until Jack huffed and opened his door first, the jagged metal dragging against the frame a bit, as if damaged and fixed years ago. "Molls," Jack said, and she realized he hadn't called her that name since the first summer of the chigger bite and the cow pond. She wondered if he still doctored and bloodied himself, but she didn't want to ask. Maybe she really didn't want to know.

Instead, she left the car and trailed Jack to the ladder that led to the bridge. The ground crunched under her sneakers, less from pebbles and more from icy frost. She thought about Jack's skid earlier, how truly recklessly and exhilaratingly he had behaved on the slick roads. Did Jack jackass around to try to impress her, or did he actually not care for her safety at all? I will likely never know the truth of any of this, she thought. And somehow, just now, the truth seemed irrelevant.

Jack climbed and she followed. He walked onto the bridge like he'd been there before, which he probably had, maybe even with his girlfriend, but Molly's eyes remained riveted to the sway beneath his feet, the motion there. She froze, a cool coward, on the top rung of the ladder, unable to join him. In the smack middle of the bridge, Jack turned to notice Molly's death grip at the bottom of the posts that supported the rope railing. The boards below him appeared solid in their rope lacings, but Molly feared cracks and breaks in the dark.

Trying to save face, Molly leaned back and pretended to stargaze, then realized that she hadn't looked up yet, only down and down and down, first from the creek's bank, and then the bridge's ladder, into the frigid water below. When she'd looked down, she'd seen forest debris—twigs and logs and branches—caught in the current, waterlogged wood

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gleaming in the starlight. Earlier, blinded by the unnatural orange light, Molly hadn't considered the absolute clarity of the skies here, but now that her brain and her eyes could discern the difference in shades of darkness, she held her faked pose, honestly held captive by the night sky. The lights of your house or your neighbor's house or your barn or their barn could obscure the stars—dim them, diminish them—but just barely so, way out here away from everything, alone with Jack.

Molly heard Jack feet's shuffle against the boards of the bridge again, felt the posts adjust to his weight as he came closer. He crouched in front of her, then sat, straddling the bridge itself. "You won't swing so much on the edge," he said. She saw his breath, felt its moist heat dissipate like a jinn from a lamp. She crawled onto the bridge and shimmied close to Jack, looping her thighs over his for warmth. Their faces touched and Jack reached to her neck to unzip her coat. Molly started to protest until Jack pulled her even closer, locking his arms around her underneath her coat. He wore a close-fitting fleece, the sleeves of which began to warm her ribs in moments. She felt warmer unzipped than zipped because Jack's heat had trapped her own, blocked out the cold that had snuck in with her fear. He kissed her then, first her chin and jaw, then her mouth, steam rising between them like in an intolerably hot shower, one they'd never taken together. How many times had Molly touched herself under a scalding spray, thinking of Jack. How many times had her siblings beat upon the bathroom door, imploring her to stop wasting the limited water in the shallow cistern? Molly felt now that she had Jack here, finally—between her legs—at last. Who knew what he might give her.

Jack drove home slowly and Molly didn't feel sick this time. She felt just right, safe in the car. The seventies music played low now, the same songs as before, the same band as before, on a vintage eight-track tape deck Molly hadn't noticed on the way out to the swinging bridge. One song was about wine and a hotel, about never leaving, about a world devoid of freedom.

Jack parked at the bottom of Molly's driveway and killed the engine and lights again. He pulled her tight to him with his right arm and deftly unbuttoned her jeans with his left hand. She let him into her underwear, shocked by the chill of his quick fingers. He played there in her damp curls, heating them both. Molly knew Jack wanted to talk now.

"What did you do? In the military, I mean," she said.

Jack's hand stilled against her. "I rebelled. Hurt some guys." He craned his neck to look out his window.

FICTION

Molly waited until he looked down and asked, “They lock you up?”

“Yeah, in the goddamn brig.”

Molly sucked a breath through her teeth in a low whistle. “You were gone...for months.”

“Spent most of that in solitary.” Jack cupped her crotch and squeezed, like testing a fruit.

“Fuck,” Molly said.

“Doc said I wasn’t fit, in the end.”

Something slaked loose in Molly, something hot and wet, something new and weird. “Why, exactly?” she asked. She panted a little, trying to moderate her speech with her breath.

“Couldn’t control the rage.” Jack put his mouth to the place where Molly’s neck met her shoulder. He bit and sucked there without remorse—only Jack knew what made her weak.

Molly let him mark her and then whispered, when she could, “Aren’t soldiers... meant to be violent?”

“Yeah, but they said I didn’t know my enemy.”

Molly understood all at once. She knew in her bones that Jack couldn’t stand to be bested by anyone—friend, foe, or lover. That’s why he had his hands on her, even now, when she knew his plans. She knew the white wedding was set for next summer.

“I’m getting married,” Jack said, resting his forehead against her temple.

“I know,” Molly said, “I know.”

Jack lifted his face and asked, “Who told you?”

Molly gasped as Jack shifted his fingers, pushed into her, hard. “Everybody,” she said, almost strangled by the unrelenting pleasure of him. By the small shocks running through her.

“What?” Jack said, “Who?”

“You’ve always been good for gossip,” Molly said, and then she could say no more.

Jack caught again that spot that Molly’d found years ago, on nights like these when Jack had left her wanting, even if she’d satisfied him with her mouth, her hands, with both

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she supposed. Molly greedily took what he gave her anyway—he kept talking, but she ignored his words and focused below on his nimble fingers.

Molly knew she'd not hear from Jack again, at least not for a good while, depending on how long it took him to save up for a place of his own. Maybe he'd get restless and marry his steady girl sooner, live with her and her folks up north. Maybe Molly wouldn't see them around town then, wouldn't have to pretend to delightedly coo into their baby stroller. Maybe Molly'd find a steady man of her own, make some precious ugly babies of her own. Maybe Molly'd forget Jack ever existed. Maybe she'd forget how he'd rambled in the dark and the cold with seductive fervency, the way he'd comment on the minute details of her body without pretense—her warm soft hands, her wet willing lips, the striations of muscles in her thighs. Maybe Molly would remember Jack as a hopeless teenage crush and nothing more. But even more likely, Molly would weep over her own guilt when she herself got married to some upstanding guy, thinking that Jack should have been her best man.





Shoot The Moon

By Jenna Byers

Andrew was a perfectly ordinary man. He was thirty-four years old, single, with a nice flat just off Islington Green. He called his mother on Tuesdays after her stories, and every time she asked him when he was going to bring a nice girl home. Andrew had never yet had the heart to tell her that it was mostly because he was looking for a nice man instead. So he just told her that he hadn't found the right person yet.

Andrew was under no delusions about himself. He worked in a bank, but not as a trader or a broker, he was a mortgage advisor, so he found most of his colleagues unpleasant, and they found him boring. But there were two reasons why Andrew stuck with the job. One was the steady salary, and the other was the generous holiday time, including time off in lieu if he worked Saturdays.

Andrew worked three Saturdays in a month, and then, on the last weekend of the month he would take off Thursday, Friday and Monday, and go on a long weekend somewhere. In November last year he had finally covered all the capitals of Europe, spending a beautiful, snowy weekend in Tallinn. Then, twice a year, Andrew took a full two weeks off and went somewhere further afield. Last year it had been a tour from Hong Kong to Shanghai and a trip to Namibia. This year he was planning to go to Moscow and Bali.

But on this particular February morning Andrew wasn't going anywhere nearly so exotic. He was on a train to Hareminster, three hours out of London. He had recently been reading a book set in Hareminster, and he had decided that he wanted to see it for himself.

But at the moment Andrew wasn't thinking about books, he was looking at someone sitting in the window seat diagonally across from him. He guessed that the man was in his mid-twenties, long and thin and taut. He was wearing dark jeans and a black t-shirt and there were tattoos poking out of his sleeves and creeping up his neck. Normally Andrew didn't like tattoos, but the one on the stranger's arm looked like a dragon, and Andrew had always liked dragons. He had even thought about getting a tattoo of one himself when he was eighteen, but he had chickened out on the way to the tattoo parlour. And it wasn't just the tattoos. The stranger had his eyebrow pierced and when his tongue flicked out to lick his lips, Andrew caught a glimpse of a tongue piercing. He hadn't kissed someone with a tongue piercing since he was a teenager.

FICTION

Then man looked up, and his bright blue eyes caught Andrew staring. Andrew dropped his gaze back to his book and did his best not to blush. He waited as long as he could bear, not reading a word, then he lifted his eyes without moving his head, and looked at the man once more.

The stranger looked up, and this time he smiled at Andrew. It was a dirty, lascivious smile and Andrew could feel the heat in his cheeks as he looked away once more. He looked down at the book on his lap and managed a glance at his watch. 8.27. Still two and a half hours to go.

He had just decided that he wasn't going to look up again when the stranger shifted and slid across into the aisle seat.

"Hey," he said.

Andrew did consider not looking up, but he thought that might make things more awkward. "Yeah?" he said softly.

"Do you want to suck me off?" the stranger asked.

"Excuse me?" Andrew blinked, and he looked up into the entirely serious face of the other man.

"Do you want to suck me off? You can get two people in the bathrooms here easy." As he spoke there was a flash of silver piercing between his teeth. "South West trains not so much, but Southern give you loads of room."

