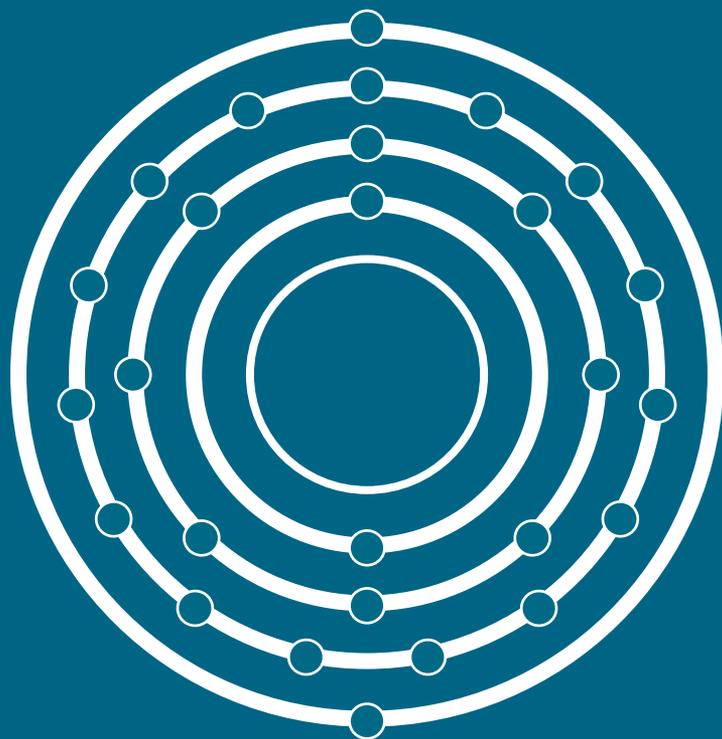


COBALT



Issue 19: Prose

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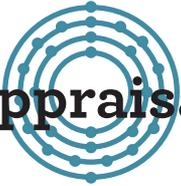
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**Issue 19:
Prose**

Marc Frazier



Appraisal

I often imagine offering my life to a pawnshop employee and asking what it's worth. In today's market. For its value shifts constantly. Even I know this.

Also in my imagination there is a plaza and a fountain. They often appear in my dreams. They are both me—my continuing lives (fountain) and the places they are lived out (plaza).

There are yellow birds and pink birds here. My feet spoil the sand and that is now. Ocean splash will create a new canvas. Who am I now? How do I know, when I have never been who I said I was?

A fact is a close relative of truth. Here is one: I have not had one life. Who I am now is the current cliché for me. Others see me this way as I see others as clichés. Aging, white, entitled gay male with disposable income who drives a Volvo S60, has a cleaning lady, gets manicures, and drops off laundry when the spirit moves him. One who can afford painful out-of-pocket treatments for rosacea. Vain. Oversexed. Aren't all gays? Not always able to perform.

Clichés are the truth but not the whole truth.

I set out with my first life: infant cared for by a psychotically depressed mother who threatened to kill me.

Other versions of me:

Shy, sensitive child strictly disciplined by a militaristic father.

Twenty-one-year-old who sat on his parents' back steps contemplating suicide.

Male who has always identified more with women.

Protector of a developmentally disabled sister.

Alcoholic continually driving drunk to get more drunk.

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Partier and sex addict saturated with gay sex: underground leather dungeons, bathrooms, and back bars.

Someone still engaged in therapy after decades of therapy.

Margaret Atwood said: “Don’t ask for the true story. Why do you need it? It’s not what I set out with or what I carry.” She begins her novel, *Life Before Man*: “I don’t know how I should live. I don’t know how anyone should live.” The latter lines sound like writing, and according to Elmore Leonard, “If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it,” she really should begin her novel again. But who wants to hear that?

And I no longer agree with, “I don’t know how I should live,” but it sounds good and that is as important as the idea.

Still, I want to know what I set out with, what I carry.

I have mostly been a world unto myself. I usually didn’t know others existed when I was an infant, and in most ways, I have lived by this assumption. When I need a reminder, there is still sex. Lauderdale is good for that.

Who I am now wants a public face. Having always been so private, I now want to be known. “I’m shy” I used to say to adults as I skulked behind my older brother in doorways, peeking around his side to watch the magic of making change for customers on his paper route, his confident punching of the card that indicated their faithful payment.

Who I am now is creative and productive. Balanced most of the time. Versatile. Business-minded. All the things a tortured soul is not. This me wonders if hard work and simple imagination is really all it takes. Lots of reworking. Editing. Reordering. My writing and my life.

Who do I write for? My banished selves. And for others’ banished selves.

Other lives:

Arty college student who felt he belonged only when hanging with other outsiders.

Educator/mentor who often taught sleepless after a night of drinking.

Adult diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

Child repeatedly coached to scrub his genitals with a soapy washcloth.

Career teacher in loud and violent environment coping with flashes of PTSD.

Devoted son who called wherever his parents lived “home” as if he had never grown up and moved away.

Who I am now can name his devils—resentment, jealousy, and anger. But they are lessening. They drain too much of my creative urges, throw me off balance in ways it is difficult to right.

I open literary journals not to the poetry but to the bios to see where people have been published so that I can be jealous. This is only one symptom. The variations are maddening.

I have always felt like an outsider. Part of that is being gay, but only part. It has also felt that way as a writer. At times, it seems like all poets, writers, and editors are young, associated with a university, almost exclusively Democrat if not socialist, and have been through an MFA program. All of these exclude me.

Here in Florida, this resort Manhattan Tower is neither a tower nor in Manhattan. But many things make sense the more you think about them. The current me feels at home here. I listen to the green parrot stuck on his one complaint, call seashells by name: *flamingo tongue*, *baby's ear*, *thracia*. Palms sway, swooshing pollen, gnats. Coleus throbs, its red deepening as trade winds hurry boats along the Intracoastal. Nothing will change if we name everything, everyone differently.

During one of my earliest visits to Fort Lauderdale, I wrote one of my favorite poems that ends: "Life, like anything, is a habit, can be found almost anywhere, can happen to anyone." My commonness is real but so is my uniqueness. That's how important I am not and how important I am.

The solipsism, the audacity, of memoir writing doesn't sit right with me. I hear my father saying, "Who do you think you are?" But I suppose I could also consider every word I've ever written as the story of my life. I love that Mary McCarthy said every word Lillian Hellman writes is a lie including "and" and "the." This says so much about the power of words.

I am now quite happy and content although I am a little fatigued from having lived so many lives.

The first one nearly led to death. The trick for me is seeing myself as a survivor but not living as one. I have mostly lived as one without seeing myself as one.

That feeling of waiting and wanting to be picked up, to be touched, never ends. Each new life of mine centers on this. So this current life has the same pull at its center—to be loved unconditionally in real time.

Place, as powerful as words, connects to the unknowable self. I remember one of my lives when I was totally confused about who I was. I lived neighboring a poor section of town called "Little Mexico." I wandered its rundown, random streets for parts of entire days fighting the urge to

drink or do something stupid. I would listen to Spanish words searching for meaning. Many days I understood them more than anything else in my life.

Each place has a spirit. I felt an immediate spiritual connection to the Southwest, to a gorge deep as God, to scrub, *cañon*, *chamisa*, to blue spilling over the *Sangre de Cristos*, Cochiti, into the Rio Grande Gorge.

I also feel spiritually connected to Illinois, my lifetime home, where once an ocean of grasses spread below sky. A world without echo. A world of rows, paths, roads, of tender sprouts of corn and soybean.

The rain of Vermont turns you green. The Gihon River cascades along old mills of the Green Mountains as maple syrup drowns. The summer children of coastal Maine are perfect shells: polished, sun-warmed, lightly starched. Morning sand for hair, ocean eyes, skin of white violets.

I feel at home in my body and soul in these places.

Emotion is part of a sense of place. Even sober I've been drawn to those who experience extreme emotion, especially women, like Victor Hugo's daughter, Adele, who cross the border of passion into madness. *The Story of Adele H* is one of my favorite films. Adele lived out her unrequited passion for Lieutenant Pinson in the bleak landscape of Nova Scotia.

I took a trip there to feel her spirit. In Halifax, every road leads downward to the ocean. Every breath is a fear. There I felt my current self form by a chips wagon near the public gardens.

Catholic child who wanted to be a holy brother because he didn't feel worthy enough to be a priest.

Twenty-one-year-old begging for dope in a psychiatric ward.

Awkward, socially anxious loner who felt perpetually left out.

Depressed alcoholic writer, fluid and wordy.

Poet struggling to be heard.

Long-term psychiatric patient prescribed psychotropic drugs.

Parentless adult feeling unmoored.

Alcoholic in recovery for decades.

Who I am now is not emotional. Why do I have so few feelings? I call Adele's music "manufactured emotion" because I think that no one person truly experiences all that. I can't even understand her pain and angst. It is endless and mythic and something out of reach to me.

Once I was like Blanche and now I am like Stella who asks, after all, "Who is guilty? Who deserves to be saved?" I am in the light with Stella even with my wrinkles and age spots, no longer in the shadows with Blanche chasing romantic notions. Stella builds a family. I build a life. An evolving self. A reason to be.

Daiva Markelis

The Book of Resolutions



For much of my adulthood, the New Year arrived without my conscious knowledge. The first time this happened I was sixteen, drinking vodka and rum and blackberry brandy in Billy Lee’s basement where lava lamps provided the ambient lighting and the radio DJ counted down the top hits of the past year: “Coming in at number eleven—‘The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia’ by Vicki Lawrence!” The year I was twenty-one and finally had a real boyfriend, I gulped down wine at the fancy restaurant where the five-course menu included steak marchand du vin and drunken apple pie. I continued with cheap champagne at the South Side party where I flirted with the married host. The boyfriend discovered me in the bedroom, passed out among the coats.

At twenty-six I spent New Year’s Eve in Vilnius, Lithuania—1983, before perestroika. Images from that night flicker like Christmas tree lights in the rain: flutes of Moldovan champagne followed by shots of vodka at a make-shift dance hall where the DJ played scratchy records of bad Russian pop. Me in a green silk dress the color of an Amazon parrot. People staring. A silver disco ball like a giant eye. Shouts of *nostrovia* and, less frequently, *i sveikata*. To your health. Me stumbling into a taxi, ripping my stockings, throwing up. My cousin asking how many cars I owned back in the States, how big my house was, whether I’d been to Niagara Falls.

Bahrain at twenty-nine. My then-husband and I were living in Saudi Arabia. Although we had access to contraband booze, we longed for a night of unabashed drinking in a public place; the Intercontinental Hotel in Manama promised Food, Fun, and Festivities. We crossed the Persian Gulf via the 16-mile long King Fahd Causeway, slowly—we’d heard stories of drunken Saudis veering off course and flipping off the bridge. We were soon drunk ourselves, boogying to Chaka Khan and Wham!,

staring at white-robed men dancing clumsily with each other, their wives safely at home.

I think about my intercontinental drinking life as I finish peeling potatoes for tonight's New Year's dinner for two: *coq au vin* with roasted garlic mashed potatoes, glazed butternut squash, fancy salad, poached pears. A container to boil the spuds would be useful, but all of my pots and pans and their respective lids lie jumbled in a heap—kitchenware after a nuclear war. As I urge a recalcitrant pot out of the bottom of the pile, the bigger ones on top come crashing down. I'm in my fifties and still don't understand the basic laws of physics.

The collision evokes a different kind of memory: New Year's Eve in Cicero, Illinois. Ten minutes before midnight the Lithuanian kids would run outside with pots and pans and forks and spoons. We'd stand shivering in the cold—it was always cold in Cicero in January. At the stroke of midnight, as anxious parents looked on, we'd bang away, shouting *Happy New Year Happy New Year Happy New Year* at the top of our lungs, except for Arvydas Zygas, my next-door neighbor and sometime nemesis, who yelled the phrase in Lithuanian: *Laimingu Nauju Metu!* Then, mightily pleased with ourselves, we'd trudge back upstairs, exhausted, ready for hot chocolate and the comforts of bed.

The next morning—pancakes, then Mass. We knew January 1st was a holy day of obligation, though the nuns made it clear we were celebrating the circumcision of Jesus Christ, *not* the beginning of the New Year. They were strangely silent on the definition of circumcision, as were our parents, forcing us to use the dictionary. We were horrified by what we read.

I uncork a bottle of burgundy—the *vin* for the *coq au vin*—and pour a cup and a half into the Crock Pot. As I mash the potatoes—gently, so they won't disintegrate into small and lifeless lumps—I think of my first sober New Year's. I boogied to “I Want to Sex You Up” at an AA dance. Recovering drunks smoked endless cigarettes while clutching limitless cups of coffee. My second sober New Year's Eve I attended a Burning Bowl ceremony at the Unitarian church in Oak Park with Wendy, my sponsor. We wrote down our resentments and placed them into a large container and watched the smoke of our antipathies rise and dissipate into the cold winter air. Then we hugged.

My husband lumbers in from the basement where he's been watching football.

“Something smells good,” he says and picks bits of Roquefort from my face and White Sox sweatshirt.

“It'll be a while.”

“That's okay. It's not like we have anything to do.”

Last year we threw a party. Guests watched movies in the media room

or played Clue in the library or chatted around a kitchen table filled with comfort food: Carol and David's baked ham, Bill's fried chicken, the other Carol's meatballs, my vegetarian chili, lots of chocolate, lots of wine and beer. Time goes by quickly when you're an anxious hostess, worried about overturned candles and music too loud or soft or the wrong kind, concerned about the wellbeing of the shy, about people drinking too little or too much. No one got sozzled, though a few people swayed a bit. Skinny birch trees in a summer breeze.

"Want to help?" I ask.

"There are games to be watched," he answers quickly and rushes downstairs.

I rinse the fancy greens and make the dressing: olive oil, balsamic vinegar, a splash of lemon, a pinch of sugar. I arrange several pine branches into a white ceramic vase. Pine scented candles burn on the fireplace mantle. The Christmas playlist continues: "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen."

Time for a break. I steep some green tea and take out my new notebook—red suede cover, unlined pages. My home office is packed with journals, some half-filled, some barely started: journals crafted out of finely burnished leather, moleskin journals, beaded journals, cheap black and white composition books, unlined booklets the size of matchboxes. There are notebooks with pictures of birds and butterflies and flowers, of depictions of famous art: *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, Monet's *Water Lilies*, Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. There are names and addresses of people I don't remember knowing, shopping lists and jokes and inspirational quotes: "Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana." And, "Beauty will save the world."

There are New Year's resolutions spanning decades. *Lose weight, eat more vegetables, take up yoga, read more quality literature*, and, highlighted in yellow, *travel to Iceland*.

The year I stopped drinking, at thirty-three, the list was necessarily long: study weather systems—become an expert on snow or tornadoes. Grow an indoor lemon tree, maintaining the proper moisture and heat for its survival. Learn to drive stick. Learn to stand on your head. Time was an enemy the year I stopped drinking. I went to meetings in dank church basements where I talked about turning my will and my life over to the care of God as I understood Him. I drank coffee and read spiritually uplifting books and bit my nails to the quick and still there was time, strange and unexpected, like extra minutes added to a basketball game when the officials slip up and stop the clock too soon. I'd wait for the moment to pass, for something to come up or something to do, so I wouldn't take a drink.

