

Thirst For Fire

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Marathon

by Joe Matar

I can't write anymore. That's what it feels like anyhow. I've been run dry on ideas. That's why I'm sitting in front of my computer, cigarette in hand, staring at a blank document, hacking up a lung. I don't smoke, not as a general habit. Picked this pack up because I wanted to look and feel like the desperate writer I think I should be. I have this image, probably perpetuated from the cinema, of an overworked writer: hair mussed, eyes bloodshot. He paws his scalp in frustration as he puffs dependently on the back of a lit cigarette. There's a veritable garden of spent butts sprouting out of his nearly overflowing ashtray; a staple of the cluttered desk. I'm only on my second cigarette and I'm using a Pepsi can. I don't own an ashtray.

Hey. Veritable garden of spent butts sprouting out of a...probably the most flowery sentence I've composed in awhile. I type it in, stare at it for five minutes, delete it. What the hell can I build off of this?

I don't like not having any ideas but something inside me thinks it's fun to play the part. I like to imagine myself at a side angle, hunched over the keyboard (the perfect desperate writer has a typewriter but I'm letting that slide), brainstorming, with my cigarette as co-author. This is, however, ruined by my sporadic coughing, the fact that I can't even begin to imagine how one masters typing and smoking at the same time, and that I'm not getting any ideas so much as a need to take a shit. I'm reminded of an old roommate of mine explaining to me that cigarettes are a catalyst to bowel urgency. I'm not sure what kind of story I could write about that though.

My imperfect writer image is further marred by my desk not being lost under mounds of paperwork. Rather, it's covered in candy and snack foods. A bag of Lays' Bar-B-Q chips, a box of Chips Ahoy! Cookies (the kind with candy coated chocolate in them), some beef

jerky, a king size pack of Reese's, and a huge thing of Rainbow Nerds. No piping hot coffee; steam drawing shapes in the air, thickening the mood. Instead I picked up this dumb-looking can of Mountain Dew energy drink. Tastes like instant diabetes.

This is stupid. I stand up and walk over to the window. The headlights from the trucks clamoring down I-81 provide the only illumination. To think I live at a rest stop. The exit has one of those signs with a little picture of a plate with a fork and knife on it. Marathon, New York. Disregarding the freeway, this is quietest place I've ever lived. From what I've gathered, there are rarely more than two life forms on the street at any given time. I see numerous parked cars but it's so rare there are people piloting them that I've started to think the whole town is in on some sort of elaborate scheme in which people jump in their vehicles and speed off when I'm not looking. There's a school system in place, apparently, so I guess there are families but I've never encountered them firsthand. The only place I've encountered life at is the Three Bear Inn and the conversation I get there is hardly what I'd call stimulating. I'm not sure I'd call it life, come to think of it. But am I so much better? Maybe I should get going down there...stomach flips. Drink some of that Mountain Dew thing. Oughta do me wonders.

I've let the cigarette burn down to the butt without taking in much of what it had to offer. I drop it in the Pepsi can. Back to the window. Clutch the window sill with my hands. Put my forehead against it and feel the cold, finely sanded wood. Who does this? Does anybody do this? Fuck. Shit. Bring my head up about a foot and bring it back down. Thud. Didn't hurt.

I sit down again. A third book. How the hell did I write the first two? I don't know what I'm doing. I never did. I put my palms over my eyes and press. Christ, how did I talk to all those people? In kindergarten, I would go off to the bookcase during playtime and read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* every day. Same fucking book every time. The concept of me being involved in readings and signings, question and answer...absolutely absurd. "What authors do you consider to be most inspirational to you?" "You know the

guy who wrote The Very Hungry Caterpillar?"

Have an urge to lie down suddenly. Dash over to the bed like someone else is going to beat me to it and throw myself on it face down. My bed's on the floor. No box spring. Just like my house in college. Except I lived in the attic then. Can't write? Toss myself upon the bed, fully aware of the fact that I'd usually just fall asleep and wake up with an hour left before I had to turn my work in. Slept pretty well there overall, being all the way up in the attic. Stayed up there a lot, whenever sports were on, anyway. Was up there a lot more once I quit pot. That's really all we ever did. I can't write on it though. Get way too self-conscious. Slept a lot better there than here, come to think of it.