Andrew stuttered. "That's a gerund," he managed.

"What?"

"Me sucking you off, it's a gerund."

The stranger's eyes narrowed and he looked at Andrew for a moment. "Is that a 'no' then?"

"Yes."

"Wait, is that a yes?"

"No."

"Freak."

And with that assessment, the stranger slid back across the seat and put on his headphones. Andrew blinked a few more times and then he glanced at his watch. 8.29. He hoped the stranger wasn't going all the way to Hareminster. Though he did have a brief pang of regret, wondering what it would be like to give someone a blowjob in a train bathroom. But then he thought of how dirty the floor would be and his regret vanished.

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Andrew got off the train two and a half hours later and took a moment to look around. He couldn't check in to his hotel until after 2pm, but down the end of a long, crooked high street, Andrew could see a cathedral, and he decided to head for that.

It was a Thursday morning and the cathedral was nearly empty. There was an old woman taking donations at the entrance, and she looked so grateful to have some company that Andrew not only donated twice as much as he had planned, but he lingered for twenty minutes, listening to her talk about her two cats and her three grandchildren like they were all equally intelligent. But finally she released him into the peace of the cathedral.

Andrew spent a bit of time looking at the glass windows, guessing the saints and the stories they depicted. He had visited a lot of churches in his time, and he was pretty good at this game. Until he came to one window and he stopped. It was a woman, dressed in a flowing green robe, kneeling with her head on a block, and behind her was an executioner raising an axe. Andrew had never seen anything like it in a church before.

“St Agatha Kwon Chin-i.”

Andrew whirled around at the unexpected voice and found himself facing a man maybe a couple of years younger than he was. The man had thin, blond hair that looked almost white in the light coming through the windows. He was average height and thin and he wore little glasses that he pushed up his nose as Andrew looked at him.

“I'm sorry?” Andrew asked.

The man gestured to the window. “The saint. Agatha Kwon Chin-i. She was arrested in Korea for being a Catholic and beheaded in 1840.”

“So an English church is the perfect place to put her,” Andrew quipped.

The other man smiled and Andrew thought how nice he looked when he smiled.

“The old window was broken in a storm a few years ago. We have quite a big Korean community around here, and they offered to pay for a new one.”

“How do you know so much about it?”

“I'm Graham,” the man stuck out his hand to shake. “I'm a volunteer tour guide here. Though it's been a while since anyone actually asked me for a tour.”

Andrew took his hand and smiled. “Why don't you give me one?”

“Yeah?”

“Sure. You don't want to get out of practice.”

So Graham took him back to the entrance and they started the tour from there. Graham knew what he was talking about, and he had a startlingly good head for dates. He talked and Andrew listened, and once or twice other visitors drifted over to listen, but none of them lasted long.

FICTION

At first it was just Graham talking, but then Andrew started asking questions and comparing the place to other churches that he had seen, and Graham grew ever more animated.

Finally he stopped. "Have you really seen all these places?" he asked.

Andrew shrugged, feeling suddenly sheepish. He thought of his mother, who always said that he bragged about his holidays. "I like travelling," he murmured.

"Well, you'll have to tell me what you do that you can afford to do all this travelling."

Andrew's voice was even quieter this time. "I'm a mortgage advisor."

"It's obviously working out for you."

"What about you? What do you do?" Andrew asked.

"I'm a lecturer, at Hareminster Uni."

"What do you teach?"

"Take a guess."

Andrew smiled just a little. "I'm going to guess some form of history."

Graham smiled back at him, and Andrew was struck once again by just how nice he looked when he smiled. "Theological history," he said.

"What, so Martin Luther and the Reformation and all that?" Andrew asked, struggling to dredge up any theological history he had ever learnt.

"Yeah, but we do other stuff too."

"Like what?"

"We do some classes on the Quran and the work of translating the Bible into English," Graham answered.

"Oh, that actually sounds kind of interesting."

"I'm not religious, in case you were wondering."

"You just spend all your time reading about it, and then you spend your spare time in a church," Andrew quipped. "Do people assume you are?"

"A lot of my students think I'm a failed priest," Graham answered.

They talked for a while longer, possibly Andrew could have stayed there an hour or more, but then his stomach grumbled, and the sound seemed to echo in the vastness of the church, so there was no way he could pretend it hadn't happened.

Graham stopped and Andrew could see the smile that he was trying to hide. "Should I let you go then?" Graham asked quietly.

Andrew thought of the last couple of hours, and he thought about the days spreading out ahead of him, and he looked at Graham smiling at him. "Maybe you could

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let me buy you lunch?” he offered.

Graham looked surprised, and he hesitated for so long that Andrew decided he was going to say no. Then the look cleared from his eyes and he nodded. “So long as I can pick the restaurant,” he said.

Now it was Andrew’s turn to smile. “Deal.”

They went to a little Italian place around the corner from the church, and they ordered pizza. Andrew was surprised to find it was the best pizza he had eaten since his trip to Rome a few years before. The conversation came easily between them, and then Andrew felt Graham’s knee touch his own beneath the table and he realised that maybe there was something else going on here. And his smile only grew wider.

That night they kissed. A soft, almost chaste kiss outside Andrew’s hotel. But they met up the next day after Graham’s classes had finished, and when Andrew invited him upstairs Graham said yes. Andrew woke up on Saturday morning and he looked at Graham sleeping next to him and he thought about just how long it had been since he had woken up next to someone.

They spent all of Saturday together, and Graham showed Andrew the sights, including some of the places where the book he had just read was set. And this time they went back to Graham’s place, a small, one-bed bungalow just on the edge of town.

It was messy, but not in a way that suggested uncleanliness. There were books spilling off the shelves onto the floor and papers scattered everywhere. There was a pile of clean laundry on the couch, and Graham snatched it up hastily so that Andrew couldn’t see his underwear. So while Graham hurried around, tidying up, Andrew turned to the bookshelves, running his finger gently along the spines. Andrew had never seen so many books outside of a library.

“Have you read all of them?” he asked.

Graham was still shuffling around behind him. “It depends what you mean by ‘read,’” he answered. “I’ve read bits of all of them, for research, but I haven’t read them cover to cover.”

Andrew shook his head. “It’s still a lot of books,” he said.

They cooked dinner together, and then they showered together, and they settled in the living room, Graham to correct his students’ essays and Andrew to read one of Graham’s books. They sat on the couch and Andrew’s feet touched Graham’s leg, and occasionally one of them would look up and they would meet each other’s eye and smile. And then, around eleven o’clock, Graham leaned over and kissed Andrew, and they went to bed together, and they slept together, and then they slept together and Andrew couldn’t remember the last time that he had slept so well.

FICTION

But before they knew it Monday had rolled around and they walked to the train station, silently holding each other's hand. Andrew couldn't look at Graham because he was sure he was going to cry if he did, and he didn't want to embarrass himself.

They stood on the platform and Graham took Andrew's other hand so that he had to turn and look at him. "I don't want you to go," Graham said softly.

Andrew looked up at the departures board. Eleven minutes until his train came in. "I have to go back to work," he answered.

"I wish we could have met some other way."

"Why?"

"If you hadn't been on holiday; or if you didn't live so far."

"Three hours isn't that far."

"No?"

"No. We could do it."

"Only if you wanted to."

"Well, yeah, I mean, we could."

Graham looked at him and his face broke into that smile that Andrew liked so much. "I guess you'd better give me your number then," he said.

Andrew did cry a little bit on the train, but Graham sent him a text on his way home from the station, and Andrew felt better after that. He went home and unpacked his bags, and ate dinner, and he read the book that Graham had lent him, and in the morning he got up and went to work.

His colleagues noticed that there was something different about him, but they assumed it was just his usual post-holiday buzz. Then he put up some pictures with Graham on Facebook and most of them worked it out.

They talked every night, on Skype, and they texted all the time, but they only saw each other every second weekend. Andrew stopped working the second Saturday of each month, and every long weekend he went to Hareminster now. In the beginning Graham came to London as much as Andrew went to Hareminster, but junior lecturers at the university didn't make much money and Andrew could tell it was hurting his finances. So he went to Hareminster instead. And they spent the summer exploring; they went hiking in the forests nearby, and they got used to a picnic lunch with pink lemonade on Monday afternoons on their way back to the train station. They visited the two museums in town and a couple of times they rented a car for the day so they could go further afield.

But slowly the summer ended and they ran out of places to visit and it started raining on their picnic site and Andrew found himself spending more and more time staring out the windows of Graham's little bungalow. And all of Graham's efforts to engage

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him in anything only annoyed him more.

So when the trip to Bali came up, Andrew was secretly relieved. Three whole weeks without the trip to Hareminster. He had invited Graham to come with him, but a budget that couldn't cover monthly trips to London wouldn't stretch to two weeks in Bali. So he went alone, just like he was used to, and on the first night he left his phone up in the room and he made some new friends in the hotel bar. But when he finally went upstairs at about 2am and he saw the texts asking if he had landed safely, he did feel a little guilty.

The one thing that Andrew hadn't expected was the loneliness. He had never really gotten lonely when he was travelling before, but this time it struck him midway through the second day. He hadn't spoken to anyone all morning and he had just noticed a woman with a ridiculous hat, but there was no one to laugh about it with him. So Andrew took a picture and sent it to Graham.