I stare at the new notebook, flip its blank pages, run my fingers over the smooth red cover. I realize with a sense of growing wonder and barely

palpable anxiety that I can think of nothing I want to change for the upcoming year, except for maybe buying fewer journals.

We eat in candlelight, reminiscing about the New Year's Eve at the fancy French restaurant where the soup was cold and the waiter quit ten minutes before midnight. We talk about the New Year's Eve we spent with my mom, eating at Red Lobster and then seeing *Lord of the Rings*, or was it the other way around, and how we argued, I don't remember what about, and tried to hide it from my mother.

After dinner, Marty clears the table. I know what comes next. The last Scrabble game of the year. It's a ritual we've engaged in for almost two decades, since we first started playing.

When we play Scrabble, my husband usually wins. He's a top-ranked tournament player who lugs around a Scrabble board the way some men carry condoms. "You never know when you'll get lucky," he says.

We draw to see who goes first: I pull out an I, Marty a U.

"You and I," he says.

"You and I."

My rack is as unpromising as a dark winter's morning: GUUOOER.

"Exchanging five," I announce, keeping the E and the R, letters that are valuable because of their synchronicity.

I pick ADIPS and try to contain my excitement.

"Exchanging five," Marty says.

I plunk down PRAISED.

"That's seventy-four points for PRAISED," I say loudly, as if there are other people in the room.

I could have played DESPAIR. Or DIAPERS. Or ASPIRED, which would have scored as many points as PRAISED. But PRAISED implies attainment rather than aspiration. PRAISED denotes gratitude.

I look for significance in the tiles we draw, the words we play. Perhaps I'm not so different from my Lithuanian ancestors, who believed in superstitions and prophecies. Be kind to birch trees because the souls of the dead perch on their branches on Pentecost Sunday. Feed the sacred family snake. At midnight on St. John's Eve search for the blossom of the fern. Forget the fact that ferns don't have blossoms. At the dawn of a new year write down letters on separate pieces of paper and then place the letters in water. The letters that float to the top will form words that spell out your destiny.

As I'm envisioning the Zen-like beauty of words skimming the surface of a crystal blue lake, Marty comes back with his own bingo, URINATE. He's hooked the U to PRAISED to also make UPRAISED. I groan.

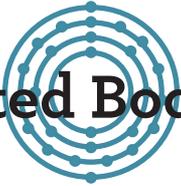
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And so it goes. Back and forth, back and forth. I get the X, he, the J and the Z. We split the all-important blanks. Marty has the edge in strategy and word knowledge, but I'm better with time. The seconds on his clock tick anxiously away. Tick, tick, tick I mutter, trying to distract him. Tick, tick, tick. He laughs, but then tells me to stop it. Scrabble is serious business.

Five minutes to midnight, we turn on the television. A replay of the Times Square countdown of an hour before—nothing but noise and Dick Clark look-alikes.

Marty and I toast to each other and the upcoming year with cranberry juice mixed with seltzer.

We kiss and go back to the game, which Marty wins, but only barely.



Felted Bodies

“... first articulated by Stambul at the 1938 Praha Conference. But the war and his own conflicting interests insured there would be no inquisitional follow-up. If Brooke-Rose and Danielewski are significant practitioners of the interpolative form, Shelton’s *Odd/Even* (2002) stakes out a more concise periphery of the issues even if in the passage cited below, with its interlineations of a colphonial poem as Adornoian paralipomenon, a cosmetized “lying butressss”, has aspectional aspirations that are primarily nostalgic rather than predicative of meaning. A nocturne more whistling than Whistler’s [polite chuckles] —

Odds of Nightingales. Of flesh informed by intelligence and by prosperity that ultimately and tastefully *throughout the 19th century* (note the tone) absolutely historical, a university town. There more books than in all the surrounding *thousands of nightingales trapped for the London market. In the words of one observer*—connecting counties, bodies and brains gently pressed, nourished sufficiently, “*the birds take poorly to captivity. At certain seasons, the gutters of Holborne* suppress that idealism so that to the cynical, sober well being and wholesome *Seven Dials were clogged with their felted bodies.*” *Yet I doubt they were miserable*, purpose seemed causal though no one would say which was the cause and which a decadent, *quickly dying. And to balance the equation, what enjoyment did?* Most professors lived a life the envy of any desert father, each so *they bring to the old, the sick, the melancholic? Oh, you want a concrete conscious, an example* scholium ad scholia as to engage in but behind the back, *Ok, think Regency; Jennie the maid jilted by Jack the drover, buys a bird to sweeten the staleness of her attic room*, autumn days when squirrels gathered nuts with attention, when all creation looms. At night, it forgets the weave of wire and dreams it is free. Hearing its elisions paused to

tense, horns calling behind pyres of far maples as if the fall of *soft throat-ed notes and for a while so does she. But frankly, it's hard to get worked up about winter*, to see the brilliant young crossing the quad, one could well believe *overloads of dead nightingales. Or the people. Everyone alive—pick a date*, say “Many gifts but you lack that high seriousness. You will squander them”. *April 1868 is dead*, she had said as he sorted the bales of letters, the skins. *Tell me that makes you sad when really you're glad they are not around*, old Virginia grand dames who dutifully to the library where they were filed and ordered, *competing for love, position of space. They are out of the race. And as to locks of hair stitched with dry rotted thread, no matter. Nightingales? Well I heard one once, one summer in Somerset. And if you didn't there's always 'Audobon's Big Book of Bird' with CD-ROM of song carried if the radiator was on, up and tacking light, galleons amid attendant pinnaces of dust sailing despite the pressure the urgency building (cyclotron) as the morning aged from the cosmic expense from one discrete moment of work to another to drink water or sat doing nothing with CD-ROM of song until even greater because the work had atomized again so that by five, after thousands of years in the brain refused to move some little motor in your nostrils or under your arms that walking home the quick emphatic nods of routs of sparrows that had scattered and then split amid the various flights of melody with no more impression or Google search than fitful summer breezes against exhausted quarries, nightingale sounds.*

Oh, the Nightingales

*Throughout the nineteenth century,
thousands of nightingales
were trapped for the London market.
In the words of one observer,
“the birds take poorly to captivity.
At certain seasons, the gutters of
Holborne and Seven Dials
were clogged with their felted bodies.”
Yet I doubt they were much miserable,
quickly dying. And to balance the equation,
what enjoyment did they bring
to the old, the sick, the melancholic?
Oh, you want an example?
Ok, think “Regency”,
Jennie the maid, jilted
by Jack the drover, buys a bird*

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to sweeten the staleness of her attic room.

*At night, it forgets the weave of wire
and dreams it's free, and hearing its soft
throated notes, for a while, so does she.*

*But frankly, it is hard to get worked up
over loads of dead nightingales.*

Or the people.

*Everyone alive in London- pick a date,
say April 1868, is dead.*

*Tell me that makes you sad.
when really you're glad they're not around,
competing for love, position or space.*

They are out of the race.

*And as to nightingales,
well, I heard one once,
one summer in Somerset.*

*and if you haven't, there's always
"Audobon's Big Book of Birds"
with CD-ROM of song.*

(Or Google search "nightingale sounds").

The question is not where we have been or where we are going (Woolf's leaning tower); every sleight of thought quantifies the proposition's displacement from space and position. Such interrogatives are themselves bankrupt positions, stock exchanges precipitated from Baudrillard's economy of failed exchange. Now I understand we time for a few questions. Who'd like to begin?"



Posing a Question

Photography essentially began as the art of portraiture. With the daguerreotype the portrait—previously painted and available only to an aristocratic few—became relatively inexpensive and available to everyone. John Szarkowski, the legendary director, curator, and poohbah-emeritus at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, noted in *Looking at Photographs* (his survey of the museum’s extensive collection) that “of the countless thousands of daguerreotypes that survive, not one in a hundred shows a building or a waterfall or a street scene.” What they show is “an endless parade of ancestors.” With the daguerreotype, Szarkowski wrote, “every man’s family acquired a visual past...” Not only that, every man acquired for himself a visual present and a knowledge of that present. It is no surprise given the unique fidelity of this new medium that this knowledge produced its own special set of problems with regard to the portrait.

In the 1850s Nadar, one of the most famous of the early French photographers, stopped taking photographs of women because the results were, he said, “too true to nature to please the sitters, even the most beautiful.” The lines were drawn early on between what the subject wanted in a photograph and what the ambitious photographer wanted. What the subject wanted was, of course, to look good—and not just garden-variety good, but, if possible, better than they had ever looked before. What the ambitious photographer wanted was something else, something important, something vital—they wanted a photograph infused with those qualities that animate a work of art.

The candid portrait—a photograph taken without the subject being aware of it—was pioneered in the early 1900s by Paul Strand, Walker Evans, and others. It was the serious photographer’s answer to the sterile studio portrait of the day—the homogenized work aimed primarily at

flattering the sitter. Evans's "Subway Portraits" in the 1930s were done with a hidden camera, the lens poking out between the buttons of his overcoat. He described the series as an aesthetic protest against posed portraiture. The idea was that a person, captured unaware, would reveal something substantive about him or herself, something truthful, something he or she would not reveal if they were conscious of the camera. It is true, of course, that a person will make this sort of revelation; but the obverse is also true—a fact that is generally underappreciated.

A person aware of being photographed reveals something substantive about him or herself that he or she would not be revealing if they were unaware and in repose. Unaware, the face reflects the conversation a subject is having with him or herself. Aware, the face reflects a conversation the subject is having with someone else. It gives us different information—information that is frequently more difficult to decode, but no less trustworthy, no less significant.

One of the most famous examples of the candid portrait is Strand's *Blind Woman, New York 1916*—a poignant and desolating image of an ageing beggar with a sign hung around her neck identifying her as blind. It is an iconic photograph—one that the critic Geoff Dyer described forensically as the "graphic illustration of the photographer's ideal relationship to his subject." It is obviously an illustration of one relationship, but it is not for me the "ideal" one—it is just one of many.

Compare this photograph to another of Strand's famous portraits, *Mr. Bennett, Vermont 1944*. Mr. Bennett is very much aware of the fact that he is being photographed. Does this diminish the photograph's power? No. Does one of these portraits feel more truthful than the other? Not to me. There is an assumption that the candid portrait tells you more than it often does and that the posed photograph tells you less. This assumption rests in large part on a pair of iffy suppositions: one about the nature of solitude (that it is invariably primal and profound), the other about the nature of presentation (the idea that the way one tries to present one's self or succeeds in presenting one's self has nothing to do with who they really are when in fact there can be, in some cases, no better indicator of who a person is than a view of who they think they are or who they want you to think they are).

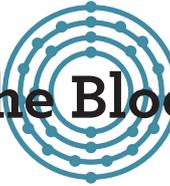
Over time the logistical and expressive limitations of the candid portrait became obvious. Photographers returned to the posed photograph seeking new ways of getting what they wanted—which was something informative, something meaningful. One strategy (which acknowledged a residual bias in favor of the candid portrait) was to play with the idea of candor by simulating unawareness, by having the sitter pose as if not

posing—to appear oblivious, to gaze off somewhere lost in thought, to do something, to be “absorbed” in some action that precluded the subject putting on a face to meet the camera. It is a stratagem on which the garrulous and habitually recursive Michael Fried has opined at length (see, for example, his *Absorption and Theatricality*).

Some subjects, of course, are better at this fake unawareness than others, but we as viewers are surprisingly good at detecting this just as we are surprisingly good at making visual assessments of character. It’s hard-wired. As the photographer Diane Arbus famously noted, there is in the posed photograph “a gap between intention and effect.” There is what the sitter wants to tell you and what they may inadvertently reveal. Actors (and sociopaths) can and do exploit this common dissonance. They study to control this gap—to keep these inadvertent revelations to a minimum. But it’s not just actors and sociopaths. More and more everyday people are becoming practiced at this.

Photographer Garry Winogrand took photographs, he said, “to find out what something looked like photographed.” Today with the proliferation of cameras and the obsessive interest in one’s self, everyone knows what they look like photographed. They have been photographed by themselves and others almost since birth. They have developed a posing strategy to make sure they look (as much as possible) the way they want to. It has made it much harder for the ambitious photographer to get a “real” photograph, to mine that discrepancy between intention and effect for the elemental substances they are seeking.

As a photographer, I have taken portraits, and, as a writer, I have had portraits taken, so I have at least a passing familiarity with both sides of the ongoing struggle for control of the image. There is a quality I have heard described as well as it can be, I think, of “thereness” to a good portrait. It puts the viewer in direct visual contact with a person who is physically and temporally distant from them. It is the type of photograph that ripens—the temporal distance becomes more dramatic with each passing year and adds to the photograph’s value as a document and as an aesthetic object. A good portrait is not about faithful transcription, but about faithful representation. It preserves and presents a feeling as well as a form. “In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. In other words, a strange action,” wrote Roland Barthes. I couldn’t agree more with his description of this photographic encounter—“a strange action” to be sure.



The Block

Maria is waiting for me. She would probably say she's always waiting for me. I think about what that might mean as I walk, hands deep in my jacket's pockets, my breath sharp and visible against the night. The block is angry, cold, in that unique way the darkest parts of cities tend to be. There's something heavy about these places, a warning hum that says, "You're not going anywhere." I cough. The air tastes sour against my tongue. My uncle Jonesy told me about the factories on the edge of the city everyone worked in back in the day and how his father could never get the smell of tire rubber off his clothes. In a wistful moment after a couple bottles of Mad Dog and a game of Spades, Jonesy spoke of how the neighborhood used to be and how hard his father worked. As Jonesy spoke, he couldn't stop himself from dancing when a Marvin Gaye song played over the radio. We had laughed at him as he closed his eyes and weaved to the music filling the dim basement. Then without warning, he stopped dancing and said, "When the wind blows just right, you can smell that past and the residue of promises." The abruptness of the memory causes me to pause. I try and imagine what the block, the world, looked like back then, but it's too hard to see past now.

I stop and watch a group of coffee-colored boys in a circle. Haloed by the light of cellphones, they look fifteen or sixteen, but their anger, an anger I immediately recognize as the kind resting uneasily under my skin, has aged them into men. Two square off in the middle – manhood at stake. Picturing myself in that same circle, I try to guess what they're fighting about: most likely ego, girls, or money. There's a reluctance to their movements. They don't want to fight, but they have no choice. The boys puff out their chests as they attempt to appear larger, but their shoulders still sag. Their faces are tight in practiced masks of intimidation; they only know fear, and that scares them.

“You a bitch,” I hear one say, his voice flat, almost robotic. He wears a white t-shirt and jeans he pulls up after each step. His sweatshirt, on the ground behind him, was discarded to show his seriousness. His hands are up high to protect his face. His head bobs. The other, in slim jeans and heavyweight hoody, swings a fist with the weight of his entire body. They dance, feet shuffling and hands reaching out for contact, until spent, and one falls, and those outside the circle get bored, putting away their phones.

This ceremony of manhood reminds me of the African dance group my mom put me in before I realized I wasn't supposed to like it and I quit. We, black boys all around nine or ten and angry at our parents for pulling us away from cartoons, would meet every Saturday in the church's activity room, our heads still bowed to avoid being looked at by everyone else who was not wearing a brightly colored dashiki. I can see myself awkwardly flailing my arms to drums and the voice of our Nigerian instructor, a woman we called Abi because she assumed we couldn't pronounce her name. While she guided us, explaining the significance of each dance, we always tried to avoid looking too long at each other so no one could see us smiling. Maria always laughs when she sees those pictures of me and eight other boys trying to be tough in our dashikis and matching hats.