Could write about college but lots of people write about college. I didn't even do anything in college. College from a shut-in's point of view. Sounds pretty riveting. This is fiction though, isn't it? I could make some stuff up, stick in a nice heroin addiction for myself. That usually adds a nice kick.

I jolt up from the bed and sprint back over to my computer to sit down. In the film, I would have fooled everyone into thinking a lightbulb had just gone off. Not so. Failure to deliver. Got nothing. So stupid. So, so stupid. I don't know why I'm even bothering. My mind's not on this. This? There isn't even a this. 10:36. Wonder if I should get down to the Three Bear yet...don't wanna blow in there and run face first into her. Or maybe I do. Could be my opening. Yeah, yeah, like in the movies. Seems unlikely. Jeez, again with the movies. Maybe I should have been in pictures. Summer blockbuster in the making. There's that blank screen again. Whatever, fuck it, I'm going. I can sit in the bar for a bit.

It's a pleasant, brisk cold outside. Jean jacket weather, my favorite. I can't help but grin as I start walking. Doesn't take much to perk me up a bit, I've always noticed. Got this goddamned optimism I can't seem to ever completely quash. Air smells nice outside and suddenly I'm grinning like a jackal (where the hell'd I get that, do jackals even grin?). I've never been able to just settle into a nice,

deep depression. Then you don't do anything and you're fine with it. You get tons of sleep. Talk about easy living. I sigh. I can never tell if sighs are genuine involuntary inventions of the respiratory system or a conscious decision on my part to make me seem more tragic. I wonder this about all sighs.

Jesus, Marathon is so nothing. This street, all these little craphole cottages, pitch dark. Not even a hint of a nightlight coming from any of these empty little shacks. Cars are parked in the driveways so I guess people live in these. These could easily be vacant. I'd get the same amount of interaction. Nothing to listen for out here but the occasional truck on the freeway. Can't even make out crickets, I don't think. Trucks must scare them away. At least you can see the stars pretty well out here. That's one of the things that never quite gets old.

I really shouldn't make major decisions based on random little musings I had during my early twenties. Stopped at Marathon to eat on the way back from a road trip to Canada. I thought I enjoyed how simple the place was. Based that all on the one street and the only building I saw the inside of, the Three Bear Inn. There were maybe only two guys in the bar section, the food was pretty good and cheap, and the waitress was uncommonly courteous. There was a little bathroom in the bar area that was dirty and small but functional. The walls were covered with graffiti from various road trippers. I remember being delighted to discover that "Joe loves cock"(or at least did at one time) and some disgruntled gentleman had written "Fuck the world." This is the kind of thing I manage to retain.

I also remember saying to my friends that I'd like to get a little place up here when I was older with my hot girlfriend and relax and go to the Three Bear Inn all the time. Except for the glaring omission of the girlfriend and the hot, this had come true. Good Christ, I actually moved here. I release a chortle into the darkness despite myself. Yeah, doesn't seem to bother anybody.

I see the Three Bear up ahead in the distance and a slight feeling of

nausea creeps into my throat. This has nothing to do with the cuisine. You think you'd get rid of this type of thing once you're out of high school but no dice. There should be a drug by now that kills off butterflies available by prescription to those of us who suffer from them chronically. Oh, right, alcohol. But there are too many side effects. Plus I can't stand the stuff. Dammit. Time to put on my sane face.

As I approach the inn, I spot one of the few sparks of life I've come accustomed to seeing, Franklin: tattered clothes, heavily bearded, Heineken in hand, dancing (or something like it) just outside the door. He's always out here. He goes inside to buy his alcohol and then drinks and dances on his own in front. I often wonder where he gets the money. I don't think he works. I see him here almost all hours of the day. Come to think of it, I don't think he eats either.

"Eyy, writer!" He always calls me by my profession rather than my name, which he may or may not know.

"How ya doin', Franklin?"

"I come up widda new alphabet. You can use it in yer books."

"Oh yeah? Let's hear it."

"Right, lissen. B, Q, Z, Z...Z, Z. X." He rotates his eyes upwards for a moment. "...N."

"Wow," I say. "That's really progressive."

"It's wat?" he cocks his head at me.

"Don't worry about it," I say. "Doesn't fit into your alphabet."

"Shanks for yer support," he calls after me as I enter the bar.