It wasn't just conversation that he missed, it was physical presence; he missed Graham walking next to him, missed the sound of someone else in the hotel room, missed being able to reach out and touch someone. He did everything that he would normally do, went on tours and visited cultural sites and ate at nice restaurants, and he got up early to go for walks along the beach and watch the sun rise, but still he found himself rattling around the hotel room after dinner, found himself struggling to get to sleep, painfully aware of the emptiness of his big hotel bed.

In the end he lasted eight days. Then he changed his flights and he went straight from the airport to the train station and caught a train to Hareminster. Well, actually, he had to catch three different trains to get to Hareminster, and even then he could only get to Cruckhold Station, which was about six miles away, so then he had to get a taxi from there. And he spent twenty-five minutes pacing outside the station while the night porter woke up the only taxi driver in town. But then he was in the car and then he was outside Graham's little bungalow and he was so close.

Andrew ran up the drive to knock on the door. And as he stood there he had this moment of terrible fear, this fear that he would get inside to find another man sleeping in his place. So he knocked again, more frantic this time. But then Graham was there, with his hair mussed from sleeping, wearing the t-shirt that he had bought on his first weekend in London.

"What are you doing here?" Graham asked sleepily.

"I missed you."

And Graham smiled and Andrew loved that smile, so he kissed Graham and they made love like they hadn't in a long time, and then they fell asleep with their arms around each other. In the morning it was raining and Graham had to go to work, but Andrew didn't care. He had made his mind up and everything felt better because of it.

But when Graham came home Andrew could tell that there was something wrong.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Nothing.” Graham shook his head, made an effort to rearrange his expression, but Andrew wasn’t buying it.

“Graham.”

Graham tugged at the cuff of his shirt. “Why did you come back so suddenly?” he asked.

Andrew shrugged. “I told you.”

“Yeah, but that’s a lot of money and effort. You could have just called me.”

“I wanted to see you. I thought you’d be pleased. You were complaining about my going-,”

“Did you have sex in Bali?”

Andrew stared. “What?”

Graham couldn’t look at him, and he was still fidgeting with his cuffs. “Did you sleep with someone else?”

Andrew got up from the couch, came forward to take Graham’s hand, to try and make him look up. “Why would you think that?”

Graham pulled away from him. “Did you?”

“No,” Andrew snapped. “I came back because I wanted to be here. With you.”

“Would you have?”

“Oh, for God’s sake. What is this? Where is this coming from?”

Graham sniffed and turned away from him. “I thought you were going to break up with me,” he said softly.

Andrew was silent for a long moment, his hand half reaching out to Graham. Then he sighed and dropped his hand back to his side. “So did I,” he answered.

Graham turned to look at him and his cheeks had turned red from trying not to cry.

“But I changed my mind. And I came back.”

“So I’ll do for now, then?” Graham asked, and he sounded like he was trying to be angry, but mostly he just sounded sad.

Andrew shook his head and pressed his lips together. “I want to be here. With you.”

“For how long, Andrew? Cause I can’t do this again.”

Andrew took Graham’s hands, and he didn’t know the answer to that question. “How long will you let me?” he asked instead.

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It was their first big wobble, but they got through it. And things weren't always easy afterwards, but Andrew had been reminded what his life would be like without Graham in it, and suddenly sitting in the house on a rainy Saturday afternoon watching movies didn't seem so bad. There was the weekend when the power went out and they sat up in the light from the candles, telling each other about every bad date and every ex who had ever done them wrong. And there was the weekend when Graham was babysitting his eight-year-old nephew and they spent most of their time building forts and playing sock wars.

But the distance was hard, harder than it had been before Bali. Andrew felt it when he got home, he felt it on the train, and as time wore on he started to feel it when they were still together, until he was feeling sick on the train on the way down, knowing that they would have to say goodbye in just a couple of days. And Graham could tell that there was something wrong. But he didn't say anything, and Andrew didn't say anything either.

Graham came up to London for their one year anniversary. He took Friday off from his classes and came up on Thursday. And Andrew tried to do it properly. He had never celebrated this particular anniversary before. They went to dinner, they went to the theatre, and they come back to the flat and Andrew gave Graham a reproduction of the Gutenberg Bible and Graham gave him a gold silk tie.

When he woke up, early the next morning, Andrew looked at Graham lying next to him, and he knew. He woke Graham up, waited while he wiped the sleep from his eyes.

"What time is it?" Graham asked.

"Who cares?" Andrew brushed the question away. "I've been thinking."

"Dangerous," Graham joked.

"I want you to move in with me."

Graham's face darkened and he dragged his hand through his hair. "You think that's funny?"

Andrew started. "Who's laughing?"

"Oh come on, let's not kid ourselves."

"About what?"

"About this."

Andrew blinked slowly. "What are you talking about?"

Graham turned away from him then, lit by the dim dawn light coming through the window. Andrew could see his soft body and his receding hairline and his pale, white arms, and he couldn't bear the thought of losing him.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Andrew demanded.

"I'm not stupid. I know what this is."

"Really?" Cause apparently I don't."

FICTION

“You travel all the time. You’ll find someone else and then you’ll be off with him.”

“What? In the last year I’ve been to Hareminster and Bali, and that’s it. I don’t want to meet anyone else.”

There was a long, accusatory silence.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Nothing happened in Bali,” Andrew exclaimed. He bit the inside of his cheek to hold back a wave of tears. “I love you.”

But Graham was shaking his head. “For how long?”

“I don’t know!” Andrew answered. “How can I possibly know that?”

“Then why do you want me to live with you?”

Andrew scuffed a hand under his eyes. “If you don’t want to you just have to say so,” he mumbled.

“Don’t do that, don’t cry. Reg used to cry.”

Andrew thumped a hand down on the bed next to him, and turned to Graham, finally able to put some force behind his words. “Well I’m not Reg, OK? I’m not going to do what he did and you need to stop being so bloody paranoid. I want you to live with me because I’m tired of spending half my time missing you.”

“I can’t just drop my whole life for you,” Graham said, softer now. “I can’t.”

Andrew shook his head. “I don’t mean this weekend. I mean start looking for a job up here, finish out the term in Hareminster, move over the summer. You said you wanted to change to a bigger university anyway.”

Graham sat for a long moment, looking down at his hands in his lap, and Andrew could do nothing but wait.

“Can I think about it?” Graham asked.

Andrew nodded and got up to go and take a shower.

It hung over them the rest of the weekend. They went out to some museums and they went to see St Paul’s Cathedral, but they didn’t talk much and Andrew found that he couldn’t really concentrate on anything.

But on Sunday evening, after a short, mostly silent dinner out, they were walking home when Graham reached out to take Andrew’s hand. Andrew let him, but he kept walking, kept looking straight ahead.

“I’m sorry about Friday,” Graham said softly.

Andrew said nothing.

“I do want to live with you.”

“But?”

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“But I’m scared.”

“You think I’m not?”

“I want to live with you.”

“So is that a ‘yes?’”

Graham pulled Andrew’s hand, made him stop and turn to face him. “Yes,” he said softly.

Andrew looked at him and Graham smiled and Andrew felt all of the strain from the last couple of days just melt away. He looked at Graham, and then he kissed him, right there in the middle of the street, with grumpy Londoners shoving past them.

Graham didn’t actually manage to get a new job until July. He had been holding out for a theology post, and finally a position came up at short notice to cover a lecturer going on maternity leave. He got offered the job in the interview and two weeks later he had moved into the flat in Islington. They had to buy extra shelves to fit all his books, so for the first couple of days they were creeping around the tottering piles all over the floor, but they didn’t care. They were so excited by the novelty of spending endless days together that they made love like teenagers, like everything was new again.

They didn’t go out with other people much for the first couple of months, and they rushed home from work, still enjoying the idea of spending weekday evenings together. Graham didn’t have any classes scheduled on a Tuesday, and he would come over to the bank so that they could have lunch together, just because he could. But over time they relaxed, they introduced each other to their colleagues and their friends, Graham started taking on extra responsibilities at the university, and they stopped being afraid of being apart.

It wasn’t always easy. There was a rough patch when, after two years, Graham was unceremoniously asked to leave the university because the new mother had decided that she did want her job back after all. He spent nine months looking for a new job and teaching English in the evenings to keep things afloat. But he wound up in a better job in a better university and he had several articles published in the next year and he started working on a book. Then Andrew finally came out to his mother and she cried and Andrew felt awful and guilty and all the things that he hadn’t felt since he was sixteen and he had taken those feelings out on Graham, who grew ever closer to one of his PhD candidates. The two shared a drunken, awkward kiss at the university Christmas party before Graham ran out of the building and stayed away for thirty-one hours because he was so sure that Andrew was going to throw him out when he told him what had happened. But Andrew was so relieved when Graham came home that he would have forgiven him anything. So things were rough for a while, but then they moved past it and Andrew did forgive him, in time.

And in between there were long periods of good times. There were all the holidays,

FICTION

the launch of Graham's first book. Then his second and his third. There was Andrew's promotion, the lazy Sundays in bed together, birthdays, Christmases, their wedding, and best of all, the day when they adopted three-year-old Anna-Lee and brought her home from China.