Outside the fight, I stand, uneasy and out of place, deciding if I should say something. I think about telling them they shouldn't fight, but they wouldn't believe me. They would know that this is how things are. The victor and his boys glare at me while leaving, daring me to challenge, to comfort. I look away, curious if they know how endangered they are, if they can feel it in everything they do. The boy who was knocked down, the one in the hoody, gets up slowly, avoiding my gaze, before picking up his phone. I can see his hand shaking as he makes a call.

“Yo... it's on!” he says into the phone. I turn away.

The streetlights flicker, their dancing glare vibrating my path. The darkness has an odd texture to it because stars don't live here. The thought makes me laugh to myself. I pass a row of houses, tight like an overcrowded mouth of colorfully crooked teeth. When I get to Maria's, the crimson colored paint flaking off leaf-like, I notice her open window. “You don't want people seeing all your stuff,” I've told her. “That's how you get your shit stolen.” She never listens. I think she likes hearing the way the block breathes, its buzz. I get that, but I know how things tend to end here.

The house—more like an apartment really—feels close, full of furniture far too big for each room. I can tell she bought for the future, for that hazy time when things get better. For when all the dreaming and the

hard work pays off. For when she no longer rents from a man who lives outside the city in a neighborhood much different than hers. I once told Maria, “Every room here is like a metaphor for ambition or something. Like some American dream shit.” She smiled, a small one, and moved closer to me.

Maria does not look up when I walk over. She is watching that reality show where a perfect blonde couple remodels the house of a slightly less perfect version of themselves, everyone smiling and gasping at the camera throughout. “This might as well be a fairy tale,” I told her one night while we lay on the couch, her head on my shoulder.

“Whatever,” she giggled, tiny and cute. “That’s why I watch.” She paused then, her tone changing. “It’s inspirational.” I hugged her closer. I didn’t bother telling Maria the truth about inspiration, how we don’t get that on the block. She’s been here long enough; she should know.

Yesterday, and every other Sunday, as Maria cleaned the bathrooms, scrubbing and shining her face into the porcelain, the similarities between her life and the lives of her parents should have been too obvious to miss. It was those parents, Dominican immigrants, who ingrained in her the value of dreams and convinced Maria things could be better. They told her what it was like in the *campo* and how America was a place where anything could happen if you just believed and worked. Her dad had driven an ice-cream truck, selling sugar and salt to other poor folks, while her mother had been a maid, also scrubbing her dark face into white porcelain that did not belong to her. I guess they didn’t know any better.

Maria offers her cheek when I walk over, and I offer a small kiss in response. She smells of lilac and something I cannot place. It makes me wonder if hope has a smell. Probably like money I realize.

“Thought you’d be here earlier,” she says, her voice higher than usual. Something’s on her mind.

“Yeah, took the long way... sorry.” She nods, saying nothing, and I sit with her, a cushion between us.

The light from the TV makes Maria’s skin look even more cocoa-colored than usual. I often call her light-skinned, to mess with her, and she always asserts her darkness. “I’m a rich mahogany,” she says, and I shrug and grin. Her hair, now a faint cinnamon, is cropped close to the scalp. It still surprises me sometimes. I used to miss cradling the soft coarseness she had, but I made sure to tell her I loved it for the first week after she cut it. I told her she looked African now (“a diasporic princess” I had called her) and she smiled, her brown eyes lighting up.

I walk over, close the window, and pull down the blinds. The room glows with a harsh fluorescence. We watch the reveal of a new kitchen,

bright white and full of carefully placed sterling-silver cooking accessories. I can tell Maria is imagining herself there frying plantains for two or three cocoa-colored children who will blow on the fried goodness as they try and eat while rushing out of the house. I wonder if she sees me there with her. The woman who did all the interior designing of the fancy kitchen, in heeled boots and a tight flannel shirt, rubs her hand over the pecan colored wood atop the bar and exclaims, “Don’t you love it? It’s reclaimed from your old door.” They gush over its smooth finish, all of them happy and carefree.

Maria looks over at me, her eyes soft, wanting. “I missed you today,” she says. I squeeze her hand. I never know how to respond. I am unsure if I missed her, but I feel like I should have. We watch more couples build dream homes as we sit in silence. The staccato pop of gunshots down the block tells us it’s time to go upstairs. Maria peeks between the blinds and shakes her head. She starts to speak but says nothing.

In bed, Maria whispers, to the ceiling, “We could buy a house. Together. Move somewhere else.” I wait for her to turn towards me to keep going, to start another conversation about the future, trying to convince me, but she doesn’t.

I lie on my stomach, inhaling the faint smell of sweat on my pillow. The sudden and unexpected thought of my dreams dying in the pillow’s softness every morning has kept me awake. It seems like something I should have realized before, and that bothers me. Even though I am not facing her, Maria knows I cannot sleep. I consider answering. The last time I told her, “We’re not ready yet,” and she said nothing. This time I am quiet and leave her words where they land. I try and decide if we could actually buy a house and move away from the block. The idea feels too large to deal with, like something for someone else. The whine of a siren reminds me of where I am and to stick to the present as the room is bathed in the blue-red of police lights. The flashing paints bars of light and shadow on my skin.

Maria falls asleep before me, her breaths shrinking into small snores. I listen to their rhythm while trying to pinpoint the moment when the size of her dreams began to scare me. Was it when she started talking about our children, imagining how they would have my nose and her eyes? Or when she began talking about the home we would buy and how I would have to get one of those riding mowers to cut the lawn? “I’ve never cut grass before,” I told her, and she had said it didn’t look too hard on TV. It could have been when I first met her, and she said, “I don’t have time for dudes who aren’t about the future,” and I had laughed, stolen a glance at her ass, and told her that as long as I was in her future, I was about it. I want to tell myself this feeling, the fear, is new, that something happened,

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but I know it isn't. The block breeds fear and feeds off it. I have always known this, and I've probably always been afraid. No matter how far I've gone, regardless of everything I've done to prove it otherwise, everything I've learned, this is an unflinching truth that aches deep in my bones.

For some reason Maria's not afraid, and she has tried to show me the beauty of the future, but I've never been able to see that far. She believes she's better... she'll do better and she can bring me with her, but I know what the block does to dreamers. Dreams are too expensive here. At some point I fall sleep, the warmth of a portable heater not quite enough to keep me from shivering.

I get dressed as the streetlights darken, taking one last look at Maria. She is calm, probably caught in a design show dream. I am envious. Outside, the block is quiet with uncertainty, as if it has a choice in what it can be. The sky is the color of cement, and I realize just then, with a suddenness that makes me stop, I have decided to leave Maria. I cannot be there when the truth arrives in her life, when she is forced to realize she's not going anywhere. I am not strong enough for both of us, and I know she will probably be fine without me. I sigh. The cold, always eager, comes quietly. I zip my jacket up high to my chin and look around. I wonder if the dope boys who run the block will have brought out their winter coats.

Katey Cravens



Sister Stalkers

People have a tendency to underestimate my level of uncoolness. It's a problem I have battled my entire life. My days are spent assuring these people that they have made critical misjudgments that will only end in heartache. "Don't come near me!" I'll say. "There's no cure, yet!" "Yes, I watch *The Office*, but that doesn't make me worth knowing." "You know the Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon game? I made a *Party of Five* version. Seriously, name any actor and I'll link them to Neve Campbell." This is often met with a pity laugh and words of unwanted encouragement. That's usually when I give up. They'll figure it out soon enough.

No person was ever more detrimentally wrong about my overall character than my little sister, Kelsey. She worshipped me. She worshipped me so undeservingly that it makes me sad to think about. Sad for her. Sad for me. Sad that the two lamest people that have ever existed came from the same family. The peak of her fascination took hold during the time I was in junior high school. She was seven. I would often glance up from doing homework to find her hovering in my doorway like an unskilled stalker. The look on her face, one of crazed glee, ecstatic to be only a few feet away from me—the family celebrity. I would cautiously shut my door so not to startle her; fearing for my life in these awkward moments.

Because I was so entirely uncool, I just assumed she wanted to murder me. Was I to possess a fraction of the excellence she projected upon me, perhaps I would have been less creeped out. But she was the creepiest, so it was difficult not to be. She told me stories of some of the things she did when I was unaware or, more accurately, unconscious.

"Sometimes when you were sleeping, I'd sneak in and look at you," she said.

"Jesus, Kelsey! That is terrifying!" I said.

"I'd kiss your forehead, too. Sometimes."

“Oh, my dear God...”

The sweet little girl with a heart of gold and the stealthiness of a serial killer—my sister.

I’ve asked her multiple times what it was about me that kept her so enthralled, and the answers only add to the pathetic-ness of our situation.

“You were so mysterious,” she said. “Your door was always shut and you hardly ever talked to me. You were so awesome.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said, “that sounds like someone I’d like to hang out with.”

“I don’t know what it was! I just needed to know what you were doing in there. In your room, I mean. I used to peek under the door.”

“Your life makes me sad.”

What’s even sadder is that I *did* know what I was doing in there. I guess you could call it mysterious, but I’d probably call it depressing. I didn’t have a lot of friends, so I entertained myself with the resources available in my bedroom. I made friends with the people in my 19-inch television. The box was always on; even during slumber I needed the company of my famous compadres. I knew every actor and actress. I knew their age, their family members, their blood type, their hopes and dreams... It was an obsession. A full-on, straight-jacket kind of obsession that probably could have benefitted from some one-on-one time with a shrink.

“Yes, now. What do you see in this inkblot?” He’d say in a thick German accent.

“Rachel Greene in a Princess Leia costume,” I’d say.

“Mmm, yes... And here?”

“Mango seducing Matt Damon. Did you see that episode? Hilarious.”

“Um, alright. What about this one?”

“That’s Jessie Spano on caffeine pills. ‘I’m so excited! I’m so excited! I’m so... scared!’”

It felt like I needed to immerse myself in the lives of these celebrities because one day I would be one of them. I would be on the television screen of a pathetic junior high kid and they would be obsessing about me while their little sister peeked under the door.

Determined to finally understand why Kelsey was so blind to my innate uncoolness (and perhaps to discover that her opinion of me was accurate and I actually *was* cool), I forced her to tell me her favorite memory from the height of her unwarranted infatuation. The result was the saddest thing I had ever heard.

I have entitled it “The Best Day,” as told by Kelsey Cravens:

It was really late one night—so probably like 11:00 p.m. back then—and I was forcing myself to stay awake because I knew *you* were awake. I turned on my TV to *Who’s the Boss* because I knew *you* were watching *Who’s the Boss*. I just sat there on my bed hoping that you would come

out of your room and say, “Hey, you’re awake, too? Wanna hang out in my room and watch *Who’s the Boss?*” And then, just as I was falling asleep, you came out of your room. You looked at me and said, “What are you doing?” And I said, “I’m awake, too!” And you said, “Okay.” Then you went into the kitchen to make a sandwich. It was turkey and cheese on a white hoagie bun. I guess I followed you in there so you made me one, too. You took your sandwich and went back to your room. I went back to my room. I sat there on my bed, eating my turkey and cheese on a white hoagie bun and was so happy because I knew that *you were sitting in your room on your bed eating a turkey and cheese on a white hoagie bun. I watched *Who’s the Boss* while I ate and was so happy because I knew you were watching *Who’s the Boss* while you ate. It was the best day.*

This story made me tear up for two reasons: 1) It made me feel like a huge asshole. 2) It made me realize that my little sister was a big weirdo. She just kept saying, “It was the best day, it was the best day...” If only she had known what I was actually doing in there. Would she have gotten slapped into reality? Finally comprehended the degree at which her older sister was the biggest loser on the planet? Unfortunately, I doubt it. But here’s what I was doing...

Who’s the Boss was, like, the worst show ever. I watched it for one reason and that reason’s name was Alyssa Milano. Every weeknight at 11pm, I had a standing appointment with my television because Alyssa Milano would be on the screen. In order to practice my acting skills and fully submerge myself into the world of this 80’s rerun, I created a new character comprised of the lines and personalities of some of the other characters in the show. Of course, this character *had* to be Alyssa Milano’s love interest because otherwise, what was the point? I would then sneak into my mother’s bathroom, steal her compact mirror, and return to my spot directly in front of the TV. Mirror in hand, I would act out scenes right alongside Tony Danza and Judith Light. I was Angela’s witty niece or maybe even her much younger sister. Mona was a huge slut, so it wouldn’t have been that far of a stretch. And every once in a while, Tony would say her name—Samantha. Only it was Tony Danza so it sounded more like “Samantah.” Then, Alyssa Milano would walk on screen in all her poofy haired, acid-washed denim glory. Samantha and my character would play out the scene with subtle sexual tension (or as much you can get between two 12-year-olds), the tiniest of glances shared between us as if foreshadowing that we would eventually end up together—because that’s just good television.

I wanted to tell Kelsey all of this. Wanted to make her see me for who I really was—an uber-dork. But if I told her, her opinion of me would change. I would no longer be her mysteriously awesome older sister, I

would be just like her—a red-blooded, American psycho.

But I was just like her. I stalked my celebrity pals just as she always stalked me. We were the same. She had no idea what went on behind that closed door, just as I had no idea what went on in the real lives of the actors on *Who's the Boss*. Alyssa Milano could have been a secret nose-picker or a Jehovah's witness for all I knew. But I didn't know, and that's what made her so appealing. Well, that and her epic hotness. So, I decided to keep my double-life from Kelsey. I wanted to hang on to my celebrity status for as long as I could because I knew that one day she would discover the real me and the fantasy would end. But when that day ultimately arrived, we were bonded by mutual weirdness. We meshed all of our flaws and quirks and inherent humanness becoming the most indestructible pair of friends and siblings the world had ever seen. We had the power to crumble mountains and part seas with our combined oddities.

But on most days, we were happy just watching television.

Conrad Bishop & Elizabeth Fuller



Midway through the journey of my life, I found myself within a dark wood, where the straight path had been lost. So I got a cat.

Abbie I met at the Sacramento SPCA. I'd never had a cat, but after my girlfriend left I went to the pound. I needed something more elemental, I told myself. In school, I'd often wished I could go back a grade and try again instead of just pretending I'd learned it all.

I saw this cat in the cage, beautiful pearl gray, with golden, hate-filled eyes. She was huddled in a corner, a vicious, hissing, spitting thing, like a soul frying in hell. "I'll take that one," I said.

I'd never heard of a fighting cat, but that's what the keeper told me. A professional, so to speak, trained to be tossed into rings to fight cats, dogs, raccoons. Its front feet had been declawed, apparently to make the fights last longer. Hopefully her owner too had been declawed and tossed in the slammer. "Well she's yours if you want her. But just fair warning that she's a vicious little thing. Two other people brought her back. She will absolutely not be touched, so if you want a cat to crouch in the corner and hiss at you, that's your cat. Sometimes people think if they show enough affection, tada! But frankly, the only human she trusts is the guy who made her like that."

"No, I understand." I guess I did understand her eyes, the huddle, the rage. As a kid it's what I felt when my dad came into the room, and I could trust the swat of his belt. But I thought, well, love can do wonders. Which had never quite worked for me in other relationships, but...