The Three Bear Inn is divided into a bar, a restaurant, and, I guess, an inn upstairs but I've never had any reason to investigate. It's a

wood-based affair, giving it a feeling akin to that of a cozy cabin, if cozy cabins were generally found alongside major interstate highways. Little bathroom's on the right. The restaurant is to my left. I glance over there. All the tables I can see from here are empty. Look at my watch. 10:48 now. Saw her in here at 11 the other two times. Sit down at the bar. Walk naturally.

Billy smiles like always as I sit down in front of him. I buy a beer. I hate the taste but I have to pretend like I'm in here for a reason.

"So, how ya doin'?" Billy starts the polite conversation. It always comes off as labored on both our parts. Guess he sees it as necessary. If anyone else was here he'd be having a ball chatting them up. I feel a small bit of guilt forcing him to wrench this dialogue out of his system in order to accommodate my presence. I'd be okay with us both sitting in silence but he's making the attempt and I don't want to seem ungrateful.

"Fine, fine." Standard response. I'm trying to keep my eyes focused on either the beer or the little carving of the three dancing bears up on the shelf behind Billy.

Billy looks down and starts wiping the bar with a rag. Pops his head back up again almost immediately. Something else?

"Crrrankin' out that new book then?"

Cranking, yes. Like a pathetically outdated assembly line.

"Oh, she's comin' along." I grin. I should have never told these people what I do.

"Hey, ah, I'm up to page, ah, maybe—" his hand stops moving mid-wipe. My eyes widen and my beer stops halfway in its journey to my lips. "Page thirty or so I think, in, ah, your book there."

"W-wow," I say, genuinely surprised, "You actually picked it up then?"

"Got it from the library."

Nice guy, Billy, going to the trouble and all. I was taken aback when he had asked me for a title last week. Probably figured it'd be a good ice breaker for these wonderful awkward silences we get together for.

"So, uh, you like it at all?"

I watch as the waitress comes out of the kitchen, smiles the requisite smile at me, and walks into the restaurant.

"Yeah, yeah, it's like okay, ya know? Not that much happening in it yet."

My gaze is centered on the entrance to the restaurant. I lean back in an effort to see who she's serving. I realize Billy's still talking to me.

"So this guy kind of just wanders around a bunch, huh?"

"More coffee, hon?" The waitress is asking.

I turn back to him and paint on a smile. "Yeah, pretty much."

"No, thank you." A woman's voice. She's here. Okay, all right, I'm going.

"Yeah, but I mean," Billy was saying, "I like it, ya know? It's nice to fall asleep to."

"That's one of the more accurate reviews I've gotten," I say as I stand up. I turn toward the restaurant. Stomach again. Turn back. Bathroom. I'll go to the bathroom real quick and then I'll go in there.

My hands are shaking. Hard to take a piss. God, this is ridiculous. Ah, there it goes. Right after I'm done here, gonna go right over to the restaurant. Talk to her. I've waited too long as it is. That's

always the problem. Ahhhh, Christ. I survey all the old graffiti as well as the new additions as though searching for some advice on the grime-encrusted walls. Instead, I only learn that Brian also loves cock. I wonder if he and Joe know each other.

I walk through the bar and Billy puts his hand up in greeting like we hadn't only just spoken. Yeah, hey Billy, hi, how are ya?

I enter the restaurant, swallowing hard. There she is, at a booth in the back right. Stomach does a little lurch there. Okay, take it slow. Take a booth in the front left. Not all the way in the back but a few booths up. No need to flank the salad bar. Two should do. Best place to be unnoticed by the teacher. How does that apply here? God, shut up. Has she seen me yet? Shit! Just looked at me, I think. Okay, head down, head down. Boy, my hands sure look cool right now. Wish I'd brought a pen or something...look so stupid.

Okay, risk it? Risk it. Look up again. She's not looking. She's pretty all right. At least from here anyway. Short, curly blonde hair. Not my favorite but pretty regardless. Can't tell the eyes from here. She's thin, that much I can see. What's her deal anyway? Nobody comes to Marathon to stay, although I guess this is an inn. You stop, you get some food, you go on your merry way. This is the third night I've seen her here. First night there was that old couple too but last time was like today, nobody but us. Even if I didn't think she was attractive, the desolate nature of the place would certainly support the notion of asking if she wanted company anyway, right? So how about I just get up and go over and-

"How ya doin', hon? What can I getcha?"