In all, they had twenty-two years together before Graham got sick. He started off just coughing, getting out of breath when he went up stairs. He said it was just a cold and they all ignored it. Then he collapsed in the middle of a lecture and they couldn't ignore it anymore. The doctors said it was lung cancer, which Andrew thought was particularly unfair seeing as neither of them had ever smoked in their lives. But Graham took a sabbatical, cancelled his book tour and started treatment.

He lost his hair, got so thin that Andrew could hardly bear to look at him, grew so pale that you could see his veins, and he went into remission. They all started to live again, Andrew got another promotion, Anna-Lee started university, Graham went back to teaching.

But the shadow was there, looming over them, and Andrew wasn't surprised when two years later he got a phone call from a university in Hamburg where a professor told him that Graham had collapsed again. Andrew left the office and met Anna-Lee at the airport and they flew to Hamburg together, holding tight to each other's hand. And all Andrew could think about was that flight home from Bali twenty-seven years earlier. He had been sure then and he was still sure now, and he wasn't ready for this.

Graham was sick for another two and a half years. Andrew retired from the bank to spend more time with him. Anna-Lee graduated from university and got a few internships for local newspapers. She did get one job offer as a junior reporter down in Wiltshire, but she turned it down, as much to take care of Andrew as to spend time with Graham.

He died just shy of their thirtieth anniversary. Andrew organised the funeral, and everyone said how brave he was, how strong. Anna-Lee hovered around him, but her boyfriend was there and anyway, Andrew preferred to be on his own.

It wasn't until a week later, until Anna-Lee went back to work and Andrew took a trip out to visit the grave. He stood there, one hand touching the cool, marble headstone, and he wept. And when their thirtieth anniversary came around he couldn't get out of bed. He lay there, thinking of that day when he had asked Graham to move in with him. And on Graham's birthday Andrew wanted to die, just so he wouldn't have to feel this anymore.

But by their thirty-first anniversary, life had moved on. Anna-Lee was a journalist now, and she had moved in with her boyfriend, Peter. Andrew had taken up pottery, and he had converted his old study into a studio for himself. He would sit, often for hours at a time, with the sunlight pouring through the window, shaping pots and vases before he took them to a local potter who let him use her kiln once or twice a month in exchange for doing her taxes every year. And even though Andrew wasn't happy, not like he had been, he wasn't really unhappy about it. Which would simply have to do.



Quarantine Love, Part 2

By Diane Culp

Now here they were two months later and still unable to leave the house. It was Monday and they were eating meatloaf. It had been a long two months....a lifetime, in fact. Since the non break up break up, things had not gotten any better and in fact were probably worse since Stanley was working from home and Janelle's place of employment had shut down, perhaps permanently. Janelle's savings were gone. At one point she had tried to leave to go to her parents' house but her mother was too worried about her grandmother to allow anyone to come into the house and her sister had told her if it were up to her, she would let her come stay, but her brother in law had said with their kids, there were already too many people in their house. So here she sat, and now, even if she could leave, she had no money. Also, it turned out she was wrong about Stanley offering to sleep on the couch. The night she had told him she thought they should break up, he had gone into the bedroom, made sure all her things were gone from the room, tossed a blanket out on the couch, then had retreated to the bedroom, closed the door, and that was that. She had been on the couch ever since. It wouldn't have been so bad perhaps, although her back hurt, but Stanley got up early and got to work by 8 and since it was a small apartment, the dining area where Stanley had set up his home "office" was right behind the couch, so she could never sleep in.

Every day, she would get up, fix breakfast and park herself in front of the window. The window looked out across an alley and into another apartment building, but it was better than looking at Stanley all day. The apartment was too small for her to clean while Stanley was working, plus if she got up to get a drink or heaven forbid, something out of the refrigerator he would sigh loudly as if her movement was the biggest distraction in the world. So day after day she sat and looked out.

Oh sure, she tried to read some, she even tried her hand at knitting for a few days, but she couldn't quite figure out how to do it and when she tried to watch videos on line about it, Stanley sighed loudly, then asked, "Can you please turn that off, I'm trying to work?"

Janelle didn't bother telling him that she was trying to maintain her sanity. Instead she threw the knitting needles down and turned off the video. Stanley said nothing and went back to work. Janelle went back to looking out the window and day after day she felt her brain shrinking smaller and smaller.

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The really odd thing, in Janelle's mind, well aside from the pandemic raging outside their door, was that other than her sleeping on the couch, it wasn't as though anything had really changed in her relationship with Stanley. She had even gone back to rubbing his feet after his work day. They still ate meatloaf on Monday and pizza on Sat. They didn't go to his parents for Sunday dinner anymore, but they facetimed them and neither one of them had told them they had broken up. No, they weren't having sex, but if Janelle were being completely honest, it hadn't been that great when they were. They still watched tv together in the evenings. They didn't talk much, but Janelle thought that was probably more because they had nothing new to talk about than it was because they were "broken up." It was a weird way to live for sure, and there was no way out for the foreseeable future. Even once the city was out from under quarantine, Janelle wasn't sure she would feel safe looking for a new job and a new place to live. Thinking about all this one day caused Janelle to issue a loud sigh. That irritated Stanley who sighed loudly in response. Janelle found this funny and began to giggle. Once she started she couldn't seem to stop. Needless to say this made Stanley sigh louder, which only made Janelle laugh harder. Finally Stanley stormed off and slammed the bedroom door. Oddly, this struck Janelle as even funnier.

After a bit Janelle calmed down and went back to looking out the window. Stanley stayed in the bedroom the rest of the afternoon. When he came out he still wanted his foot rub so Janelle assumed they were back to normal in their relationship....whatever their relationship was these days. That was on a Wednesday so they had a vegetarian meal, then watched some tv before calling it a day. On Thursday, Janelle got up and after breakfast took her seat by the window. Stanley began banging out numbers on his computer. Janelle thought if she had to listen to the tapping of the computer keys one more minute her brain would implode, but at that exact moment she noticed someone looking out of the apartment directly across from her. She had never seen anyone there before so it gave her a little surprise and she felt herself jump back from the window a bit. In a few minutes she peeked out again and the person was gone. She had been so startled upon seeing anyone, she didn't even know if it was a man or a woman. She thought it was a man, but she couldn't be sure. She watched the window the rest of the day but no one appeared again.

Friday morning she would always sit on the couch and pay bills before moving to the window, but since there was no money in her account left to pay bills she went straight to the window and there was the person again. This time she could tell it was definitely a man. A young man about her age if she had to guess, and a very good looking man at that. She had just determined all that when she realized the man was looking at her. She

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jumped back a bit but not before noticing the man had appeared to laugh as she did so. She moved back towards the window and saw the man waving at her. She glanced over her shoulder to look at Stanley, but he was not interested in what she was doing so she waved back. The man smiled, then stood up. He was completely naked. Janelle gasped and Stanley sighed. The man laughed then disappeared from the window.

Since Stanley did not work on the weekends, Janelle did not look out the window as much and this weekend she decided not to look out at all other than take quick sideways looks when she passed by the window while cleaning. The man was never there and Janelle could not decide whether she was relieved or disappointed.

When Monday rolled around, Stanley was back at work and Janelle having nothing better to do went back to the window. She didn't have to wait long until the man appeared again. This time he didn't sit down at all but stood there in all his glory. He waved and Janelle found herself waving back. This went on for days and Janelle began to fantasize about meeting him after quarantine even though part of her was repulsed by the man. In ordinary times, she probably would have called the police. At the very least, she would have told Stanley, but these weren't ordinary times and Janelle was bored.

One day when it appeared that the absolute quarantine was maybe coming to an end and folks could get out for at least some fresh air, the man did not appear in the window. Janelle waited all day, but he never appeared, nor did he appear the next day or the day after that. On the fourth day he reappeared but this time in a suit and tie. He waved to Janelle and blew her a kiss. Glancing over her shoulder at Stanley, she turned and blew a kiss back. She never saw the man again and the next day, people were allowed to go outside as long as they stayed six feet away from one another. That was a good distance for Stanley and her.



About an Average Day

By Jim O'Loughlin

I feel okay, which means I hurt all over, but at least I'm able to go grocery shopping. Now that Jocelyn is old enough to climb in and out of her car seat, I can take her out on errands. Not that I do a lot of errands.

But some days are like today, so when Jocelyn says "Mommy, please!" I get one of those carts that looks like a race car. She pretends to steer while I guide us through the aisles. Then I make like I can no longer control the cart, and we are about to crash into a big display of cereal boxes. Jocelyn shrieks, and at the last second I swerve out of the way. By the time we check out, my hips are throbbing, and it is all I can do to get myself and Jocelyn back into the car with the groceries, but I do it.

It's not that I like grocery shopping. It doesn't feel "good to get out," and just because I'm not lying in bed, it doesn't mean I'm not in pain.

I'm always in pain.

Right now, it hurts to put the groceries away and it hurts when I sit down to take a break. I'm not happy, and though I don't complain as much as I'd like to, I do whine at times. I suppose I'm whining now.

I suppose that's why most people think I'm a bitch.