"But she's something else, so if you bring her back she's going to be put down."

For three months I couldn't touch the cat. Those hind feet still had claws. Every time I'd go to work she'd try to slip out the door. Then I'd come home, crack open the door, we'd lock eyes, then she'd wad back into

her corner. It wasn't what I needed at that point in history. There were times I felt, okay, she can have the apartment, I'll sleep in the car. But I kept thinking be patient. We shall overcome.

I called her Abbie. Miss Abbie had been my kindergarten teacher, this little round lady, the first truly kind human being I'd ever known. I thought maybe there's magic in a name. I gave her sardines, tried to make her understand I wasn't like those other guys, that despite my abusive childhood and suicidal tendencies, I had a beautiful heart. She was unresponsive to beautiful hearts.

Abbie didn't help my sex life. There was some conversational value to start with, how I found her and what a sweet generous soul I was for saving her from death, but that wore thin. I acquired another girlfriend, Beth, and lost her fast. "I mean, Michael, one wonders, why would you have a cat that you can't even pet? What is that about? Frankly, I have had it with co-dependent relationships, okay?"

One night I was having weird dreams. I woke up, moonlight from the street, and Abbie was crouched on the night stand, staring at me with those deep, deep yellow eyes. When do I rip out his throat? I thought, go ahead, stare at me, I hurt too, you little bitch. She padded off to the closet. It scared the hell out of me.

My friends gave me advice. Jasper was the worst: "Michael, buddy, that cat— This is our political disagreement, microcosm, macrocosm, okay? This is the War on Terror, buddy. Feed those ragheads sardines and make'em love you? No! The one thing they understand is a fist. America has got to go over there, say, 'We are the boss of the world, guys, get used to it!' Crack down and she'll be eating out of your hand. Just bitch-slap that cat!"

My mom, we'd gotten closer in recent years after Dad died off: "You still have that cat? I think you'd be happier with a dog. You're always telling me how stand-offish that cat is, that isn't natural, there's something wrong with that cat—"

"Yeh, I know—"

"Well, I'm not telling you what to do, this is just your old mom talking, but you really used to like dogs, remember Lady Bug, you really loved Lady Bug. You ought to get a dog..."

Twice I decided to take her back to the pound. Once, for the purpose, I even rented a carrier. But then I would start imagining she was me. I'd start hearing, "Little bastard, stop crying, smack him!" And for me, commitment was commitment, even in relationships where this feeling was not mutually shared. You don't take your girlfriend back to the girlfriend shelter and say, "I can't deal with her. Gas her."

Then one day Abbie got out. My place got burgled, and Abbie got out

the door. I came home from work, she'd been hit by a car, she was lying on the porch. Her back paws dangled over the step, her back was a bloody mess, she was breathing hard. I touched her. She let me touch her.

I ran, got a cardboard box, and scooped her into it. Took her to the vet, who said, "You've got a pretty mangled cat. I can try to fix her, but it's gonna cost a lot of money and she probably won't live." I told him to go ahead, please try.

Because... What I had seen was the line of blood up from the street. She'd been hit in the street, crawled up over the curb, across the yard, the flower bed, gravel, then up two steps to the porch. Thirty feet. She'd crawled thirty feet, back to the guy she hated. Where she knew there was help.

Shortly after the accident, my friend Jasper called, left a message: "Michael, my man, wonder if you'd like to go to Fugazi tonight, Tin Hat Trio is playing, so give me a call. Bee-beep."

I called him back, got his voice mail: "Jasper, hi. I'd love to, but Abbie got hit by a car and she's pretty bad. I'm just gonna have to be with her, so I'll be talking to you."

Beep. Voice mail. Jasper: "Michael, my God, is there anything I can do? Jeez, I'm sorry for asking, but Abbie, is that your cousin I met at Thanksgiving? I'm really really sorry, buddy, but just, you know, I'm sorry, man, but just hang in there, okay? Bye."

Beep. "Jasper, Michael. No, look, to put things in perspective, Abbie is my cat, you know the one I got at the pound? Where we differed on the politics? So no, she's not my cousin, although she's... Talk to you later. Thanks."

For two months, twenty-four/seven, my life was Abbie. I was very lonely at the time. I made up a box, and we spent almost every minute together. When I went to the store, Abbie's box went along. I'd been laid off and was working for a small business out of a private home, so her box was by my chair. I used to play Pink Floyd while I sat at the computer, one hand dangling into the box to scratch her ears. She loved Pink Floyd. "Okay, here, want some water? No, the beer's for me, the water's for you." I fed her with a bottle and wiped her butt with baby wipes.

And I talked to her, told her my life history, my modest aspirations, my problematic relationships—the first time in my life that I was totally honest with another living creature. Sometimes I could hear her in my head. Of course I never told anyone. They'd think, "Hm, he hears his cat."

One day she started to purr. When she was able to come out of the box, with this really weird limp, she never hurt me again. And I never, ever felt alone.

New job, and I moved from Sacramento up to Portland. I met Samantha, and we've been together now for a while. Abbie did come to tolerate

Samantha, despite the issue of who slept in the bed. Sometimes I actually asked myself who did I love more, Abbie or Samantha? But I thought, what does that mean, to love more? Love, there's enough to go around. The more you have, the more you have. And I would never have believed that, ever, before.

But cats don't live forever.

Five years. Natural causes. Abbie got weak, got worse, died. And of course to the rest of the world it was just a cat. Checkout line, the clerk says, "How you doin' today?" "My cat died." "Oh that's a shame. I had a parakeet, parakeets are nice. Got out of his cage and I got three cats, so he didn't last long. Try a parakeet. Have a nice day."

I thought what if I said my wife had just died of breast cancer. "Oh, too bad, try a parakeet."

At least Samantha knew better. She just hugged me. But that was Easter week, and she had a ticket back to Omaha to visit her parents, so of course she had to go. I said, "Hey, it's Easter, maybe Abbie will rise from the dead." I thought that was kinda funny, in fact, but neither of us laughed.

So I was in Portland, feeling pretty messed up. The Oregon clouds rolled in. I looked in the mirror and saw those old familiar handdog eyes staring back at me and winking bye-bye. But I survived that very long night. Next morning I called in sick, then bought a plane ticket, a very expensive same-day ticket, and flew down to Sacramento.

I called Jasper, knowing he'd probably say something stupid, but that's what our friendship was all about, so—

"Yeh, I'm in town. Abbie died. My cat. Don't laugh."

"Who's laughing? I'm sorry, man. Hey, my brother died once. I mean, once is enough." Jasper's politics were only skin-deep. They didn't curdle his heart.

"Can you give me a lift? I gotta do something."

He picked me up at the airport and drove me out to the street where I'd lived. Where Abbie was hit. He stopped, I got out of the car. It was a quiet street, resurfaced now, but over across from the fireplug I imagined the line of blood.

The Via Dolorosa. I don't think Abbie was remotely Christian, nor was I, but that's what came to mind from some lost Sunday School moment when they talked about "Suffer the little children..." and I thought they meant me. That was my journey now.

Walk that route. Thirty feet, with your rear end smashed. And at some point it dawned on that little cat brain, I trust him.

I went to the edge of the curb where she'd been hit. Then slowly I walked that thirty feet with my colossal legs and my mangled spine. Crost the

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white dividing line. Over the curb. Patch of grass. Gravel. Flower bed. Up two steps, up, up to the edge of the porch. Inch by inch. Crawling home.

Then I thought what if the door opens and some guy says, “What’s going on?” So I went back to the car, thanked Jasper, and we went out for a beer.

Right now, I’m sitting by a stream that runs along the edge of our yard. I sit here a lot. The water flows through rocks, eddies, then flows on. Salmon swim here, upstream to their spawning grounds. Then you see them desiccate—bloated bodies bumping the rock, and the stink of death on the breeze. And the water flows. A few minutes ago, so weird, I took a pinch of Abbie’s ashes, mixed it with chamomile tea, and drank it. Do this in remembrance of me. Jasper would say I’m totally nuts, but that’s no news.

Samantha’s living here now, so it’s easier. But I’ve had a period of unemployment, and I get into a mood. I see my eyes in the mirror. Then I think come on, dummy, come on. Up over the curb, patch of grass, gravel, flower bed, up two steps to the porch, up, up. Where there’s trust. Where it’s home.

The Rose Garden



“It’s your day to go downstairs to the rose garden, Rose,” Nancy, my kind-hearted and encouraging recreational therapist said as she entered my hospital room. “You ready?”

“Yeah. Mostly, I guess,” I said back.

Only four weeks prior I crashed my car, where the impact broke my neck at the C4-C5 vertebrae and paralyzed me from the chest down. I was initially groggy with limited consciousness, but as I became more aware, I started to process my surroundings and my new state of life, including the brace that held my head, neck, and shoulders straight; the tracheotomy; realizing that I could no longer move my legs or hands or most of my arms; and I’d be wheelchair-bound.

I was often plagued with the thought that I would have people constantly staring at me and thinking I was incompetent since I was so new to paralysis and a wheelchair; I didn’t want to be looked at as anything other than the smart, outgoing 16-year-old I was only weeks before. However, when a nurse told me about a rose garden on the first floor, I knew I had to see it because, raised in the country, I loved being outside in the beauty of nature—absorbing the fresh air and letting the sun freckle my face and shoulders, while highlighting my red hair. This was the first time I decided to leave my fifth-floor room on the Pediatric Rehab Unit, not being prompted by a therapist or going out for a test or scan. It was a big step for me. The appeal of the rose garden—described as a quaint, open-air garden filled with a variety of lush rosebushes in the spring and summer—was too great, despite being the gloomy early March in Indiana and for whatever unknown reason that motivated me.

Not only did I have to reconcile the intimidating thought of leaving the comforting solitude of my hospital room in a wheelchair and in the body that I couldn’t feel or move independently anymore, but leaving

meant preparation. Nancy had to schedule a time for a nurse to go with us, considering when they both would not be booked with the other patients' needs, as well as find a time when I was not working with physical, occupational, or speech therapies, schooling, meetings with the psychiatrist, or any personal care routines. We also had to tote a portable suction machine in case I started coughing. Without it, if I got into a coughing fit, I could aspirate or choke since I had the tracheotomy and my lungs were so weak. On top of all the planning, the nurses told me I could not stay outside very long because it was a cold and rainy day, yet thinking about fresh rain on my face made the trip more enticing. I hated being weighed down by so much preparation and restriction.

I finally made it to the first floor with Nancy pushing me wrapped up in two large hospital blankets, draped in white from shoulders to feet. I never would've left the house like that before, but I had determination within me to finally meet this place; I already felt a kinship and thought of it as my own garden. We turned down the long hall that connected the professional building of Methodist Hospital to the medical building: floor-to-ceiling windows on either side. The nurse who told me about the garden said that most people never noticed it because of the inconspicuous glass door that blended in with the rest of the hall. Indeed, it was not very noticeable at all. As the nurse held the door open, Nancy and I went outside.

My ears immediately picked up on the rush of the traffic from the highway just beyond the towering brick walls, while the cold seemed to grab my eyes. And what was remaining of those beautiful bushes was not attractive at all. The few leaves left lingering seemed to shiver as they clung to the thorny sticks and spirals all exposed to the wintery air. I was disappointed that there wasn't any rain or even sprinkles from the gray skies anymore, only the wet cobble path that led around to a couple different concrete benches. Regardless of the grim appearance, I loved it anyway. I didn't mind being among those roses; I could still see what they once were and soon would be again.

"It's colder out now than it was when I came in this morning," Nancy said, rubbing the outside of her arms. We'd only been out for a few minutes and I was cold as well, but I enjoyed the fresh air and didn't want to go back into the stuffy, sterile hospital.

"I'm okay. I don't think it's that bad," I lied. I missed going out and complaining about the bitter temperatures and even scraping the stupid frost off my windshield.

"We'll just head toward the door then. We have to be getting back anyway," Nancy said, slowly pushing me around the path.

I just want to feel one raindrop, I thought directly to God as we ap-

proached the door. I was so far out of my normalcy that I didn't pray regularly. I knew family and friends and churches all around our rural county were praying for me to heal, but all I did was live each day, trying to figure out if my own dreary life of immobility and dependency would eventually transform into something more beautiful and worth living. Sometimes it felt like my life would never flourish again.

"I know you've been struggling to go out of your room, Rose. How was it going down the hallways just now?" Nancy asked sitting next to me on a bench. Her sincere tone was more comforting than my assigned psychiatrist because she talked to me like a friend, not like another patient on the list.

"Everyone stared at me. I knew they would," I said.

"I know. I thought I saw a couple people looking your way, but they're going to be curious," she said, offering comfort. "It might be hard to think about now, but I'm sure you've glanced at people that looked differently a time or two as well, don't you think?"

I nodded my head, but I wasn't comforted by it as I sat there in my own dependency. I didn't want to be viewed as one of those kids in a wheelchair that only moaned or was looked at or treated like a baby.

"I know you'll have changes to get used to and that takes time, but you just have to try step-by-step," she said as she stood up. "And you know, it's about that time. I know you have to be cold by now because I'm freezing. Your nurses are going to kill me if I return you as a blue ice cube in this wheelchair."

"Wait one more minute before we go inside," I partially pleaded now only a couple feet from the door. I looked up to see a swirling mess of light greys in the sky before closing my eyes to take a slow deep breath through my nose, filling my lungs to savor the cool, fresh air. With my eyes still shut, a single raindrop landed directly on my forehead.

He listened. Among enduring all the therapies, adjusting to a wheelchair, tolerating a new body, and accepting a life-change I'd never imagined, God was there all along, watching over me and listening to me. With that one drop, God Himself whispered I am here.

Haiming Chan

Mid-Autumn Moon



The lake was alive with lights—the lanterns on the boats, golden and round, like hundreds of miniature suns, and the moon, so heavy on the horizon that it was difficult to believe that it would be able to climb any higher in the sky. The foxes smiled debonairly as they steered the boats. They knew well how to mimic the behavior of aristocratic young men, though they couldn't entirely refrain from an occasional impatient yip, while their doll companions tried to wear the same demure expressions they had so often seen on their mistresses' faces.

How strange to find themselves on boats, the dolls thought. How strange to be separated from their devoted owners. One of them had been sleeping beneath a flowered coverlet when a fox leapt through the window and tore her from her protesting owner's arms. Another had been lying in a lacy crib before astonishingly finding herself in a fox's mouth. It was all quite shocking, though the dolls weren't terribly upset. What young lady doesn't want to be abducted by a gay troubadour? The thought of their forsaken little girls was sad, but nonetheless the dolls couldn't help smiling furtively into their fans.

The Isle of Delights was in sight now, a black line in the glittering water. The foxes could barely contain their excitement, and the dolls tittered nervously. But wait, what was that along the shoreline? It almost looked as if there were broken dolls, thousands of them... One or two of the dolls screamed, but the foxes hastened to explain. You young ladies aren't accustomed to being out on the water, always all kinds of strange debris, you're seeing twigs and branches from the wind storm last week. The dolls tittered again, embarrassed by their ignorance, and the gallant foxes helped them ashore.

How glorious the night! It was the festival of the Mid-Autumn Moon, and the music of human celebrations drifted across the water, but even

the humans weren't enjoying a repast as splendid as the one prepared by the foxes. Embroidered quilts were spread out on grass dotted with chrysanthemums sagely nodding their yellow heads. The dolls seated themselves and modestly pulled their silk dresses around their ankles. What would the foxes do next? Tiny doll hearts fluttered like hummingbirds.