Shit, the waitress! Startled the hell out of me. Wonder if it was noticeable. God, I can't even eat right now. Should order something, looks unnatural otherwise. I've only eaten Nerds and jerky today. Just get something, you can always wrap it up.

I order a two bear steak. There are three different types of steaks here. Take a guess what the other two are. The waitress walks off. I

take a sip of the glass of water she left me, let my eyes drift towards-shit!

Eyes down, start twisting my napkin up in knots. She was looking right over here wasn't she? Goddammit, why don't I just go talk to her already? The stupid staring contests never go anywhere. This is the dumbest thing in the world.

"Scuse me?"

I snap my head up so quickly it hurts a bit.

"Oh-ah...hello."

Holy hell, she's over here now.

"Sorry to bother you but, are you-you're not Jack Lindquist, are you?"

What the-? She knows who I am?

"What-yeah, I-I am, actually."

"Oh, wow," she lets out a nervous little laugh. "Wow, I've seen you in here for the past few days and I've just been trying to decide if it was actually you or not." Pauses. "That picture on the back of your book is pretty small."

"Yeah, that picture is awful." I emit what I can only assume to be the worst, fakest laugh ever released from a human mouth. I'm suddenly very aware of my appearance. What the hell was thinking, coming out here to talk to a girl without even taking a look in the mirror? I'm sure my eyes must be bloodshot from staring at the screen in that dark room for so long and I literally don't think I've brushed my hair in years. The least I could have done was shaved. I've got major stubble going on here.

"My name's Molly." She puts out her hand. I look straight up at her

for the first time. Blue eyes. Fairly standard. Quite pretty though. Small, slightly pointy nose, thin, pink lips. Bust isn't much to speak of but that's not a huge concern. I realize how annoyed I am by the fact that I've already made an assessment of this. Well, these past months of isolation haven't affected my gender, at any rate.

I reach forward and shake her hand lightly as though some kind of explosion will be triggered by the meeting of our two appendages. I'm debating whether or not I'm supposed to stand up.

"Would you mind if, uh," she scans the length of the room, "Would it be okay if I joined you?"

"Oh, uh, definitely, yeah." She sits down. Her hair bounces up and down momentarily and then resettles in slow-mo like a shampoo commercial.

"It's just so random to find you here. I just stopped here for, um, a couple days." She puts her hand through her hair and rotates her eyes upward and to the right.

"Oh..." I should ask her something about herself. "Where are you headed?"

"Seeing friends all over really. I just graduated and decided to take a little road trip before going headfirst into a job or something."

"On your own?" Ooh, ballsy little question there. Where'd that come from?

"Yeah." She smiles. "You don't have to fight over what music you're going to listen to in the car." Cute.

"Good point, good point."

"Oh, but what am I doing, I'm here with one of my favorite authors and I'm talking about my stupid road trip."

"That's okay. I'm really not that interesting." There was a compliment in there. "Oh! Thank you."

"Two bear steak?" Waitress.

"Oh, yeah, thanks." She sets it down and looks at both me and Molly, smiling.

"Enjoy it," she says, looking me square in the eye as she walks off. Lady, I really don't need your subtle commentary right now. I pick up my fork and knife. My insides feel as though they're engaged in fisticuffs but the steak gives me an excuse not to maintain eye contact every second. I know it's supposed to be important but is it ever a trial.

"Uh...you mind if I-?"

"Oh, go right ahead, I ate already." I start cutting into my two bears.

"Well, I, um," Molly begins again. "I think you write really good stuff. Really, really good stuff. Your two books were some of the best things I've read in awhile, I think."

"Thanks. Thanks very much."

She smiles widely. Boy, that's a nice smile.

"Would you mind me asking if-are you working on anything right now?"

"Oh...yeah. Yeah, I guess I am." The smile extends further. Didn't think it was possible.

"Cool! Could I ask you what it was about or is that crossing a line? I-I try to write sometimes. It's not very good but I know I don't really like to-

"No no, it's fine. I've got no fucking clue what it's gonna be about

anyway."

She laughs. She looks pretty when she laughs. She sounds pretty too.

"Sorry to hear that."

"You said you write?" I ask, as I eat a bite of steak. Good move there, I'd say, asking her about herself. Besides, I truly have no desire to talk about me anymore.