It takes effort not to complain about the pain, and it's actually surprising how often I'm able to just act like I'm not different than anyone else. When my oldest daughter, Katie, the one in college, gets home after she's finished classes for the day, I can look happy to see her. But I doubt I'm fooling her. She's lived with me long enough to know that a smile on my face doesn't mean anything. I've kept grinning right up to the point when I blacked out before. But anyway, my point is that Katie has seen it all before, so she's probably not impressed to see me standing and doing dishes. She likely notices that it's almost 5 p.m., and these are the breakfast dishes.

"How you feeling, Mom?" Katie says. She throws down her backpack in a corner and grabs an apple from a bowl on the kitchen table,

"It's about an average day," I say, turning back to the sink.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she replies, no doubt trying to strike some balance of sympathy without pity. "Can I tell you about what happened at school today?"

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“Sure, let’s go sit down in the living room.” I can use some time on the couch. I also want to stay within in earshot of Jocelyn, who is playing with something, maybe dolls or Legos, in her bedroom. I think I might want to stay on the couch for a while.

I ease myself onto the cushions. Katie has picked up her bag and grabbed some papers out of it. She stands next to me so that I have to look up at her.

“Today in my creative writing class, the professor had us read a story that he was working on, and it was all about a man with chronic pain.”

Katie pauses there and stares. I don’t know what she is expecting from me.

“Uh, huh.” I nod. It hurts to nod, but it’s all I have at that moment.

“Well, we were discussing his story, and I had a lot to say about it and—I hope this is okay—I said to the professor after class, just the two of us talking, that you had chronic pain, and he was really interested and wondered if you might read his story and maybe let him interview you to do research on what it’s really like, you know, living with chronic pain.”

Katie didn’t stop to take a breath for her whole speech, and I wonder what it’s like to have that much energy. I suppose she takes after her father in that way. When she stops talking, she breathes deeply, and I worry she is gearing up for another speech, so I jump in.

“I don’t know what I’d have to say to him,” I tell her, which is true.

“Well, he would really like to know if the story, you know, seems real to you.”

“I thought this was a fiction class you were taking.”

“I am—it is. I mean, the story is fiction, but that doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be real or true.”

Katie has gotten flustered now, and I feel bad. I’m not trying to give her a hard time. Or maybe I am, in which case I am just not a very good person. But I can make it up to her.

“I don’t think I’ll have much to say, but I guess I can take a look at this story of his.”

Katie smiles, and I realize that that was what I really wanted all along. This is a thing I can do for Katie when there are so many things I can’t do. She must realize that too, and part of her smiling is because this is a moment when I am a mother and she is a daughter. There aren’t enough of those, what with her working and going to school, doing most of the cooking, and half the time acting more like a mother to Jocelyn than I can.

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“And I guess I might be okay with having this professor interview me, if he wasn’t just saying that to be nice.”

At this, Katie’s whole face lights up, and I realize I have gone too far. I’m only going to disappoint her, but I take the story from her anyway.

Katie cooks dinner. After we eat, I get Jocelyn through a bath, but that’s a lot of bending down, and I begin to feel the evening coming on. Evenings are never my best time. It’s tricky to transition between pain meds and sleep meds, but if I don’t, I’ll never get anything resembling a night’s sleep. Fortunately, I have a story to read now, so I have an excuse to get into bed right after putting Jocelyn down.

My bedroom needs some cleaning up. Clothes are spilling out of the closet and clutter has taken over the dresser on the other side of the room that had been my ex-husband’s. In fact, all of his space is covered up with junk now. But all that will have to wait for tomorrow. I change out of my clothes, position my pills on the nightstand next to me and turn on the reading lamp, which I guess is going to earn its name tonight.

I’m not really sure what to expect from the story. I’m not much of a reader, and I don’t know that I’ve read any stories since high school. When I start in, I expect that there’ll be some big dramatic scenes in the professor’s story but there aren’t. In fact, hardly anything happens. What can go on when the main character never gets out of bed? But I guess that isn’t fair. Plenty happens in the character’s head. He’s thinking all of the time, even if he’s only thinking about how awful he feels and how much he’d like to be able to get out of bed. That much is true. Even when I could barely get up and my doctor wouldn’t prescribe any good pain killers because he thought the pain was all in my head, I never stopped thinking. Sometimes my only thought was that I wasn’t sure I could take the pain any more.

The story has some good points to it. There’s a nice bit about the difference between a shooting pain and a throbbing pain, but there are some parts where the professor just doesn’t get it. For instance, at one point the character is feeling really sad because he’s thinking back to when he was younger and a runner and now he can barely walk. He looks out his bedroom window and—what a coincidence!—at exactly that moment, he sees a cardinal fly past his window. And somehow, in that moment the main character feels like he’s a bird, too, and he’s able to feel like he’s flying, and somehow that’s supposed to make him feel like it’s a good day after all. What bullshit. No cardinal is going to make staying in bed all day worth it. Nothing makes staying in bed all day worth it.

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That's what I tell Katie when she comes in to talk about the story, though, I immediately wish I had said nice things about the story first. I suppose my point about not having the character stay in bed all of the time would sound more persuasive if I wasn't already in bed. But Katie doesn't say anything about that. She's seen worse.

"Well, do you think you might, you know, talk to my professor and help him make the story more real?"

I'm not eager to talk to her professor, but Katie's got me again. She's giving me an opportunity to act like a mother who does things for her daughter. I pause. I can't say no.

I should have said no. That's what I realize after Katie has set up a time for me and her professor to meet at this coffee shop on the edge of campus. Katie's trying not to act as excited as she is, going into great detail about how I'll recognize her professor. I begin to worry that she's come up with some fantasy in her head where her professor and I really hit it off. You'd have thought seeing her father walk out on us when Jocelyn was still a baby would have been enough to make her a little more cynical, but that just isn't Katie's way. At least, not yet. I don't know, maybe she's just glad to see me going out of the house to do something fun.

The day of the big meet up, I try to look nice. I hardly ever wear makeup anymore, but I guess it's like riding a bicycle. I can still remember how to put on mascara, and my wardrobe does include more than sweatpants. I take a dose of my meds a little early, hoping that won't make me too loopy. I don't want the pain to be all I can think about.

I get to the coffee shop and look around a bit before I find Katie's professor. When I catch his eye, he jumps right up out of his seat. I don't know why I bothered dressing up if he was going to just be in jeans and a flannel shirt. He comes over and shakes my hand hard enough to make it hurt. I thought he'd be taller, but he's only got a couple inches on me, and his beard could have used a better trim. Still, he seems pleased to see me, so I return the smile and sit down.

"Hey, thanks so much for coming down. I really appreciate it." He pulls out a chair and insists on getting me a cup of coffee.

We chat a bit. I say how much Katie had been enjoying his class, and he says nice things about her, real things, like how Katie is not the most vocal person in the class but

when she talks everyone pays attention because the thing she says is the one thing that needs to be said. That's true about Katie. She is that way. I like that he recognizes that quality in her. I can see why she likes him.

As the professor is talking about the novel he is writing, I realize that I have seen him one time before. It was a different time when I was at the grocery store with Jocelyn. This was on a day when I shouldn't have gone shopping. It was too crowded, and I was not at my best. Jocelyn decided it was a day to misbehave. As I was checking out, I saw that she had grabbed a candy bar from the display and was about to rip the wrapper open. I ripped into her, grabbing her by the arm and knocking the candy bar to the ground. Don't start with me. I know I shouldn't have done that. I know it wasn't a big deal. It was a bad day.

Anyway, after I reduced Jocelyn to tears and got her back into the grocery cart, I went to pick up the candy bar and saw that it wasn't on the ground anymore. I looked at the person behind me at the register. I realize now that it was this same professor. He was looking at the headlines on the rack of tabloids as if they actually contained news. He must have picked up the candy bar for me and put it back where it belonged. I appreciated that he was going to pretend he hadn't seen anything. That was enough for me to remember him. I just hope it wasn't enough for him to remember me.

But that was then. Now we are just two pals having a cup of coffee together. When the cashier brings over our drinks, we talk about the weather and sip lattes. It's nice, just hanging out like this. We are surrounded by college students, talking in pairs or huddled over laptops pretending to do school work. There's some kind of jazz playing in the background, and a steady wave of people are coming in and out of the coffee shop. I can see how people get used to spending time like this.

But the chair I'm in isn't very comfortable, and I know that my hips will pay a price for this later. I shouldn't try to draw this out, as nice as it would be to just spend time without worrying about what might happen next.

So, I bring up the professor's story. I make sure to start with the nice things. I tell him I like the story, and I mention of the moment when the main character has to think really hard about the best way to turn onto his left side.

"But how did this match with your experience?" he asks. "Did this perspective seem true to you?"

"It's a story, isn't it? It's not supposed to be real."

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“No, I want it to be true,” he exclaims, leaning forward and pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

I wait. I’m not sure what he really wants me to say. Taking a sip from my latte, I wonder if the meds are making me feel loopy.

“So, parts of it feel real. But other parts are... what you might wish was true.”

The professor takes out a pad of paper and a pen from his bag and starts scribbling things down.

“I need you to be specific,” he says. “Can you point to a particular moment in the story that was like that?”