The foxes, with a flourish, spread a bolt of golden silk over the embroidered quilts. The picnic hampers were unpacked, and what wonders they contained. Melons and mooncakes. Tiny jade cups, exactly suited for a doll's delicate hands, and wine as sweet as dew. Platters laden with red salted goose slices and pickled crabs. The dolls, accustomed to nothing more sumptuous than imaginary tea parties, were quite dazzled to be eating such splendid food, and perhaps they drank more wine than it was entirely wise for a doll to drink. The foxes watched them carefully, whiskers twitching. Every fox knows that the secret of immortality lies in devouring a doll's heart essence, but opinions differ as to exactly what a doll's heart essence might be. The foxes had concluded on this particular Mid-Autumn Moon that perhaps a doll's heart essence was produced by feeding dolls pearls. After all, they had previously experimented with feeding dolls gold and feeding them orchids. Therefore, the platter they presented next was heaped with carp stuffed with nightingale wings and decorated with pearls arranged to represent a phoenix. The dolls exclaimed and applauded and daintily ate the carp, and the nightingale wings, and the pearls, every last one.

It was time. The foxes draped their front legs around the dolls' shoulders. "Look at the silver toad in the moon," they said. "Look at the Weaving Maid Star. At the Cowherd." The dolls lifted their little heads to look at the night sky and the foxes, with great delicacy, tore out their throats. Had they succeeded this time? The foxes looked at each other, hoping to see some indications of immortality, though they were no more certain what immortality looked like than they were certain what a doll's heart essence might be. But surely there should be some new luminosity in the air, an unaccustomed sparkle? They tore the dolls apart, searching desperately. They didn't want to admit it, even to themselves, but this was ending like every other Mid-Autumn Moon night. Finally they climbed back in their boats and set off for shore, their lanterns long since doused. Even the human revels had ended, and the night was black and silent, the moon hiding behind a bank of thick cloud. A cold drizzle made the foxes shiver, and when they reached land they ran to their dens and curled up to shut out the freezing night, their tails over their eyes.

Winter arrived, and soon the Isle of Delights was muffled under heavy snow. The only movement was from the coiled dead leaves that still stubbornly rattled amid black branches. The dolls thought longingly of home

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and the little girls who had loved them, though they knew all that was past and gone. Their silk dresses, red as blood, blue as spring, lay in frozen heaps under the bare trees. By the time the snow melted the dresses were the same color as the surrounding mud. With the arrival of spring a creeping fungus turned the dolls' bright brown eyes to dull green. Arms and legs split open under the blazing summer sun.

But now it's once again glorious autumn. The night air is full of the sound of drums. The foxes are in their fairy boats, red coats gleaming in the light of lanterns. They reach the Isle of Delights, and their passengers cry out in fear when they see dolls dismembered and scattered about, but they are easily reassured. Soon a joyous party is underway. And why not celebrate? Perhaps this is the moon that will confer immortality. Perhaps this moon will bring each tender longing heart true love. Perhaps this is the Mid-Autumn Moon we have all been waiting for.

Andrew Sarewitz



The Tale of the Sisters Landau

On the afternoon that Lila and Lola Landau moved out of my apartment I was relieved. It was two days into a new month and I was apprehensive that they might further delay removing all their stuff. But keeping to her word, Lila had everything cleared out by the time I got home from work, house keys left on the kitchen counter. My new roommate wouldn't be moving in until the fifteenth so I had nearly two weeks to myself. But it would be years before I would appreciate the adventure that was the Landau sisters.

In the fall of 1978, I landed a temporary position at the flagship location for Saks Fifth Avenue, across from Rockefeller Center. Computer systems were being installed to replace the antiquated storewide communications network of capsule pipelines known as Pneumatic tubes which are, according to Wikipedia, “systems that propel cylindrical containers through networks of tubes by compressed air or by partial vacuum.” I found it a little sad to witness the modernization of this elegant landmark that still used hand-written sales orders and manually driven elevators operated primarily by black men in uniforms, looking like caricatures out of a 1940's MGM movie.

Before being put on the sales floor, all new hires trained for three days. That's when I met Lila Landau. At our first lunch break she and I went to a coffee shop and so began our friendship.

Lila was a striking, dark complected black woman in her late twenties with a Stateside accent that I admit confused me. She was from Detroit but spoke with a mix of Southern drawl and Midwest Urbanese. She did not have a homogenized “white American” accent. Lila was beautiful and charismatic and it was not long before we began to socialize outside of work.

Saks did not keep Lila or me employed beyond the new year. I found part time work as a banquet cashier at the Americana Hotel on Seventh

Avenue. Lila already had additional hours working evenings for a telephone answering service called Bulletin Board. It's hard to fathom in this age of speed-of-light texting and social media that in the late 1970's, we were only on the cusp of having answering machines in our homes. The biggest advancement to that point in telecommunications being *call waiting*.

I was living in the center of Greenwich Village, later dubbed NoHo (North of Houston), in an expensive loft style duplex apartment on Bleecker Street with a roommate. I didn't intend to renew our lease for reasons extending beyond the obscene rent, yellow shag carpeting and roach infestation. It was also located next door to an active chicken coop from which feathers would waft into our windows like fall-out from a pillow fight, and the street traffic, both human and automotive, echoed constantly day and night.

My good friend Michael Franji, whom I had met while living in the dorms at college, made me aware of an empty one bedroom apartment in the building in which he was now living on West Thirtieth Street. If I could get it, we would be neighbors. We snuck in through the adjoining fire escape to case the layout. By Manhattan standards, it was very large. The next day I ran to the agent's office to ask for the lease. \$393.70 a month. I signed for three years.

Lila was living in a sublet in the elegant Murray Hill section of Manhattan. I asked if she would be interested in rooming with me. I wanted the bedroom for myself and she could have the living area, though I'd have to traverse through to get to the kitchen. We would split the rent. She was excited by the idea and accepted.

The lease began on March 1, 1979, but because the apartment had been vacant, I was able to take possession the last week of February. The day before Lila was set to move in, she called me to say that her younger sister also needed a place to live. She proposed that I still take the bedroom and they would share the living room, dividing the rent and expenses three ways equally. They would pay me in cash. My rent would be about \$131 a month. I wasn't yet twenty years old. It sounded great to me.

Lila and Lola moved into my freshly painted apartment on West Thirtieth Street, between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. They brought a king size bed with them and Lila told me that she had some furniture in storage in Detroit and was having it shipped. Within a week, two large brown couches, a square wood and glass coffee table, a six-foot rug and two end tables with matching lamps arrived. Though not exactly my taste, the apartment was coming together well. The furniture had been acquired while the sisters were living in the U.S. Virgin Islands. They ordered the set on a payment plan: no money down with monthly installments. The

living room package was delivered to their address in St. Thomas. Then Lila arranged for delivery to Miami, and from Florida to Michigan, leaving no forwarding details. In other words, they stole all the furniture.

One perk to her working for an answering service: Lila was able to connect our telephone to Bulletin Board, free of charge. She explained that this was an expensive and prestigious service. Clients included famous singers, movies stars, fashion designers, jet setters, etc. Bulletin Board Answering Service maintained a reputation for complete discretion, and members paid handsomely each month for the privilege.

The first time I met Lola Landau, I could see the resemblance between the sisters, and though perfectly nice, she didn't seem to carry the panache or charm of Lila. Two years younger, her height and coloring were similar, but there was no style to her clothing and her hair had been bleached and cut very short, with odd plaits that looked like tiny braided, blond sprouts. And her accent was not like Lila's. She spoke with a deep urban dialect.

Then came the transition. Lola would lock herself in our bathroom for about an hour and a half, emerging like a red-carpet natural. One memorable look began with a soft-curl shoulder length brunette wig, flawless make-up, a silk designer blouse tucked into a short leather skirt and a pair of killer Maude Frizon high heel boots. Rock 'n roll chic. It was fantastic. No super hero could have made a more surprising transformation.

I knew very little about their biographies. One vocation I believe they took seriously was as musicians' groupies. They had followed the Doobie Brothers around the country, with Lola bragging of an on-going sexual understanding with one of the band members. Beyond that, I really knew nothing. The Sisters Landau; Lila and Lola. I adored them.

The building in which we lived was a melting pot and a social enigma. Even the block we lived on was a strange residential oasis in a neighborhood of ware houses, music studios, fur vaults, vagrant hotels and parking lots. Multi-ethnic and financially diverse, for a short time it represented the best and weirdest of what it was like to live in New York City in 1979, without any evidence that this was out of the ordinary.

Michael, whom I owed for finding me the apartment, lived next door with his older brother Mark. As with the Landau Sisters, they were quite a pair. American born, of French and Egyptian descent, Mark and Michael Franji were unbearably handsome and raised in great privilege. Both with black hair, green eyes, olive skin, chiseled torsos and perfect jaw bones. And with gigantic suave personalities and biting tongues that added to how magnetic they were. Mark was straight and Michael, gay. They were not only beautiful but looked very similar and could have passed for fraternal twins. When they went out to a club together, watch

out. Mark was occasionally mistaken for being gay, especially if seen side-by-side with his younger brother. That didn't threaten his masculinity. Mark used it to his advantage. In that highly promiscuous pre-AIDS era, Mark would sometimes tell a potential female conquest that he was confused about his sexuality. Many women lived up to the challenge of setting him straight.

The Franji Brothers were an example of the norm in our exaggerated lives. On a Friday afternoon at a Washington Square coffee shop, Michael met a well-known fashion designer (think underwear) who took him to the Plaza Hotel for the night before flying him out to his beachfront mansion in the Hamptons for the weekend.

On rare sightings, you might have caught a glimpse of the Landau sisters and Franji brothers together on the dance floor at Studio 54 or Danceteria. They gleamed like a pack of unapproachable royals.

Our monetary overhead was not difficult to meet each month. Lola hung out at home during the day, often looking like some urchin, usually watching "daytime dramas," as they were then called. Then into the metaphorical phone booth, soon to materialize as a stunning beauty, and out the door for the evening. I figured that Lila earned enough at Bulletin Board to pay the bills but I had no idea where Lola went most evenings, until the sisters had a heated disagreement. I came in on the heels of the fight as Lola stormed out of the house, slamming the door. Lila, furious, decided to confide in me.

In an area of the elite world of nightlife which I naively was not familiar, thrived an off the radar business at certain exclusive and high-end hotels. In the case of the St. Moritz Hotel on posh Central Park South, there was a bar notorious for executives who were interested in finding the hourly company of beautiful women. These were not street hookers or cheap whores. They were elegant, well dressed, subtly perfumed women of class. This was not an easy gig to land. The doorman to the bar only allowed the cream of the crop to enter, after his palm was greased with a Benjamin. It was competitive and strict and Lola was *the* black woman allowed to loiter at the bar. Earning \$300 an hour, she was a top-drawer escort.

The fight had started when Lola had a "regular" who was trying to make an appointment and she wanted to use our apartment to rendezvous. Lila said that it was out of the question. A decision they had agreed upon before they moved in. Lola said it would be just this one time. Lila would have none of it and Lola left in a huff. Lila wanted me to understand that she would never bring business into our home and didn't want me to be blindsided or misled if Lola ever broached the subject. If either came home with a one night stand, it was entirely recreational.

I appreciated her confidence and told her so. I was actually kind of excited to find out that I was living with an honest-to-god pro. I didn't ask how Lola got into the business. The cross section of class, crass, seedy and elegant was the backdrop of our day-to-day existence. And in a subject I have never spoken about, there had been a time I'd considered this road, if not as an occupation, at least as an occasional option for paying bills.

East Fifty Third Street was a block that housed a few men's bars notorious for prostitution. Gay boys as well as straight young men who were willing to be "gay for pay" would meet tricks in bars, book stores and on the street. You didn't have to be selling your body to hang out there, but it was common knowledge that this was where you'd find upper class older men willing to pay a good price for sex. One night in 1979, Michael and I, and our gorgeous friend Victor, each broke while living expensive lives, headed to East Fifty Third. When I describe myself as needing money, I was far from destitute, but there were nights when I weighed shallow options and chose to forego eating lunch and dinner in order to pay the fifteen dollars needed to get into Studio 54 on a Thursday night.

The bar we chose was called Cowboys and Cowgirls. When we walked in, the disco record playing was, "There But for the Grace of God Go I." And this raw lyric permeated: *Let's find a place, they say, Somewhere far away, With no blacks, no Jews and no gays.* I remember thinking I was two of the three.

Michael and Victor each met gentlemen, and left the bar. I couldn't go through with it.

Though Michael may have tricked more than once—I don't know if that is the case—his professional life took a legitimate path to success in high end commercial real estate. Victor, employing his great beauty, found a very wealthy suitor who set him up in a penthouse on East Eighty Third Street with a view of Central Park.

Where Lola's identity was now in focus, it took a while for the layers of Lila's modus operandi to be unearthed. It became clearer when her friend Cindy, in town from Dallas, came to stay at the apartment for a few days. She was a lanky, attractive white girl in her early twenties with long blond hair, large breasts and the apparent intelligence of a rhododendron. Some calamity had happened during her visit.

Cindy was a high-end call girl, not unlike Lola. Lila had arranged an appointment for her with a high roller and something had gone awry. It seems the gentleman's erotic pleasures played toward the romantic. In keeping with the fantasy, he didn't like discussing transactions with his date, preferring at the end of the evening to slip hundred dollar bills in her pocketbook or shoe. Though Lila made these instructions clear, Cin-

dy kept to the industry's undocumented rule of "get paid upfront" and asked for money. The client was very unhappy and had called Lila to complain.

And thus unraveled Lila's confession that she'd had a long-time relationship with the gentleman: a powerful Mafia kingpin named Kurt Michelin. This was the one-man Lila admitted she'd occasionally meet as a paid lover, but primarily Michelin asked that Lila set up dates for him, giving her "gifts" in appreciation. Now she was concerned that Cindy may have screwed up the lucrative arrangement she had with the Mafia don.

As the walls of discretion came down, our apartment, as well as the Franji's and a few other neighbors in the building, became a continuous party. We were loud and obnoxious. One tenant living across the hall complained to the landlord. We all got letters from the management company as a warning. Since the lease was in my name, I was nervous and upset. Lila put an end to that. She went into our kitchen, picked up a loaf of challah and a carving knife and knocked on the neighbor's door. A few minutes later, Lila returned with a nonchalant, satisfied look on her face. She replaced the knife and loaf of bread—now in mutilated chunks—to the kitchen, and got herself a Tab from the refrigerator. The tenant moved out within the month.

Looking back, it seems it all was fleeting and animated. There were fragrances that still hibernate below the surface like a covered tattoo reminding me I wasn't always the person I see myself as now. One incongruous gem was Lola explaining how she could put a condom in her mouth and roll it onto a trick's penis without, she swore, his ever knowing it. We argued about that skill. A more concrete experience was a Saturday night that I accompanied the sisters to the Mudd Club, an elite counterculture disco in TriBeCa. After a few hours of dancing, I headed home leaving them in the upstairs lounge. Lila phoned at 7:30 in the morning, which for us was equivalent to the middle of the night. She was in bed with one of the members of Van Halen and thought she'd call so I could say hello to him. What the rocker didn't know was that Lila and I had made a gentleman's bet, racing to see which of us could get him into bed first. Clearly, I lost.