"Oh! It's, I mean, it's nothing special. I've written a couple little stories. I have some ideas. I dunno." She starts fidgeting with her fingers. "Nothing I'm too proud of yet."

"Well that's a step ahead of me. I'm not at all proud of anything I've done." I push out a smile.

"Oh, don't say that!" she abruptly puts her hands, palms down, on the table in order to emphasize this point. "You're really one of the better new writers I've read. I mean, really, I think that. I know my opinion hardly holds a lot of water or anything but—"

"No, no, it does. 'Official' reviews always strike me as pretentious. They try to make too much out of the work."

"Did the New York Times not like you?" she smirks.

"No, they liked me fine. They just said it in a dickish way."

She laughs.

"Dickish, right."

"Yeah, this is what I've become."

"If you could put the word 'dickish' somewhere in your next book, I'd really appreciate it."

"It's the title, actually."

I don't know that it was that funny but Molly laughs loud enough for Billy to tilt his head into the room.

My steak is done now so I don't have the comfort of looking down at it. Things could get difficult here.

"You probably don't really want to keep talking about your work right? I was just thinking I really don't like people asking about my writing." She's looking right at me.

"Well-no, not...I don't mind it for a bit but, yeah, I don't particularly care for it, honestly."

"No, I understand. So...what are you doing in this little rest stop? You headed somewhere?"

"Uh, I live here right now, actually."

"What, really?" Her eyes open wide. I nod.

"If you don't mind me asking, why?"

"You know, I'm not sure really."

"Is it a good place to write?"

"It's not really a good place for anything." My eyes keep researching the table top. Molly chuckles.

"Yeah, this place does seem pretty dead. Except for that guy out there who's always dancing. He's like a party all by himself." I laugh quite genuinely.

"Yeah, that's Franklin. He's like my best friend right now. Started blabbering at me first day I saw him."

"That's funny, he put his head down or took a drink anytime I tried to talk to him."

"Yeah..."

What now? I can't think of anymore nonsense to churn out. I grin nervously at her. She looks straight at me. Look around the room. Follow a pattern: top left corner, that other carving of the three bears, Molly, booth behind and to the right of us, Billy over in the bar, Molly.

"Oh, jeez, look at the time," she says abruptly. "I was gonna leave tonight. I've got friends expecting me in Jersey. They thought I'd be there yesterday." She seems to be focusing in precisely on my right eye.

"Well, uh, it was very nice to meet you," I say.

She waits a moment and then breaks the stare.

"Yeah," she breathes out. "It was great to meet you."

I stand up. She stands up next. We walk through the bar (Billy greets) and outside. Franklin's out here, running in place or doing the Running Man, I'm not sure which. He puts his head down as we come out. Molly turns to me.

"I never would have thought I'd run into you here."

"Yeah, hah, here I am," I say. Oh, that was atrocious.

"Well, uh, do you need a ride or something?"

"Oh, no...thanks. I live right up the street."

"Good to know," she says sort of flatly. I reach out to shake her hand. I should do something here. Do I pull her closer and kiss her?

That's a little too much too soon, isn't it? Do I ask for her number? Wouldn't she have given me her number already if she wanted to? Or does it not work like that? I wish Franklin wasn't eyeing us despite being so involved in his workout.

"Well," she brushes some locks out of her eyes. "Bye."

"Goodbye." She turns and walks toward her car. She gets in, starts it, pokes her head out the window and waves. My mind is fighting with me, tossing tons of different ideas at me. I elect to smile and wave back.

"Bye, Franklin," she says. Franklin's head shoots up in complete shock and then quickly goes back down again. The car pulls out and drives off towards the exit to the I-81.

I deeply suck in some air and start off towards the road.

"Ey, writer!" Franklin, breathing heavily as he continues to trot in place, suddenly starts as though whatever he has to say is so important it could only be communicated now that we're alone.

"Yeah Franklin?"

"Remember what I said! B, Q! Q! P! X, Y, X, Y! L!"

"Isn't that a little different from last time?"

"New addishuns!" he responds as though he was expecting to have to field this question. "Don't forget!"

"You got it."

I arrive home and flick on the light by my computer. I sit down and wiggle the mouse. The screen illuminates with the blank document I've come so accustomed to seeing. My eyes squint as I jam my fingers down upon the keys.