He seems like he genuinely is interested in my opinion, so I give it to him. I tell him what is wrong with the cardinal. I explain that the main character is popping pills too often. I say I don’t like the ending when the main character looks back on his day and the people who come to his bedside to speak with him and decides he feels okay after all. That’s not how it works. Having a good day doesn’t make up for the pain. Feeling happy doesn’t make the pain go away.

The professor stops writing and looks up at me, looks closely into my eyes.

“But aren’t there moments when you transcend the pain?” he asks. “Aren’t there moments when you don’t feel it?”

“Not exactly. There are times when I don’t focus on it, but that’s not the same thing as--what was that word?--transcend? Yeah, there’s no transcending.”

The professor taps on his pad of paper.

“If you don’t mind me asking, are you in pain right now?”

“Of course,” I tell him.

“Can you describe how you feel?”

I explain that I’m on meds, which doesn’t make the pain go away but reduces some of the sharpness to a dull throb. I can feel it at every point where my body can bend. If the coffee in front of me didn’t taste good, it might not be worth bending my wrist to drink it. I would never voluntarily tap my foot to the music. If someone comes in the door behind me, I might decide it’s not worth twisting my neck to look at who it is. And I know that it all will be worse tonight.

The professor has been scribbling down notes as I talk, and he keeps writing things

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down when I stop speaking. I take it as an invitation to say more, and so I do. I tell him about how the chronic pain appeared not long after Jocelyn was born. I don't think it had anything to do with her birth, though I can't know for sure. Having two kids 16 years apart isn't typical, but it's not that unusual. At first, I thought that there had to be some source of the pain, and I wasted a lot of time and money getting tested by doctors who didn't believe me anyway. Fortunately, I had worked long enough to qualify for disability, and between that and alimony payments, I've been able to get by. I can't say for sure that the pain was the cause of my divorce. My ex and I had been having troubles before Jocelyn was born. But making things harder only made things harder.

"You know what I mean?" I ask him.

The professor keeps scribbling, only looking up when he realizes I'm waiting for an answer.

"I do know what you mean. That is, I'm trying to. This is all really helpful."

"So, do you think you'll write a story about me?" I ask, half joking.

"Oh, no," he says very seriously. "I'm just doing research. You need to be the one to tell your story. You really should. Have you considered writing about your experience?"

I scoff. "I'm no writer. Katie's the writer in the family."

"You really should consider it," he says. "You have a distinctive voice, and you have a story to tell. People would be interested in what you have to say. You should tell your own story."

Maybe I should.

In a way, that's what I'm doing now, as I'm lying here in bed, trying to find a comfortable position, wondering if I can toss the professor's story onto the nightstand without straining myself.

Maybe it would have been nice to have actually met Katie's professor. Maybe he would have found what I have to say interesting. Maybe I should have actually made this meeting happen instead of lying in bed and just imagining it. But that's a lot of maybes, and most of my maybes don't work out.

THE SOCK DRAWER

“Mom? You didn’t answer me?”

I’m confused. Katie is in front of me, right next to my bed. How long has she been standing there? I blink, but that doesn’t clear the fog from my head.

“Mom?”

“Katie, I’m sorry, honey. Did you ask me something?”

“Yes, I asked if you would be able to talk to my professor, you know, about his story?” She gestured toward my lap.

I look down and see the story, folded open to the last page. My neck twinges and I wince.

“Don’t move. I can get it,” Katie says. She picks up the pages.

“Can you—can you just...?” I know what I want to say but I can’t find the words.

“I’ll just put it on the nightstand. We can talk about it tomorrow.” Katie’s voice sounds distant, like she is talking at the end of a tunnel.

I hold up my hand and a glass of water appears in it. I open my mouth and pills are on my tongue, more a texture than a taste. I take a sip and swallow. Then I lay back. Now I just have to wait.

Katie gives me a kiss on the forehead and squeezes my hand. It’s not at all like the handshake I had imagined from the professor. Katie’s squeeze is gentle, just a reminder that she is there, that there is still something outside my body and outside this bed. Sometimes I just need to be reminded of that.



NONFICTION

Mlamli Tyulu
Kerstin Holman

“Don’t ask for advice too much. Go with you,
as gritty as that might be at times.”

- Porochista Khakpour

SOMETIMES THE RAINBOW LOSES ITS COLOURS

By Mlamli Tyulu

Grief has many colors. It shows up long after the loss has vaporized into an odorless gas that leaves us at a point of intersection, where the choice to continue is but an option. Grief reduces us to children of chance, who live on a diet of 'maybes.' Is there anything as desperate as reducing grief to a color? Black. The color of forgotten things, the shade of treasured memories and the blur of dreams.

It all started with a sentence. A string of words that lined themselves up into cohesion. "Your father has cancer." Everything flashed like a scene in sad movie: "Our Sister's Keeper" or "Titanic." The world stood still. I only remember the smell of the stillness: it was the scent of a freshly squeezed lemon: sharp and acidic. I knew then that death is a scent. Sweet in the nostrils; sickening in the stomach.

I thought forgetting was a balm to remedy the pain that I felt. I opened its leaves carefully and hid the pain, the anger and the confusion in its warmth. I ignored the waning of the chlorophyll, so that I did not have to see the greenness fading. Forgetting is easier than remembering. I pressed the leaf hard with my thumb, cognizant of the DNA it left on the thickest finger whose lines slid to my palms. I chose to forget, but forgetting was not as easy as I thought. It was difficult, but a minute price to pay when compared to what I feared becoming, if I allowed myself to feel.

Christmas 2014

It was the first Christmas we would spend without my dad. We allowed our lips to curl into smiles. The scent of freshly cooked meals sat in the air like a statue of the Buddha. We all went about defining a sense of normalcy for ourselves, secretly fearing the pain of separation. The unexpected climax of it all was when I answered the door and saw a surprise that made me numb, so that my heart went into a gentle paralysis. The hospital had discharged dad to spend the rest of the Christmas season with his family. We braided together, as we always did. We hosted no family and friends. It was just my beautiful, small family. We ate. We laughed. We listened to Jazz together. His presence weaved us into a quilt of unity. But, God. But Time. But the Ancestors, have a Triune way of creating opportunities for us to carve memories into sculptures for ourselves. So that when our skies are darkened, our memories become our walking sticks or a scale to balance our most intimate beings. Our faces were marked with joy, so that each of us had symmetrical features that made us identical as dagga seeds.

February 5 2015

My birthday fell on a Thursday that year. As was the norm, dad woke me up with a cup of coffee. He knew how I liked my coffee: strong, with a small drop of milk and lots of sugar. The day went by quickly, but the scent of coffee lingered in my nostrils. Later that night, I made a wish as I cut the slice of cake. A secret wish: that time would stretch like bubble gum. That all the pain – present and to come, would become sweet as condensed milk. Nothing beats that, huh? Holding on to time as though it was not a ghost that haunted us in our dreams. The moon separated the day from the next, and the skies agreed by taking on an indigo glow. My birthday was over.

August 2015

The sun was in a wrestling ring with the wind. They both pulled each other with equal force. It was my parents' anniversary. We separated the roasts, brown on the flesh, oozing spices and the juicy insides that splashed out into ripples – leaving a smoky smell in the air. The fridge overflowed like a heavily pregnant stomach, carrying potato salad, green salad and chakalaka. The flavored drinks and champagne had a speck of ice on the tip like prized cattle, ready for the celebration. "Happy Anniversary, mom and dad," was a mane that we wore as though we were a pride of lions. The excitement was indicative of the love I had witnessed, for the 19 years that I had been theirs to have. To love. To cherish. The wisdom and jokes my parents poured out on the table were testament to the fact that their love was a rebellion against the hardships they had faced and a baton for those willing to carry the fuel of its intensity into the future. I touched his face, kissed his lips and played with his beard. For the first time since the announcement of his illness, I allowed myself to feel. I felt the pain of losing the embodiment of your love, while he breathed. I felt the pain of my father slipping away – as I watched. As I dropped my fork after gulping a piece of fried chicken dipped in potato salad – I had to stop myself from choking, as I held in the tears.

"A Day In September"

My matric ball was in September or October. I do not remember it clearly. What I do remember is that my school did not allow me to attend because my fees were not paid up. It was a difficult day for me. I wished that someone would dig open a grave for me and then shove me in. To escape the pain and shame, of having to explain the reason of not attending the matric ball to my partner. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen then. A rare flower blooming from the most precious seed. The matric ball was an opportunity to forget: the pain and anguish that I felt from within. After our return from

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the traumatic ordeal of explaining that both she and I would not be attending the matric ball, I heard my father shouting my name. “Mlamli.” I ran to the bedroom, dressed as though I was invited to my matric ball. He told me that he was proud of me. He told me that he loved me. He became sick all over the floor. Nothing stayed inside of him. That day more than any other – I felt him asking me and all the others to release him: slowly, with the meticulous hand of a goldsmith. He asked me, with his eyes – holding in the pain, until fate had its way with him.

“Chemo”

For all the times dad was due for chemotherapy – mom accompanied him. My sister and I only accompanied him once. It took almost the whole day. We waited and bought food to beguile the time. We bought him an expensive meal – he told us that it was unnecessary. He frowned so that his jaw fell and his lips stood firmly as though he had gone through lip surgery. We loved it when he did that. We would play with his cheeks – until they morphed into a bubbled smile. That is the last time I remember him with that smile: easy and at peace. He lost his balance when we got home. The pain was palpable. Sleep was his remedy and a tool that hid his tears from our ever worrisome eyes.