There are the less political memories of having breakfast at 4:30 a.m. at a restaurant camouflaged between warehouses called Florent that harbored drag queens, truck drivers, celebrities and club kids. Or hanging out at Life Cafe across from Tompkins Square Park, a setting later used for the musical, "Rent." Part of the capricious and affected landscapes we lived in without a concept of time, consequence or endings.

Days with the Landaus came to an abrupt close when a cousin of the

sisters visited and ran up an \$800 phone bill. And though Lila did eventually reimburse me, I was becoming very uncomfortable with the parade of guests coming and going and decided it was time to end our living arrangement. I had been hired by a press agent representing soap opera stars, and told the girls I was able to afford the rent by myself. Whether or not they believed me, they graciously agreed to find new living accommodations. They asked for thirty days.

In the following months, I continuously had trouble with my telephone. When the line went completely dead, an AT&T service person came out to investigate the problem. He took me to the basement of our building to show me the phone system's apparatus. Our wires had been ripped out. I looked at him blankly. He said my phone had been tapped.

When Kurt Michelin was arrested for tax fraud shortly after the Landaus moved out, I thought Lila's friendship with Michelin could have been the reason why my phone had been bugged. I later formed an alternate hunch that the tap might have been aimed at Bulletin Board. Maybe the answering service had been a front for prostitution. Just theories. No proof.

There are mysteries, probably relevant only to me, that won't be unraveled. And memories of that era, fading fast. But what I remember of my time with the sisters Landau, even with a revisionist's mistakes, I think on with great fondness.

I would bring two more roommates into my apartment over the next five years before I was able to swing the rent by myself. During that time, the Franji brothers separately moved out of New York and we lost touch. I eventually moved to the Upper East Side where I still feel I don't really belong.

On a spring day in the mid 1980's, while walking through Times Square, a black stretch limousine honked and pulled up to the curb. The smoky rear window rolled down and there was Lila, looking gorgeous, blowing kisses and calling my name. I ran to the car. She said she didn't have time to stop but saw me and wanted to say hello. I told her to please call me. Same phone number. She said she would, rolled up her window and drove on. I waved as the car pulled away. Like trying to remember a dream in the morning, I smiled and let it go.

Barrie Darke



Murderer's Bar

It was a fine thing to be beyond London. We felt it fall on us, all three of us—a relaxation about the shoulders, our breaths taken deeper, our walk easier and looser. It was a pleasure to have something soft underfoot.

None of this is to be ungrateful to London, you understand. And I was unsure where our feet were heading, in fact. Vince hadn't thought it worthwhile to mention it to me, and the time when I could have asked without looking daft had passed: I had a vast ignorance of Geography which I was happy to keep undisplayed. It was the countryside, that was enough to know; we were going to try our hand there. They would be starved, those people, after a long winter.

It took a few days of walking, therefore a few nights of looking for places where we could pitch up with Jenny. It was amusing, the first couple of times, to witness the reaction, especially when the reaction was itself amused, even if it still ended with them closing the door in our faces. One old man simply stared at us, as though we had set out to insult him.

So it was outhouses for us, bedding down with the derelicts, the wanderers with nothing in their pockets but their hands. Vince liked to hold himself apart from such people, or he did for five minutes. In truth, he was more gregarious with those souls than with any other.

When our spot was selected, I took Jenny into the woods to do her business. I enjoyed staring up at the stars through the trees, with none of the clatter and stench of London to distract me. I stood upwind of her, of course! She made a gentle, contented groaning noise that always made me chuckle, and since I was out, it made sense to relieve myself also.

Some of them would've preferred Jenny chained up outside, but they didn't say anything above a mutter. Vince wasn't a big or imposing man, and he was getting on in years, yet neither was he the type anyone raised their voice to. I was younger and a head taller, but I didn't think of myself

as tough in any way, and so no one else did.

I woke a few times and always sat up to give Jenny a look when I did. Poor thing, she was awake all night. They had dogs in there, but they were on the other side of the barn, so no trouble to us.

The mornings were buckled up cold, so that at first I couldn't grab Jenny's chain without wrapping a cloth around my hand first. I dug the other into her fur for some warmth and waited outside while Vince said his solemn goodbyes. He customarily took goodbyes seriously, I had noticed, particularly goodbyes to strangers. People he'd known for a long spell, on the other hand, he was content to walk away from without a word.

We travelled on. Jenny was a grand old walker, rolling and shimmering along, never pulling on the chain, never stopping to sniff at things the way a dog would. I liked dogs, all the same; nothing against dogs in that sentence.

She was fed on mounds of bread, some vegetables, fish from streams. Vince had the skill of catching them with his bare hands, and he didn't so much as flinch at the cold around his ankles when he stepped in. She looked wistfully at the ham sandwiches we bought from farmwives along the way, but she was an angel there, too, never came close or made her high yearning sound.

There weren't a great many folk on the road, and this displeased me. I enjoyed company on a long day, however brief and irregular it might be. When I say company, of course, I mean a woman. We saw none of those.

We met a hunched old tramp who spoke to Vince of people Vince had never known—spoke to him as though he were privy to every detail in their history. Vince entertained him kindly and patiently, maintaining that even into the second hour of talk. To me, this old man passed along a single line of advice: *trust the canary*. This was something to consider, particularly as he pronounced it *can-are-ry*. Jenny he ignored as though she were invisible, until the moment he separated from us, when he stood as upright as he could manage and saluted her briskly. She blinked at him and cocked her head as though trying to fathom a puzzle. I chuckled to myself every time I thought of it for the rest of the day.

Late in the afternoon we came across a forlorn farmhouse, where an old woman rushed out at us. Afternoon though it may have been, I thought I detected a few signs of the sleepless night about her, and perhaps more than one: she looked angrily demented, at us, at Jenny, at the world, at the heavens. She stood with her hands on her spiked fence and castigated us. "That," she said, pointing to Jenny, "is of the Devil! Directly of the Devil! We don't want it here! Not here!"

Vince forked the sign of the evil eye at her, which virtually had her

climbing over to strangle us, only she was too decrepit for that. She shrieked something unintelligible and shook the fence. Vince spat theatrically as he walked away, because he wasn't a man to ride easy on certain types.

He had been in a blue study when we left London, and for a few days before, I now realised. I had no inkling as to why. The takings were as healthy as they ever were. Jenny behaved herself, and not once did he have to show her the mop handle. It was a cold March, but a dry one, with no snow underfoot. I saw him take a drink with his many acquaintances in whichever district we worked, and I think he even passed an hour with a young redheaded woman in Bethnal Green; I wish I could've said the same.

His mood was silent and stern. Mornings acted as a particular affront to him, to be met with narrowed eyes—which had nothing on the eyes he would've turned on me if I'd asked him what the matter was.

The day before we left happened to be the Oxford-Cambridge boat race. Vince expressed a desire to see the finish of it, and selected Chiswick Bridge as the best vantage point. For the life of us we couldn't implore Jenny to look over into the water. She plumped herself on the ground with her back to the wall, facing the road and the people passing us with a wide berth.

I wasn't sure who Vince was waving his cap for, so to speak. I had never heard a word of interest from him on the subject, or of Oxford and Cambridge for that matter. He didn't cheer or shout when the boats came into view and he crossed the road without any fantastic urgency as they sped beneath us. I ambled over with Jenny. When it was finished, Cambridge the winner, he spat into the river. I was certain that would have been his reaction whatever the outcome.

That evening, over some ale, he told me we were making for the country. The next morning, sharp, we did.

It was my way to hope beyond hope that I'd meet a young lass wherever we pitched up, and it was my belief that country girls would be lonelier than city girls and consequently more grateful to encounter a specimen like myself. This was a belief forced to survive a great many amused, blank, and pitying looks, I have to report.

The first tiny village we stopped at was perhaps too small and scattered a place to give a performance, but Vince thought we should keep our hand in and so the playbill was nailed to the notice board in the main square. They wandered in grudgingly and mistrustfully that evening, as is the way of these characters.

I found myself delighted at the heavy, lumbering walk of the farm girls, with their pail-swinging arms and wide open rosy-cheeked faces. I noticed one of them immediately, with long straight healthy brown hair and slightly shy eyes, and I liked her very much. She was far too timid to glance at me, of course, even if anyone would think to glance at me when they could stare at Jenny.

It must have been every child in the village that came to see us, all of them holding their hands over their mouths, dancing on the spot, and shouldering one another to make sure they were seeing the same things.

I started proceedings with a drum roll, then Vince cracked into his speech about Jenny's exotic origins. She had been captured in the woods of America! Sometimes he said Germany. He threw brightly coloured hoops her way, and she pushed her head through all of them until she was wearing a necklace. When Vince attempted to lift one off, she flipped it back down with a careless paw. That had them roaring, always, and again when they saw the manner in which Vince paused and turned to her with a furrowed brow. Often Jenny looked away from him with an innocent air, though it proved impossible to train her in that with any consistency, and she failed in it that day.

She caught the rubber ball with her usual flair, not looking at it till the final second, and threw it back to Vince with the one perfect bounce he'd worked harder to perfect than any other part of the act. She wasn't quite as proficient with her throw when Vince brought the child up, but then she never was. We had the impression she was wary of children, perhaps didn't like them overmuch. Vince always picked an ugly, unhappy looking one.

With a rat-a-tat-tat of my drum, Jenny next stood on her front paws. Vince slipped in almost unobserved to collect the hoops as they fell from her neck. She lay on the ground and spun a cardboard tube with her back paws. Next was the boxing exhibition, which Vince partook in until he asked for a volunteer from among the young men watching; there were always one or two who came up and did a tentative job until Vince drew them away and sent them back before they could get her riled.

We rounded off the performance with Jenny on her back legs, swaying from side to side, her front legs outstretched beseechingly, while we played *The Village Idiot's Daughter*. Vince blew the tin whistle. It was always a time standing still moment.

They applauded and dropped their coins into the upturned drum when I passed among them. The shy girl was with her father, and he was the one who paid. She was already turning away, considering what was next in her busy day, I'm sure.

We left them happy, and embarked on days of rougher travelling. We were forced to break our way into a barn one night, and I would swear that Jenny knew the transgression: she was anxious all night, prone to making noise, which kept us from sleeping. Vince preferred to lie there making soothing sounds, with no recourse to the mop handle. That would've made more noise, it was true, but I don't think that's why he abstained.

The weather slipped back a way in the night. I could almost hear the air tightening and cracking above me as I stared into it, and I found it a little frightening, though I don't know why. I was pleased when morning light arrived, even if it brought no greater warmth.

Our next stop, a village only slightly larger than the one we had recently left, saw Vince set out drinking from the moment we arrived. He stopped us at a farm, and as well as the usual odds and ends for Jenny, he bought himself some cider and beer. He sat on a tree stump and drank them both in turn for a while. I was offered a swallow, but I knew to decline, which absolved him from having to offer again. I hadn't seen him drink quite so early in the day or with such dedication, but I was more amused than worried in that moment.

The playbill was displayed. It wasn't long before Vince passed into the singing stage, the old folk airs he had perfect recall of whatever his condition. Some frowning boys with their hands in their pockets appeared and watched him, and were ignored utterly. They disappeared halfway through the third song without even showing much interest in Jenny.

He didn't scale the fighting stage, which was fortunate, as I wouldn't have known what to do with him. No, he subsided directly into the maudlin stage. It was women he bemoaned, a long list of them, which I didn't consider anything to be maudlin over. He talked about all the mistakes he'd made. There appeared to be a lot of them. Anyway, we didn't give a performance in that village.

Vince was asleep by early evening, in a barn we had permission to lie in this time, which Jenny also sensed. I could perhaps have chained her up and taken a stroll around the village, found a dance or some such, but I decided against it. It was hard to walk into places on your own.

Vince's last words to me before he slipped under were: 'Aren't you going to wish me a Happy Birthday?'

I did, after I had blinked at him. It transpired he was 41, though he could've been taken for 20 years older than that.

We finished up in a village by the name of Billingham. I still don't know exactly where it would be on the map, and I have no intention of looking. So it was new to me, but it wasn't new to Vince, not if we are to judge by

the look he gave me as he said, 'Here we are then.'

He had us parade around the place for a while, to be seen. That wasn't difficult. We drank and ate, and fed Jenny, in all the main outdoor spots, despite the temperature. Passers-by got themselves a measured nod from Vince and a look that lasted a touch too long. To balance matters out, I hardly looked at anyone at all, not even the pretty girls.

It rained in the afternoon, making Jenny sparkle. She shook herself intermittently, always funny to people even if they were caught in the spray. Vince sat quietly, wide eyes staring at the ground. I watched the rain hit puddles and lost myself in that for a spell. Later we had a drink in a bar, Jenny allowed in with us for once. She fell asleep, which was rare for her, and we stayed a little longer because of it. Vince drank a lot, though not as much as on his birthday. I didn't take much on board. I tried to talk to him, my main subject being: when are we leaving Billinghamurst. He gave me one word answers. We would leave when we were finished, was the gist.

There was the usual array of people when we got to the town square and its bandstand. Parents with their small, closed-off looking children. A few children without parents and much happier-looking for it. A pack of youths grinning at each other and whispering, no harm in them. A few old people who looked like they were remembering entertainment from their youth. Shy young couples, always shy young couples.

Vince delivered his opening remarks the way he always did; it wasn't in him to stint on a performance. Unfortunately, though, I was distracted. My drum rolls when the child was brought up were too brittle and too short and I commenced to sweat in the cold, knowing that everything I did would be slightly awry from then on. Jenny picked up on it. Her handstands took a little longer to steady, and she spun the tube a little too fast.

Still, no one knew but ourselves, and we were almost at the end when the toughs arrived. They were my age. They look the same the country over, probably the world: thin and weasel-like, with unblinking glares, harsh smiles between themselves, and an awful boredom behind it all. There were four of them, and they all had fat, angry, straining bulldogs.

They shouldered through to stand at the front. Vince didn't falter. Jenny saw them last, and stared almost pleadingly at the dogs, though she kept dancing. People in the crowd obviously knew them and some of the pleasure slipped out of their faces. I hoped that some of the older, bigger men would make their presence felt, but most of them were with their children—and we were only travelling performers, after all.

The toughs watched for a few moments, looking at each other like they couldn't believe people paid to see this rubbish, then they bent down and

slipped the leashes.

Two of them stood in front of Vince, who fell quiet and stared at them. One got in front of me, and when I lifted my hands to push him back a few steps, he banged his elbow into my face. I didn't see it coming. I was on the ground in half a second, my drum rolling away and the sticks clattering. Jenny sent up a howl, but not for me. The dogs were on her.

They went for her throat, one of the toughs urging them on by clapping his hands and shouting their names: Jupiter, Slowcoach, Sawbones, Hilly. They had to run up her to reach her throat, scratching her to climb. Some of those in the crowd were turning their children's faces away, and others weren't. May as well get them used to this sort of behaviour, was the thinking. When the dogs were at her throat, they dug in and pulled back.

I don't know if anything like this had happened to her before. She looked like she didn't know how to react. She looked to me and Vince for help, me first, which jolted my heart, but we couldn't get to her. Her howls had panic in them. The snarls of the dogs were low and wet.