BQQQQQQPPPPPLLLLLLXYXYXYXYXYXYXYXYXYXYXYXYXYXYXYXY

XYXYXYXYXYXYXY

This is great. I'll have a whole page soon.

Cotton Season

by Jim Parks

William Pierce, Jr., grasped his hip with both hands and tugged with all his strength against the action of the auger that caught his leg and was pulling his body to bloody pieces.

The foreman Red Smith locked eyes with him over the stub of an unlit cigar. Pierce screamed without a sound against the deafening roar of the machinery. He knew that Smith left the grating off the top of the horizontal floor shaft meant to cover the auger.

After Pierce's right leg was reduced to a bloody pulp up to the pelvis, Smith turned off the main power switch. All the machines shut down slowly. The vacuum hose that sucked raw cotton out of the wagons and into the gin was the last to stop with a diminishing moan. In the sudden quiet of that moment, on cue, he smiled at Pierce, speaking around the stub of unlit cigar.

"You look real stupid like that, Mr. Pierce."

Pierce thrashed the air with his fists and howled again. Blood spattered his white dress shirt and the gold pen and pencil set clipped in his breast pocket.

"I tried to tell you about rushing a man in his work."

Indeed, he had warned Pierce about rushing a man in his work earlier that morning. Pierce had reminded him that it was 1934, there was a lingering depression, and that he was lucky to have a job.

"I know you right, Mr. Pierce," Red had intoned, then spat the juice of chewing tobacco at his feet. "You sho' nuff right."

Red knew what year it was, all right. He had spent eight long years in the cotton fields of the Texas Department of Corrections planting, hoeing and picking cotton, running to the patch and running back to "the house" in the evenings. He'd seen men go mad after "riding the Coke box" in their bare feet, made to stand on the necks of glass soft drink bottles in wooden cases all night because of some imagined or perhaps real but slight offense against a "boss" or a "building tender," the term for a sadistic inmate guard.

He had received a crooked trial in a kangaroo court for something not only he didn't do but no one did because it, because the offense, in fact, never happened.

Burglary of a building.

What building? It wasn't specified.

When? Where?

The jurors didn't care.

He was just another drifter, a two-bit sharecropper with a barefoot family.

He'd seen men beaten with trace chains on their bare backs and go on to die of infections of the untreated wounds, seen them kept in the hole on "piss and punk," the term for bread and water or hominy and putrid, filthy water, for days until they were unable to perform their work in the fields.

He had seen men lashed with the "bat", a piece of industrial grade leather belting attached to a wooden handle for being the last to reach the field or the last to reach the "house" in the evenings after running to and from. A few well placed elbows and knees took care of any man that was targeted to become a boss's "boy" or a building tender's "bitch." Broken ribs and strained knees or pulled hamstrings made a man last, put him in the unenviable position of being lashed to the bars of a cell door hand and foot, whipped until

he screamed for mercy, and subsequently broken through sexual torture.

Red had seen it all, but he wasn't broken, not by a long shot. He had family and that family had paid cash money to keep him in the good graces of the crooked authorities. They paid to keep him in a job as a ginner in the civilian work force where he was rented out as a worker by the warden. Thus, the warden was collecting two ways.

It had turned Red into a hostile, cynical piece of work. He was taciturn, dour and by turns downright hateful to all but his family. Family meant everything to Red. It was all he had, that sense of belonging to a family and fathering his own.

He was now living under the terms of parole, a system that placed him in the true state of feudal villainy, a man unable to leave the county without permission or seek employment anywhere except where he had been assigned to work – for Pierce, the local cotton king.

But Red had also had the sense to make the best of his situation. His little girl Dotty was smart and it showed way before she went to kindergarten. By that time, she was reading him items from the paper, explaining the funnies, and adding up the family grocery bill based on the prices listed in the sale papers.

The Smiths knew they had a very special little person living in their family, someone that came along while her daddy was "away" and whose spirit had kept him alive through his darkest days while he waited for his Sunday afternoon visits with Mrs. Smith.

His problems with Pierce started after Dotty had been called to the high school office one morning the week before, told that she was the valedictorian of her graduating class, and given the morning off to go tell her mom and dad. She had practically run the mile and a half home to tell them.