9 November 2015

It was a Monday. The sun came out early, so that the breeze of the sea, gave it a beautiful equilibrium – as it wiped our faces gently. I remember seeing my dad lying on his bed – helpless. There was nothing to ease the pain. I wished I could take some of it and carry it for him. But, I could not. I entered the room and told him that I loved him. I did not wait to see him respond. That was the last time I saw my father alive. I came back from writing my exam just after 2pm and I could already feel that a part of me had died – way before I heard the news. A gaseous tragedy had exploded within me. I cried. I screamed. I jumped up and down. I asked God – why? All the things they said boys shouldn’t do – I did. Grief knows neither gender nor sex. The air I held in my lungs begged to be released. They placed him in a body bag. I watched them leave with him. I watched myself die many deaths in the tragedy of his absence. His death birthed my own. I would have to learn what it meant to live again. To breathe again. To be (myself) again!

Death reduces us one time and changes us at another. Loss is a painful thing. Grief on the other hand, has many angles and sides to it: a polygon. Grief has many faces. The stained photographs of the dead and the socks they leave behind are relics of lives that we struggle to untie ourselves from. The love we had for them is the pair of surgical scissors that cuts the umbilical cord that ties us to them forever when they die and a placenta that

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we chew – and whose salt we savor, as though to retain a part of them with us. Grief leaves behind a gaping hole that we go through life hoping to fill. Grief is a process, with many faces, but whatever face one sees is a confrontation; a gaze that takes every bit of strength you have hidden in you.

“Things That Remain”

The most difficult part of loss is having to mourn dead things, while they are still alive. It is to watch the rainbow losing its colors. The worst form of death is not the ceasing of the breath, but breaking into fine fragments whilst the breath remains. Death is an exploded star; whose light is, but the residue of what once was. What scared me most about grief is the fear of the unknown that it instills within you.

Loss is a journey that we travel at our own time and pace. It requires no destination. Healing is going into the past; finding the memories and not feeling the madness of grief hiding in your skin; unstitch wounds that have stopped bleeding. As I started my journey to healing, that year, I noticed that on the sand on which I walked – I left no tracks!





"Jungle Scene" by Jillian Hamilton

Black Hair as Womanhood

By Kerstin Holman

Can I please touch your hair?

Why?

I don't know, it just looks so [fluffy, springy, interesting, nappy, poofy, puffy, coily].

Fine.

Wow, it's so much softer than it looks!

Thanks.

How do you get it to look that way?

It just does.

I think black women invented the “look don't touch” rule. That saying is generally thought of as being said to men who lose (or never had to begin with) their sense of boundaries whenever an attractive woman is near and they feel the need to grope, grab, tap, pat the women to get their attention. But since black women have been exploited and othered as long as we've been around, it is safe to say this term is more suitable for us. It can apply to our bodies, our lives, and unsurprisingly, our hair.

As a child, I went through several hair phases, as one does when being primarily risen by your white mom and her family. At four or five my hair was long, curly, and grew past my waist. By third or fourth grade, my hair became too much of a chore and I was never taught how to take proper care of my hair, so it was cut shorter and shorter each year. In fifth grade, I got long, thin braids for the first time. Those 4-6 hours being sat in a chair until I could not feel my butt would be the first and last time for me. Seventh grade was the year I had my first relaxing treatment. It's all-too smooth and shiny appearance made it blatantly obvious that my hair went through a chemical transformation and had the kids on the school bus pointing and laughing at my attempt to wear a style that I spent many nights wishing was naturally mine. The minute I got home I ran to the shower to wash away what I swore was going to make me fit in. The water didn't fix it.

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High school consisted of me waking up at 6 am every morning to flat iron my hair. The stinging steam and forehead burns and smell of burnt, dead hair felt worth it because straight hair could be worn down, which meant length which meant femininity which meant acceptance. Days when I wanted to sleep in meant wearing my natural hair in a tight bun on the top of my head or very rarely letting it breathe freely, my dark brown curls just inching past the tops of my shoulders. These days I was met with:

Is that your natural hair?

Yep.

It looks darker when it's curly.

I guess.

How'd you get it like that?

Water.

I think I prefer it when it's [natural, straightened].

Me too.

“Bald-headed” is an insult frequently thrown at black women who have short natural hair. It is an insult that has never knowingly been used on me, but that is because I actively made sure to never have my hair at a length that would keep those words far away from me. I feared the words nappy, frizzy, kinky, and bald-headed. Although a lot of these words are simply descriptions of textures of hair and are meant to be just that, people have shifted the tone and connotation to be negative and insulting. Black women who rock the short or bald look may still be called disgraceful or unwoman-like by some. Bald-headed women are decidedly not feminine enough. How could they possibly get a husband if they choose to get rid of a feature essential to their desirability? Because our hair is different; because our hair is versatile; because our hair defies gravity and beauty standards; we become a threat and we are lead to believe that what makes us unique is a liability. Our worth is not even our own.

In recent years, black women have combated the policing and othering of our hair with the Natural Hair Movement. It is a way for black women to show off and embrace our hair for all of its brilliance and versatility. This movement not only encourages black women to

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women to sport their natural kinks, curls and coils, but it also celebrates women who choose to wear their hair in any style or length they feel comfortable: straightened, Bantu knots, wigs, weaves, braids, and twists. Black women have always challenged and defied the harsh standards of beauty and femaleness. The length and texture of our hair will never be a measure for our worth.



REVIEWS

Kerstin Holman

Izzy Peroni

Gracelyn Willard

“Knowing how to be solitary is central to the art of loving. When we can be alone, we can be with others without using them as a means of escape.”

- bell hooks

To be Invisible is To be Seen; To be Seen is To be Killed: A Review of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*

By Kerstin Holman

Since its creation, America has championed itself as the world's freest, richest, and tolerant melting-pot; a place all foreigners dream of living so they can achieve the infamous American Dream which promises money, equality and safety. Rankine all but pulverizes the glamor and glitz of what a dream like one this is: a fantasy. Rankine's book recalls personal experiences with racism, discrimination and racial profiling in her own life, while also discussing how black Americans face these in pop culture (Serena Williams) and politically (Hurricane Katrina). She uses poetry, hybrid prose, art, and photographs to paint a bluntly realistic painting of this country, showing anyone who may feel content with how "advanced" we claim to be that there is still a lot of work to be done.

Throughout *Citizen*, Rankine discusses the hardship both directly and indirectly of the "hypervisibility" that comes with being black in the United States. Rankine recalls an encounter with a therapist she had only ever spoken to over the phone. She arrived at the therapist's house to meet for the first time and was met with shouts and anger from the counselor: "Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?" It was clear that her therapist imagined that her client would be, well, not black. Rankine receives a string of I'm-so-so-so-sorry's after she manages to explain that she has an appointment. But sorry's cannot take back animosity and blatant racism. Words and language—both constructed and validated by those in power (i.e., white people)—are all-too powerful to ignore and many times cannot be forgotten when followed by an embarrassed and reluctant apology.

I knew that revisiting a book like Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* at a time like this would be frustratingly relevant. The movements and protests that simply beg for black lives to be protected and considered human (surprise: they should be and are) as white lives have been for centuries are just as rampant now as they were in 2014 when Rankine's book was published. The murders of black men, women, children, trans and gender-non-conforming people and the refusal to give the victims any sort of justice by apprehending their killers never ceased, but thanks to calls for change through protesting and social media, more people are becoming aware of and thus angry about these murders.

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Citizen acknowledges and comments on the black lives which for generations since their forceful arrival to the country have been wrongfully taken by American citizens, each killing motivated by racism and a disregard for black life. Six years since publication, Rankine's words still sting. Although it may appear that more people are feeling emboldened to make a change, it is hard to say if her novel will feel just as current in the next six.



The Gorey Cross-Section of Horror and Grief: a Review of Joey Comeau's *One Bloody Thing After Another*

By Izzy Peroni

In the last decade, the horror genre, across all mediums, seems to have shifted its focus from the generic, unfamiliar horrors of ghosts and monsters that harass protagonists for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time, to ultra-personal supernatural experiences, where the antagonizing force works as a metaphor for the protagonist's grief, regret, paranoia, or other mental ailments (see: *The Babadook*, 2014; *The Haunting of Hill House* Netflix series in 2018, based off of the 1959 novel by Shirley Jackson; as well as video games such as *Blair Witch*, 2019, and *The Evil Within 2*, 2017). *One Bloody Thing After Another*, published in 2010, indulges in this concept on various levels, connecting supernatural occurrences to unbelievable personal tragedies. Joey Comeau's ghosts and monsters are not unknowable creatures from the deep, or phantoms trapped in ancient houses— they are mothers and daughters. Comeau, a co-writer of the archived comic *A Softer World*, as well as author of other novels and short story collections such as *Lockpick Pornography*, *It's Too Late to Say I'm Sorry*, and *Overqualified*, skips back and forth between the daughters and mothers struggling in the living world to deal with the loss, or unimaginable transformation, of their loved ones. He does so with a refreshing amount of humor and endless empathy for his protagonists, namely Jackie, who has lost her mother to illness but still summons her ghost when she needs to disappear, and Jackie's best friend (and crush) Ann, whose mother loses sentience and gains a craving for live flesh that her and her sister Margaret must provide.