Then something clicked in her, some ancient woodland instinct. One dog was batted away from her, her claws digging in as she hit it, and that was enough for that animal. It scampered away leaving heavy drops of blood. One of the toughs standing in front of Vince ran after it and wouldn't come back even though the other one shouted for him.

Another she bit on the back of the neck. It screamed the most piercing sound yet, bringing a moan from the crowd. Its legs scrambled in thin air as she lifted it into the air, then shot out stiffly as she shook it. She dropped it after a few seconds, and it couldn't walk when it landed; it staggered like it was about to faint before falling on its side. It bled a quick pool.

One was still climbing up her when she raked her claws down its stomach and ripped it out. Its guts poked through. It stared at her in shock, as if it couldn't believe she'd actually done this. It slid down onto the ground, where it stopped moving after a while. This was Jupiter.

The last dog knew to retreat by now. It was still growling at her, the tough who owned it urging it forward. But no: it gave Jenny one last bark, then turned and ran.

I got a kick, and Vince was shoved into the railings, which he slid down. They left without taking their dogs with them. What remained of the crowd booed them, and some shouted "Shame!," and a couple of them came over to help me up. No one did that for Vince, and they all stayed clear of Jenny, who was sitting and moaning and rolling her head from side to side. I felt dazed and vomitous with the smell of the blood.

Vince held Jenny's chain and muttered things to her. She was snorting and making small sounds in between the moaning. He told her they were

gone, she could calm down now, it was finished now. She was bleeding, but how badly we couldn't say. We were trying to find out when we heard the police whistles.

We had a chance to get away from them, I believe. All things considered, they might not have chosen to run after us. But Vince stayed sitting against the railing, talking to Jenny. I also felt strangely...*weary* is the word.

The police didn't step too close, but they didn't need to: they had rifles. The story they told was a predictable one. The toughs just happened to've been strolling past, taking their dogs for a stretch of the legs, when a bear—of all things!—had been allowed to attack them. Two of the dogs had been killed, the evidence starkly there for the police, dog lovers all, to see.

Vince didn't say anything, and didn't much look at them, so I chimed in that there had been a crowd of witnesses. One of the policemen, a fat one, grinned at me and asked if I could produce any of them.

They told Vince to stand up. They told him to make sure he had a firm grip on Jenny's chain, and marched us to the station. People in doorways and windows watched us go by, scrutinised us. Jenny knew something was wrong at Vince holding her chain, and I kept looking over and making reassuring sounds, but they didn't go very deep or for very long. When she started to moan, the policemen allowed themselves to drift even further from us.

One brave soul darted ahead when we reached the station and jammed the door open. They started to shout orders at Vince as the door came closer, and two went ahead while two stayed behind. Vince went through first and turned to speak to her, to ease her in. She didn't put up much resistance, brushing the sides of the door as she padded through. One of them was now suddenly close enough to jab me in the back and push me through next.

They put each us in a cell of our own. Three whitewashed stone walls and a set of cold bars. As soon as the lock was turned Jenny kept moaning, a low sound that filled the entire structure. Nothing we could say stopped it, and that was good. Let them listen to it all day.

Different policemen kept wandering along to see her. They always laughed, every one of them, at the ways of the world.

They kept us all through the night; we were resigned to that happening very quickly. They fed us on bread and water, the bread so hard I needed to soak it in the grey water before I could chew it. They threw some bread into Jenny's cell, but I can't say if she ate it or not. Sometimes when she was distressed, she didn't.

Her moans grew louder as the night came and everything was quiet.

I hoped they reached outside the station, into everyone's homes as they tried to sleep. I couldn't sleep, and that would've been true even if Jenny had been quiet. I muttered Vince's name a couple of times, but he was asleep or he was pretending to be.

It must've been in the small hours that a young boy came along to look. He couldn't have been more than nine or ten. Perhaps he was someone's son or brother. He gave me a quick glance, and I felt a huge urge to insult him. I was glad I didn't, later, when I realised he was the only one to see Jenny and not laugh.

There wasn't much in the way of a dawn, but they came then anyway. One of them carried a rifle. I was at the bars immediately, Vince a little slower.

They told us the magistrate had declared that Jenny now had a taste for meat and for killing, therefore she was a danger to society. I started shaking the bars and shouting that she was a trained performing animal, that she'd been attacked, that she was never off the chain, that she obeyed our every command and had for years. Vince was quiet throughout this. Perhaps he didn't want to drown out any of my words.

I was ignored. They didn't even tell me to shut up. Jenny fell quiet, too, that was the worst thing. She knew what was coming, somehow.

The one with the rifle, a very boring office-looking type of man, rested it between the bars. I could tell she must've been sitting on her back legs if he was aiming for her heart. I started shouting again, telling them to stop, don't do it—small words, really.

When he fired, the rifle lifted up and from side to side, hitting the bars with a bang that cut through everything: my shouts, Jenny's screams, the echo of the shot. He aimed again, lower this time, and fired. Her screams stopped then, so I stopped as well.

They sold her to a hairdresser's, it turned out.

They fined us before letting us go. This fine amounted to every last farthing we had, which came as no surprise.

They let us out before they moved Jenny. Vince didn't look back, but I did. He was right not to; I wish I hadn't seen her that way. I couldn't look at the policemen, or I would've ended up back in the cells in no time.

Vince wouldn't speak to me. Not out of anger, it was simply as though I wasn't there. This was welcome, as I wasn't disposed to talking myself. We started back the way we'd come, back to London. It was a long and tiring day on no sleep, and that first night, breaking into a barn again, I managed a few deep hours of shutting everything out.

I woke up before dawn, looked over, and Vince wasn't there. No surprise there either, not really.

COBALT REVIEW

It took me three days to get back to London. I still had my drum, which I played at stops along the way. I gathered in a few ha'pennies at best in some places; in others, nothing. This meant I had no choice but to steal handfuls of food here and there. No choice, and also I was pleased to do it, very pleased.

When I arrived back in London, I stepped into the first pub I came across. I stood in the doorway, so they all turned to look at me. Everyone in there looked like a murderer.

from "An Old Street Showman"
in Mayhew's Characters, Henry Mayhew

What's In a Name?



It has been said that art represents humanity's collective attempt to reconcile its own existence against an otherwise cold and uncaring universe. To strip away artifice, to obliterate pretense—to provide a context through which we may hope to define, at its core, exactly what it means *to be a person*. Which explains why art is so often heartbreakingly, unyieldingly, *sad*. Because, loathe as we may be to admit it (and despite all of our attempts to the contrary), ours is a conclusively lonely existence—one fraught with sorrow, doubt, and, ultimately, disillusionment. That's the torment heard in Juliet's deathbed soliloquy, the longing behind the chords of Leonard Cohen's, "Hallelujah," the anguished panic pulsating through Edvard Munch's, *The Scream*. And that's the reason why, every Spring, I make sure to stock up on extra-soft, triple-ply, Kleenex-brand tissues in anticipation of the season's most gut-wrenchingly devastating artistic offering: the premier episode of the ABC network's hit reality television series, "The Bachelorette."

For those who may be unfamiliar, a brief synopsis: "The Bachelorette" is a televised dating competition wherein twenty-five presumably eligible men vie for the affections of one woman—the aforementioned "Bachelorette"—an America's Sweetheart type generally plucked out of the pool of losing contestants from the latest season of *The Bachelorette's* identically structured, appropriately titled, gender-reversed sister program, *The Bachelor*. Over the course of ten weeks these men will compete in a series of ingeniously constructed trials-by-fire ("dates" in the parlance of the show)—all designed to prove one's merit, one's worth, one's essential *spouse-ability*, so that ultimately one contestant may emerge victorious to claim the hand of his Bachelorette-No-Longer, a presumably consenting, presumably love-struck, presumably *gushing*, Trisha, Kaitlyn, or, most recently, Jojo.

However, it isn't this rose-tinted notion of storybook romance that reliably brings me to tears every May. It isn't the helicopter rides, the horses on the beach, or even the valiant attempt at poetry (wherein the "Artistic Contestant" will inevitably rhyme the phrase "My Jojo" with "My Mojo" in a metered application for entry into the coveted Fantasy Suite.) It's the fact that, of the initial twenty-five contestants selected to participate in the show, ten will be *immediately turned away at the door*.

For these men there will be no helicopter rides, no beachfront equestrianism, no opportunity to show off a recently acquired mastery of iambic pentameter. Not only will they never enter the Fantasy Suite—they'll never even enter the *second floor of the Bachelorette Mansion*. They'll arrive in a limousine, have a twenty second conversation with their season's Bachelorette-De-Jour, be flatly and publicly denied one of the fifteen roses meant to signify Jojo's ever *cursorly* interest in getting to know them any further, and then be sent directly back to whatever part of the country it is they flew in from. And then they will be instantly forgotten.

All while I watch. All while I cry.

Because these men very clearly did not expect this to happen. (In fact, they very clearly expected the *opposite* to happen.) Why else would they have flown into California—abandoning their careers, abandoning their *lives*—if not because they were fully convinced that what they brought to the table—their accomplishments, their personalities, their comically inflated pectoral muscles—would be sufficient to not only satisfy the romantic ideals of one starry-eyed young enchantress, but also those of an adoring American public? These men flew into California a group of self-perceived Prince Charmings. They flew out of California a broken cluster of Le Fous.

(For those who may be unfamiliar, "Le Fou" is a bumbling, bizarrely-proportioned secondary character in the animated version of Disney's, "Beauty and the Beast," one whose primary function appears to be absorbing the vitriol spewn at him by his domineering master Gaston, in what hints at an only-slightly-sanitized version of sadomasochistic role-play.)

I cry for these men not out of embarrassment, but out of a genuine sense of empathy. Because these men bear the collective burden of embodying what may be the single harshest truth underlying our shared human experience: that the image of ourselves that we *think* we're projecting onto the world is often so comically divorced from the *reality* as to merit its own television show on the ABC network.

We *all* think that we come across better than we do—we *have* to. It's a necessary byproduct of our own self-preservation. If we were ever forced to honestly acknowledge the way that the world *truly* thinks of us as individuals—how visible our deficiencies, our flaws, our *cartoonishly bi-*

zarre proportions truly *are*, we would never be able to muster the simple strength required to get out of bed in the mornings. That's the reason why the phrase, "The Kind Of Place Where People Don't Even Lock Their Doors," holds such great currency in today's real-estate market. If we never need to lock our doors—so follows the logic—then we never need to re-enter the party we've just exited in order to retrieve a forgotten set of keys, thus eliminating the all-too-real risk of inadvertently stumbling into the cacophony of terrible things that everyone has been saying about us starting the *second we left their apartment*.

Look—it isn't as if we're wholly unaware of the image that we present—we generally have the basic outline down. But the devil, as they say, is in the details.

For example, I am generally aware of the fact of my whiteness. Which is to say that it doesn't tend to take me by surprise as I stare into my bathroom mirror in the mornings—fraught with a crippling sense of internal anxiety as to the question of whether or not an open second shirt button projects an image of bravado that I can't *possibly* be expected to live up to—that the face staring back at me is textbook definition Caucasian. I own a seltzer maker, I have a "tea connection" in Connecticut, and I've started more than one conversation with the phrase, "You know, if you really stop and think about it, Matchbox Twenty is actually a pretty underrated band..." I'm white. There isn't a lot of ambiguity surrounding that fact.

And yet, despite the overwhelming empirical evidence to the contrary—evidence suggesting that the image I *actually* present is that of a "bookishly approachable stranger you can rely on for accurate directions to Banana Republic"—I simultaneously maintain the completely *un*-founded illusion that I also project a palpable sense of *danger*.

For example, I recently started wearing a bandana on my forehead in an attempt at a look that can only reasonably be described as "newly-unemployed-adjunct-professor." Last weekend, on a jaunty stroll to my favorite neighborhood cheese shop, Vampire Weekend in my ears, America's first Haagen-Dazs to my right—the thought honestly occurred to me that someone might see me wearing my blue bandana and worry that the tree-lined streets of Brooklyn Heights had been infiltrated by a *street gang*. (More specifically, I thought, "I'd better take off this bandana before someone sees me and thinks that I'm in the Crips.") Never mind the fact that my very *next* thought was, "I hope this place sells a more spreadable Brie than the unpasteurized Somerset I've been buying recently..." I was *legitimately* worried that someone was going to see me in a headband and draw the immediate conclusion that I was a member of the most feared and repudiated prison gang in the history of American criminology.

(Look—I’ve *been* in gangs over the course of my lifetime. But they’ve been gangs of people who look like I do. Also known as “improv groups.”)

Which brings me to my own personal moment of devastating self-realization—the moment when the entire façade-of-delusion that I’d spent years carefully crafting for myself came cascading down in a crushing avalanche of reality. The moment when, confronted with the complete set of options available to her, Jojo looked me in the eyes—squarely, *deliberately*—and mumbled, simply, “Nope.”

I was in the beautiful city of Charleston, South Carolina, touring with a show I’d written and absolutely confident in every aspect of what I was bringing to that particular Southern table—my *accomplishments*, my *personality*, the *New York City residency* that I assumed would have everyone I met throwing themselves at my feet begging to be regaled with tales of “life in the big city.” The night before the show, the cast and I decided to hit the town—experience some local booze-culture, meet some native Charlestonians, and hopefully muster up a small sense of hype surrounding our ensuing comedy performance. Several hours (and as many drinks) later, we found ourselves in the company of Brittany and Elena—two beautiful young HR Recruiters from Raleigh, North Carolina, fellow travelers in town for a consequence-free Girl’s Weekend. (Which was, it should be noted, *exactly* the experience that I assumed I was providing for them.)

From the moment I inserted myself into their conversation (a conversation which was, I could only assume, *severely* wanting for some fascinating insight into “the time I saw Joaquin Phoenix on the subway because, you know, I live in New York City, and that’s the kind of thing that happens all the time in New York City, where I live, in New York City...”) I could tell that Brittany and Elena were little short of *enchanted*. I was *witty*, I was *charming*—the banter between the three of us bouncing seamlessly between the kind of flirtatious repartee and respectful intellectual challenge that would have Aaron Sorkin openly weeping with envy.

(In fact, I was *so* convinced of the effect I was having that, while walking over to the jukebox in order to queue up my go-to Matchbox Twenty playlist, I actually thought about taking off my wedding ring and hiding it in my pocket. Not because of any inclination towards infidelity, but because I was sincerely concerned that Elena might be thrown into a fit of actual hysterics were she to realize that I had a spouse back home in Brooklyn, which is part of New York City, where I live, in New York City.)

So engaging was the conversation, *so ripe with potential*, that, fifteen minutes in, I realized that I’d never even found a window in which to properly introduce myself. Of course, as a long-time resident in the

kill-or-be-killed word of long-form improv comedy, I decided to take this glaring omission as a moment of unique opportunity. “Here,” I said, smiling smugly, “I’ve got a great idea. Instead of me *telling* you my name, why don’t you try and guess what it is based on everything that’s happened over the last fifteen minutes.” I leaned back slowly against the bar, a cocky Rumpelstiltskin waiting to be anointed with the moniker of “Pablo,” “Jean-Luc,” or perhaps even “Ryan Gosling”—some name evoking *mystery* and *adventure* and the type of forbidden dalliance heretofore confined to the pages of the ancient Kama Sutra.