They called everyone they could think of to crow the news. It meant

everything to them. Their girl could compete for the scholarships that would lead to a university education, a good job – in short, a way out of the grinding poverty of the depression and the attendant rural politics of mere survival it dictated.

She would be free, more free than they had ever hoped to be. Then she went back to class after the lunch period and the world turned upside down.

She was called to the office and told that there had been a mistake. She wasn't the class valedictorian, after all. Another student had beaten her record by a half a grade point.

She cried. She pleaded with the principal and the school superintendent to let her check the figures.

They refused her.

Then who had gotten the higher grades and displaced her from her spot?

The daughter of School Board President William Pierce, Jr., owner of the cotton gin, the bonded warehouse and seed mill.

He had wheeled up to the school in his Cadillac to pick up his girl and get the good news.

And so, the next morning when a wealthy farmer came to the gin to complain that Red had told him to "Blow it out his ass" when he demanded that his cotton wagons be unloaded first, Pierce came firing out of his office in his white shirt and wing-tip shoes, striding across the gin floor that he, in fact, owned, without looking where he was putting his feet.

"What happened, Mr. Red?" A colored man asked in the sudden quiet, strolling over with the arthritic gait of one that has grown old far before his time.

"I don't know, Clarence. I purely don't know."

Red lighted a fresh cigar and sat down to wait for whatever would come next.

Casual Encounter in a Dark Place

by Manuel Jimenez

I don't remember my father. I can't picture his face. It's blurred in my memory, coming clear only when I peer into an old family photo album. Although unable to visually recollect him, I do remember the feelings he gave me and recall a collection of actions and events, of which he was a part, that I have filed away only to be pulled out of memory in the darkness of a still night or under circumstances I cannot predict. I was a small child when my father died. I don't remember the loss. I don't remember grieving for him. Yet his absence has left a void in me that I have struggled with all my life.

When my brother died, the situation was different, the effect immediate. His death tore a hole in my heart and cast me into a year long depression that strangled me until I left for college.

But I had never so intimately seen anyone die before. I'd never watched the life slip out of someone I loved. The horror of the experience refused to leave me. I had lost my best friend and all I could remember about him was the shocked detachment and isolation I felt as I held him in my arms, his blood spilling onto me, coloring the sidewalk and glittering red over the broken glass. I tried to picture him in my mind. But the recollections were drowned in the image of his death.

The four of us, Zelda, Ex, August and I, looked terrible. None of us had gotten any sleep the night before. Having witnessed the event, we now sat in The Café , a club on Market Street, blanketed by darkness, strung out on alcohol and exhaustion. Ex was a regular at the place, and somehow we just followed him there. It was just a gay bar masquerading as a club. Saturday night and it was filled with people. To us the people were unwelcome. I didn't want them there. The sheer mass of weekend bridge and tunnel people threatened the solemnity of the occasion.

We sat at one of the small tables at the edge of the dance floor. The smell of stale beer was mixed with spent cigarettes. We talked about Paolo. Over and over the same stupid clichés came out, changing only with the speaker's interpretation. August sat across the table from me, unable to remove his dark sunglasses, southern pride defending his masculinity. Exeter was seated next to him. Thin, wiry and intense, Ex usually carried himself with a combination of detachment and intellectualism which translated into an air of coldness. Paolo's death upset his facade, unbalancing his presence. Next to Ex sat Zelda, an alternative girl, with alternative hair, alternative clothes and an alternative air.

"Another toast to Paolo," Ex said, unsteadily raising his glass in front of his face. He peered into the auburn liquid inside, "The whole fucking world shares the blame for killing him." Ex stood up and raised his voice as if confronting everyone inside the place and yelled out, "You were so fucking envious. You sharpened your frailties and bled the life out of him." A few people turned their heads to look towards him. They quickly ignored him again. Someone then yelled from across the room, "Fuck you too."

"That's more like it," mumbled Ex, "Yeah, fuck me too." He dropped back into his chair.

"He was cool," said August, matter of factly, "But now he's dead," said August.

"Salud." With that we downed another in a long string of drinks. Ex had a gift for stringing together words that made up grossly inefficient sentences. We were drunk and so his toast seemed profound. The four of us were cast into an uneasy silence that lingered unnaturally. The evening passed slowly. We sat getting drunk, suffocating in our thoughts.