The most enticing aspect of the narrative of *One Bloody Thing After Another* is how commonplace the supernatural elements are portrayed. An old man sees a ghost holding her own head in the lobby of his retirement home every day after he takes his dog for a walk, but he treats it as more of an annoyance than a true horror. Ann and Margaret have to feed live animals to their mother and her many teeth, but they do not hesitate to do so, because that's their mother, and you always look after your family. Much of this gorey chaos is played off humorously, and all of it, matter-of-factly. With the lives of many of the characters being upturned by sudden change and loss, bloodied ghouls and creatures are no longer as terrifying and world-shaking as one's own grief. The storylines of these characters become parallel at times, perpendicular at others, and through this complex narrative structure Comeau layers the story in a way that makes it hard to predict what could be coming next. There's even a storyline— or more accurately, the answer to a

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character's grief— laced through the physical pages themselves, one that I won't spoil for you, because it's worth the anticipation of tracking it through the novel.

This novel from the beginning of the 2010s perfectly encapsulates what would be the tone of horror in the next decade: equal parts tragic and hilarious, stretched across the full range of human emotion and, especially in the case of *One Bloody Thing After Another*, drenched in empathy for a person blindsided by their own way of coping with grief. Jackie's affinity for putting rocks through car windows might not be the most typical way of dealing with loss, but our narrator can't hold that against her.



Grief and Egos: *PONTI*

By Gracelyn Willard

PONTI is Sharlene Teo's first novel, she won the Deborah Rogers Writers Award for her debut novel. *PONTI* is a haunting and melancholy read that explores the horrors of life, loss, and teen years. Told in a multi-narrative and episodic structure the novel follows sixteen-year-old Szu, her friendship with Circe, and her haunting/haunted mother Amisa. The reader is invited to witness the interwoven grief and egos of the three women as they each tell a story of girlhood and the fragile dreams that come with it. Reading *PONTI* allows the reader to turn an introspective eye on their past selves and evaluate who they were and who they are now. As a woman in between the age of Szu and Circe in this novel, I found myself relating to both their bitterness and their hope. These interwoven feelings raised feelings of nostalgia and horror for the past. The emotions raised by the complex relationships of the characters in the novel were translated into a world of physical confinement for me as I read this novel during quarantine. The physical confinement I'm currently experiencing paired with the emotional confinement of the characters created a unique reading experience that added a level of surrealism to the novel.

Amisa, the mother of Szu, was once the monster in a series of films with the same name as the novel. Her beauty and her regrets cloak Szu as she grows up. The danger of idolization is highlighted through the relationships of the three women, reminding the reader of the dangers of comparison. The idolization of Amisa reminded me of how we, in the social media age, cling to idolization, and the quest to perceived perfection, even if the images we are shown are lies. In the end, we are all humans with flaws and Teo creates a beautiful grief in her reminder to us all. *PONTI* is an exquisite read, especially during a time of global struggle and grief, it creates space for mourning in all its possibilities.



“Don’t part with your illusions. When they are gone you may still exist, but you have ceased to live.”

- Mark Twain

DISCUSSION

Gracelyn Willard

Spoonies and Technology

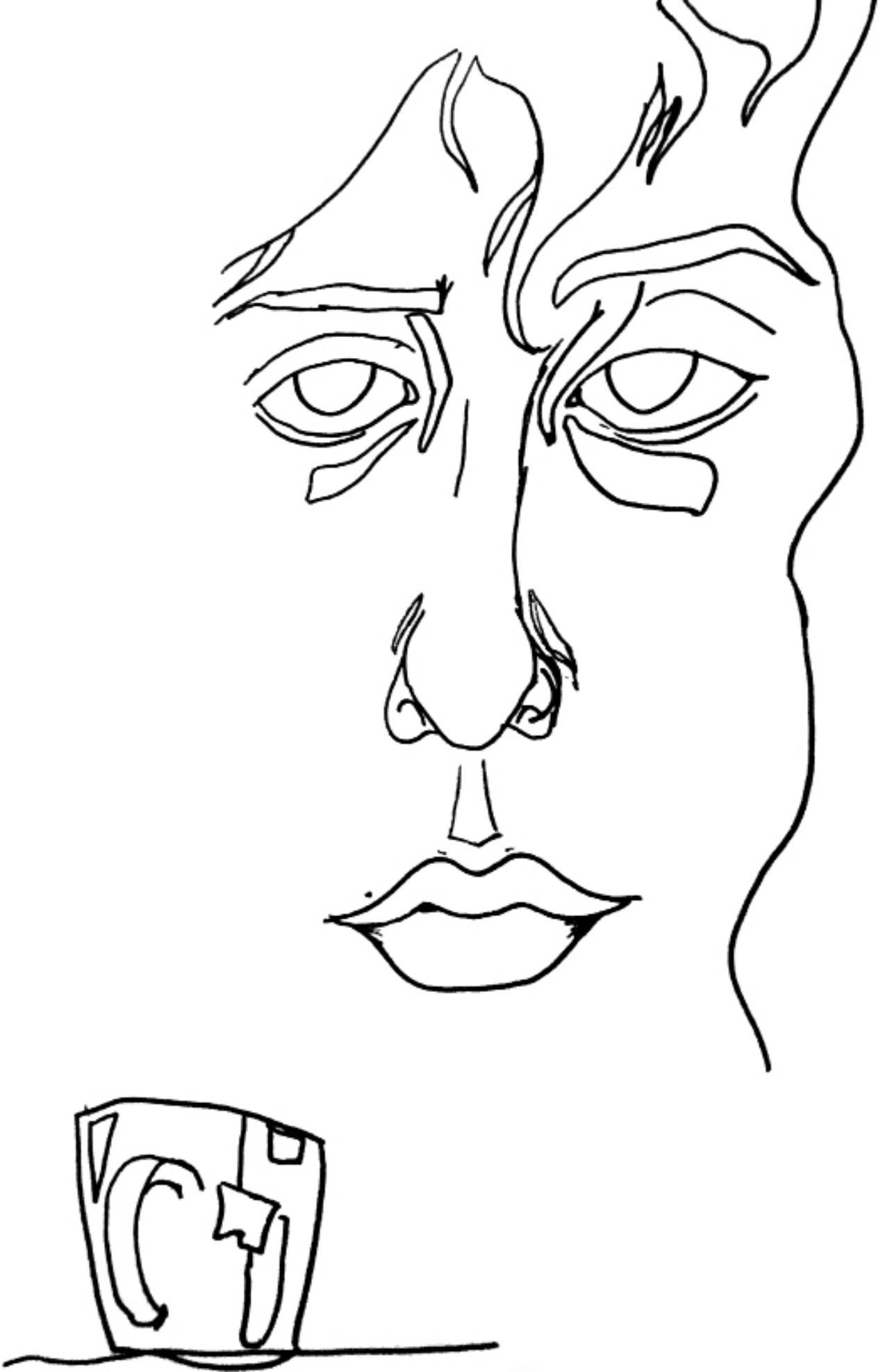
By Gracelyn Willard

Lately, I've been using technology more than ever, as I would assume most people have been. I've always used social media to connect with people the pandemic has simply highlighted the importance of social media in my life. My use of social media has only changed in the sense that I spend more time on it currently than before, my purpose on social media has remained the same; I want to connect with people. Instagram specifically allows me to reach out to people I'm unlikely to meet in real life. For me, Instagram is a platform I use to find and give support to and from other chronically ill individuals. I seek out the "spoonie" community and use the knowledge and words I find there to help me in my own life and to remind myself that I am not alone. A "spoonie" is a term for a person with a chronic illness and comes from this theory where everyone has a certain number of spoons for a day and each task you do cost a certain amount of spoons and once you run out of spoons you run out of energy for the day. People with chronic illness typically have fewer "spoons" than the average healthy person. And sometimes tasks cost more spoons for a chronically ill person.

I use my Instagram to document moments of my life; both the positive and the negatives. I want the people who follow me to see that it is possible to continue to live life even when your health places restrictions on you and that there are people out there that are dealing with the same shit as you. The internet helps us all find a community, but it is especially useful for individuals who have difficulty leaving their homes due to illness. Instagram, for the Spoonie community, helps to spread hope, information, and support for those who may lack those things, or who just need an extra dose some days. When the outside world can often be rude, unbelieving, and difficult to navigate for a chronically ill individual the internet is a surprisingly safe bubble at times. It is a place where stories of health can be traded without a misinformed bystander butting in asking if we've tried "exercising: as a solution to our health problems. Without technology or social media, I would have a difficult time maintaining a positive outlook on my life. The stories of success and healing that I find through the "Spoonie" community helps me maintain hope that I can get better one day too, and when some days the flares are too much I have a community of people who understand and who go through the same thing right at my fingertips. We watch out for each other and are always there to give support in whatever way we are able. Technology and social media have the power to bring hope and support and people together.



"Job Limbo" by Megan Ulrich





At The Sock Drawer we aim to raise the voices of those who have felt that their voices have been placed in the back of the sock drawer. We welcome all art and all artists, while giving special notice to those who are often marginalized by society.