The name that I was *actually* given (and given, it should be noted, with a deliberateness and speed in defiance of everything I thought I knew about the physics of sound)...was Gary.

Fucking Gary.

I ask you: has there ever been a name that connotes an image of a more sexless, amorphous, broken sack of human desperation than *Gary*? Gary isn’t the name of a person you flirt with at the bar; Gary is the name of a guy who wears sweatpants to The Olive Garden. Gary isn’t the guy who fulfills your romantic fantasies; Gary is the guy who still gets hernias as an adult. You never ask a guy named Gary, “Hey, how’s it going?” because you just *know* that his answer is going to *begin* with the phrase, “Well, it’s been a rough couple of months...” and end with the phrase “...and that’s how I got my *latest* spider bite.” I don’t care what small town you live in; if there’s ever a headline in your local newspaper reading: “Area Man Falls Into Yet Another Sinkhole,” the name of that Area Man is Gary.

If Gary was an instrument he’d be a used tuba. If Gary was a book he’d be, “Everybody Poops.” If Gary was a band he’d be—I can now say, with the benefit of hindsight—Matchbox Twenty. Here are a series of phrases that have never been uttered in the presence of anyone named Gary: “Well Gary, the results are in, and it *isn’t* terrible.” “Congratulations on *not* getting caught up in that Ponzi scheme.” “Please Gary, just a minute. My body can’t handle another orgasm.”

And lastly, perhaps most devastatingly:

“Gary, will you accept this rose?”

There would be no rose in the offering that night in Charleston, South Carolina. No sun-drenched evening horse rides, no walks along the beach. I tried to comfort myself with the thought that perhaps Brittany and Elena were simply compensating for their intimidation at being in the same room as someone who might be in The Crips, but even I couldn’t maintain that illusion for more than the minute it took for the final notes of “Smooth” to fade away from the bar’s sound system. (And though I can’t say for certain, I distinctly remember that the song that came on next was Leonard Cohen’s, “Hallelujah.”)

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And yet, though I stood in that moment alone, I can honestly say that I wasn't lonely. Because somewhere, at that very moment, there was a man boarding a plane for California, on a one-way ticket to the Bachelorette Mansion. And to that man I say this: "It's nice to meet you, Gary. My name is Gary too. I live in New York City, although I suspect you already knew that."



Long after the children moved out he developed this new way of playing. Always as though playing a timed game of chess, but instead of trying to capture his opponent's rook or put the king in checkmate, somehow it was as if he was using his queen to gather every pawn on the board, regardless of side, and present them all before a king that was clearly not *his*.

But when I lived with him and loved him in the coffee house hours of youth, Christmas lights on the walls and twenty-five intensive conversations caffeinated in ascents and declines around us, he would change the rules, collapsing the conventions of the game in hair-pulling fits, his brow furrowed there, underneath the lamp that always dangled above us but whose light could not illuminate his shadowed face. Sometimes, if his loss seemed sure, he would overturn the chessboard with one cool sweep; his hand struck down each player with absolute detachment. And then he would look you straight in the eye as he set out the pieces again, and as you took it all in you saw that he was one move away from cornering your king. Other times he would make obvious mistakes that you couldn't believe he had made without other, hidden strategy—malevolent or benign. The way a father lets his child win in order to preserve the young one's commitment to the art of the game. Or was it something else entirely? Sacrifice the queen to preserve a pawn. Redeem a pawn for another pawn. Things which led, indirectly, to so many losses, but which never seemed to trouble him.

And I? I can't help but ask it: what was I in his game? Is it right of me to call it *his*? Was it *ours*? After all, didn't I play? If I say that I was a pawn in his hand this isn't saying much at all, as it may mean that he loved me above all the rest. If he did I never knew it. Or—did I? No. Even when he won he knew, always, that on some other plane he was a perpetual loser, so that he never gave way to hands-held-high, histrionic celebration. So

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there must have been two games going on at any given time. As though in his game he defeated me innumerable times, I am here. And he is gone. But somehow I find myself heading out the door to the pawn shop, to buy that old chessboard back, the one I pawned for five dollars yesterday. I woke up seven times in the night, and scattered a deck of cards across our king-sized bed, laid out the beginnings of a game of solitaire in the spot where he used to sleep. Found it's a game I could never get used to. I will pay them the ten dollars the tag asks. I will look them in the eye with a loser's bleary eyes. I will play their game.

Lindsey Danis



Set Free By a Prom Night Slight

Chris comes into my life when I am a freshman in high school and he is a senior. We don't meet so much as this: I receive a numerically coded note of numbers and dots, along with a piece of candy, *CW 95* punctuating the cryptic message.

We attend an elite independent day school in the suburbs of Boston, filled with entitled children of wealthy parents who all look like they stepped out of a J. Crew catalog, their LL Bean backpacks sagging with calculus problem sets and French irregular verbs. I don't understand how to relate to these children, who all summer on Nantucket or Martha's Vineyard and who seem to mix effortlessly, by some rule book I have never seen. The things I like are outsider things—Tori Amos, *On the Road*—and I am a townie.

My best friend is a chubby math geek from a trashy suburb. She scribbles and doodles and morphs the numbers on the note into letters by taking the square of each coded numeral. Decoded, the note says something about coincidence and the color of my eyes before asking whether I've been trying to say something all semester long as we passed in hallways.

This is romantic. At least we think it is, blushing and whispering, freshman girls who have never been kissed. But it's also totally weird since I don't know the guy who sent it. I've really never seen him. As we try to find someone in our circle who does know him, my stomach flops. What exactly is supposed to happen now?

We ask around the hallway and the gay guy I crush on knows Chris and says he'll get a note back to him if I write one. *What's he like*, I ask. *He's nice*, my crush assures me before showing me Chris's yearbook photo. Long hair, pimpled skin, regulation blue blazer and striped tie.

The seniors have already left school, getting out a month early for a capstone project, so it feels unfair that someone I'll never see gets to have

the last word.

I write something open-ended and teenaged back. Like *thanks*, and *no*, and *maybe let's meet for coffee?* We don't meet right away. We trade another set of notes and then talk on the phone and finally decide to meet for ice cream. He comes to pick me up in a beater car.

Chris is tall and reedy, polite and engaged, but what are we doing? The sheer teenage awkwardness of it all sits between us. He orders strawberry ice cream and talks about how excited he is to go to McGill. I tell him about the YMCA trip I'm taking to Israel and Egypt.

I do not see him again, but the letters sail back and forth between Montreal and Boston. Massive eight-page missives penned in cramped handwriting. When a new letter comes, I take it upstairs and savor it, rereading the lines for context clues. What I feel isn't understanding so much as the potential for it. When he mentions the *Griffin and Sabine* series, I special order every book and scan the fanciful lust-filled letters for clues over what precisely is happening to me.

My classmates don't know I am writing to Chris, so it's easy to keep our relationship segmented from my everyday life. I spend free periods in the drama teacher's office playing Scrabble and talking about bands and books with other smart misfits. I join the gay-straight alliance and then the swim team and then crew for the play to spend more time with a guy that I like in hopes of romance.

Chris drops out of McGill halfway through freshman year. He moves into his parent's basement in the suburbs of Boston and our letters boomerang closer, until he moves to L.A. for a program in radio or audio, something technical and masculine and almost outmoded.

I don't understand how a smart misfit like him would willingly leave a top-tier university for a parent's basement. I scan his letters as if they might tell me what college, what life, will be like for me.

When summer comes again, I go to summer camp. I offer to help teach fencing because it sounds fun. I bond with the counselors who teach it, short Jewish women who attend rival Ivy League schools. Halfway through the summer I start arriving early to lessons. I lie on a flat rock beside the dining hall and watch entranced as the dark-haired one leads the campers back and forth in the fencer's crab-like walk. I can't stay away from her and I don't understand it at all.

In the fall, Chris returns from L.A. and we meet in downtown Boston. He wears a suit and tie, his long hair pulled into a low ponytail. He appears suddenly grown-up in a way that confuses me. His job is mundane and doesn't suit him, but he seems alright with it and I swallow my disappointment. We go another long period without contact.

It's spring of my junior year. Prom is coming. So are the Indigo Girls,

a favorite band for years. Taking Chris to the Prom feels like, if not my one shot at high school romance, then a way to give our story a meaning that eludes.

Plus my photography teacher dares me to do it, telling me that artists need to learn to take risks. I promise to call Chris and invite him. *Report back*, she dares me.

On the phone, I make awkward small talk before blurting it out. Chris says, *no one's ever invited me to Prom. Sure. But maybe let's meet and talk before?* We go for pizza. I buy a sparkly blue one-shoulder dress and try to decide what to do with my chin-length hair.

I am 16 by then and my eyes are locked on a way out of high school. More than anything I want to go to a particular Ivy League school where the short Jewish woman captivates me with the curve of her smile and the way saliva collects in the corners of her mouth when she talks and I tell myself it's just something about her.

Then Susie offers me and my best friend a ride to the Indigo Girls show. Susie is a greasy insomniac poet who knows Chris through her sister and me from the gay-straight alliance.

In a dusty gym, we huddle and talk until Susie offers me a sip of her Nantucket Nectar. I take the cup and her petite hand for a second touches mine and the watermelon strawberry juice shocks my mouth with its sweetness and nothing is the same.

My friend leans over me, and says to Susie, *At school everyone thinks we're lesbians together. But we're not. They just think that cause we hang out a lot.*

We crowd close during the show to watch the musicians. Susie puts her arm around my shoulder and I am rooted to the spot, suddenly wanting something my brain riots against in full fury. Her skin against mine offering a promise of something I've never known to want. I pull away from Susie and curse my friend.

In school, I look everywhere for Susie, who is out early for her own capstone project. She mentioned a girl she was seeing who lived in a wealthy western suburb, who she was kind of on the outs with but maybe taking to Prom. I think, *if I lived in that suburb I could be gay.* I ache with the desire to go back to that moment. Juice in my hand, arm on my shoulder.

Prom plans are made without my knowledge. Chris has a family Cape house and we will all be sleeping over after the Prom. Me and Chris and Susie and Susie's date. Chris sits down with my mother and explains how safe we will be and how no one will be drinking. I am left with nothing to do but go along.

Prom is the latest high school experience that is supposed to signify

everything about this time but feels meaningless once it arrives. Susie is there with the girl and it isn't a big deal for anyone except me.

I'm relieved when it ends and Chris and I drive down to the Cape. We lie in the grass and look at the stars. The ocean crashing beneath us as we wait for Susie, and Susie's date. It seems we are finally talking about everything the night on the beach. Chris says, *I feel like I'm supposed to be in love with you or something. But I'm not.* His words go to the bone. He's not. He's not? What has all of this been for, then?

Susie and her date come and we stay up talking. I push away all my thoughts about what I want. Chris and I fall asleep on separate sofas; Susie and her date sleep in the guest room. Later they tell me they left me a bed and I try not to think about Susie and her date squeezed into one twin.

In the morning we drive back and it's a flurry of awkward goodbyes. I go back to sleep, and then school on Monday, and in a couple weeks I see Susie when the GSA holds a party to watch the Ellen coming out episode and her girlfriend is there and they're holding hands and then Susie is gone.

Prom is the last time I try making Chris into something that he isn't. Because even though when he says those words a part of me is crushed, another part of me is in the bedroom with Susie and her prom date. Or wishing I am Susie's prom date. Wishing I'd been brave enough when she reached for me, to grab her hand and listen to the lesbian folk singers and face what it was about me I'd resisted without naming.

Monte Jones



The mist roils up from the river. From the woods around the river it rolls and snakes and creeps its way up and over the grass and the weeds and the garbage. Up from the river where it's dark and wet and people won't go but the trees that always have water grow thick and tall above the meadow. Together they grow tall and thick and they don't die because they're never thirsty.

It happens at dusk the mist. It's there at dawn too but it feels different then because you know the sun is going to come and burn it all away. But at sundown I walk into the dark and the clouds they sneak out from the woods and over the ground and cover the grass and the weeds and the garbage and they stay and don't leave. They come up from the river and they stay.

Tonight/this evening it is a winter fog. The kind that flows out over the dirt and the empty cans and boxes that no one wants and gets into your bones and leaves everything silvery and beautiful and still. It can hold you tight when you're lonely but it will be cold.

I stuff my hands in my jeans and I lean forward and I walk. I would/should stuff my hands into my jacket but I forgot it or I lost it or something so I don't have it anymore. My bones they cool down and it feels good in its own way to have cold bones. It feels like a caress or maybe like dying almost but how would I know that? But the cold it makes everything stiffer I know that for sure. It makes stiff hands in stiff jeans and my bones they lose their warmth.

A siren starts in the distance alone like me one siren wailing and sad. There's city all around this meadow but it stays away from here on account of the water I suppose. In the storms the river she can get angry and then no one wants to be around her so the citizens they stay away. The road and the bridge and the cars they go high over the river even

when she's not upset out of respect I suppose.

But this evening/tonight she's quiet and gentle and she reaches out with dewy fingers soft and cool and wet. Stay here she says don't go. And I've stopped for the siren high up over the river so I stay like she asks and I listen.

The replies come from deep in the woods where the trees are thickest and you can't go there because they're so thick that no one walks or maybe they just don't want to. It starts with short answers because the siren doesn't stop so the answers begin. Little yips from the young ones at first from in the thick and the dark where only coyotes hunt. Pips and yips and squeaks. Then the older ones join with longer rounder howls upon howls. The siren seems less sad now because he is joined by the whole pack wailing back and forth the pack and the siren with answers and questions.

The music of this conversation takes my breath away and I listen even though I know they're not talking to me because no one really talks to me not much anyway. But I listen so I can hear the coyotes and the sirens and the people too sometimes. I can hear what they say too the citizens when I'm up there on the street far away from the river. I listen to everything they say to each other even when they're talking about me but they only say it to each other because no one likes to talk to me not much anyway. I can talk to them too the people up there but I don't think they can hear me because they never talk back when I say something they just look scared.

I don't think they see me either the citizens up there or at least I think they try not to. When it's cold and I sleep up there on the street they chase me away but even then I don't think they see they just chase until I'm gone and they don't have to look. One time yesterday or last week I can't remember a lady she looked at me and I think maybe she saw but when I tried to talk I started coughing and there was blood or something and she looked scared too and ran away with the other citizens.

I'm lonely and I wish I could talk to someone so I tilt my head back and I tell the coyotes. The blood it gurgles and gets in the way but I talk to them anyway. Maybe they care because they don't shut up and they don't run away at least I don't think so but I can't really see so I don't know for sure. I think it must be nice to be like them around so many who care because they're all talking together all at once and no one is running away from each other at least I don't think so.

I try to take a deep breath because I have a lot more to say but I slip on the grass at the edge of the meadow turning silvery and still and I fall. And when I look up I can see the trees right over my head because I'm near the river where the forest starts and the trees are silvery and still just

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like the grass and the weeds and garbage. The siren is gone now and the coyotes get quieter and quieter since the siren stopped talking and I don't think they can hear me anymore if they ever did.

I want to reach up and touch them the trees they're so beautiful but my arm is silvery now too and it just lays still there like the grass and the weeds and the garbage. Shiny and beautiful and still I am like the trees and the empty boxes and cans that no one wants. I want to call out to my new friends but my bones they're cold now and it's very quiet and the coyotes they have all stopped talking.