I looked over at my friends. None of us were San Francisco natives. We all had come from various and sundry places believing we had found a home in the city. August was from the deep south, Meridian

Mississippi. He was a man of contrasts; soft-spoken, but self-assured, always tolerant, but perfectly willing to re-fight the civil war. Tall, square-jawed and solidly built, he epitomized an idealized American manhood. He spoke with short monosyllabic sentences, deriving the effectiveness of his communication from that which he left unsaid. Ex on the other hand was from Manhattan. Columbia educated, he made conversation an art. It was a thrill to cross swords with him on any subject on which he had an opinion. He had a lot of opinions, most of them well thought out.

Where you found Ex, you found his self named friend Zelda. She complimented him. They were a set. A writer, she wrote both poetry and prose. She created great poetry, but dysfunctional fiction. She was the door to Ex's glass closet. Everybody that knew Ex, knew that he was queer. Those just introduced to him, suspected. But with his fag hag Zelda next to him the suspicion remained until he let them know otherwise.

As I looked at them I knew that we had nothing in common. Paolo had been the only one in our circle of friends to have been raised here. He had been the common thread that unified us.

As for myself, I adopted the city soon after completing my undergraduate work at Berkeley, taking a degree and relocating once I'd accepted a position with a San Francisco firm. The transition was natural. Just across the bay, Berkeley feeds many of its new alumni into the city. I had lived there only a short time before becoming comfortable with my neighborhood.

I took up residence in the Haight, located adjacent to the east end of Golden Gate Park. Most of the residents of the neighborhood are young, coming from a varied mix of experiences. Like myself, many are relatively recent graduates from the local colleges, attracted to the area by its low rents and circus culture. High school drop-outs and run-aways also escape to the neighborhood, their desperate, extrinsic circumstances lending the place a dramatic air. There live artists and pot heads, musicians and drunks, all of whom help define the Bohemian, sometimes surreal, flavor of the area.

Collectively, the inhabitants of the district are flamboyant and self-absorbed, intoxicated with the arrogance of youth. On display, the cooler women wear clothes that steal their spirit from the pretentious outfits of the 60's and '70's, their retro attire defined by their tight tops and loose bottoms, based on thick-soled shoes. Some have fair, ghostly white skin, their purposefully gaudy looks punctuated with heads of unnatural jet black or dark auburn hair, tattoos and peircings. The men wear their hair long, sporting goatees and side burns. They move with accentuated motions and speak in exaggerations. Into this home I was welcomed, into a family of acquaintances, the liquid and unstructured society that makes up much of the city's youth culture.

With Paolo gone, my desire to run away from the place permeated my thoughts. His death brought to surface deep fears and insecurities that haunted my subconscious. Fears that were raw wounds at one time. "What the fuck?" I silently asked in my drunken state, "How could life be ripped away so easily?" If Paolo could be torn down so easily, so could I. I'd seen it so many times before. Too many people I'd known lay down and slipped away; drugs, violence, alcohol, depression or suicide. Who the fuck am I? What the fuck have I ever done? What will I do before I lay down on some street corner and let my life spill out of me?

With his arm propped up onto the table, August rested his forehead in his hand and stared at the floor. Breaking the silence, he spoke, "I can't stomach another drink." There was a long pause as he rocked his head back and forth. He slip his eyes over the palms of his upturned hands to wipe the exhaustion from his stinging lids. He looked around the room with his bloodshot eyes. Then rested his head in his hands. "I'm going to be sick."

Ex turned toward him, "This celebration isn't over."

"What are we celebrating?" retorted August. Another long pause. He stood up slowly. "I'm gonna go."

"Fuck it. I'll go with you," Ex said. He pushed his drink away and looked up to August, "We'll share a cab."

"That's it?" I thought to myself, "The ceremony is over? Now we can comfortably forget the man now deep sixed?"

Ex turned to me, "Let's blow this joint."

I was too comfortable to leave. The darkness was soothing. I didn't want to go home. I didn't want to sit in an empty room and bounce my depression off the walls, letting it reflect back to me.

"Go ahead," I replied, "I'm staying."

"You all right?" asked Zelda, "Can you make it home?"

I knew the fucking bitch couldn't care less if I ever made it home. Her patronizing suggestion of concerns was annoying.

"Yeah."

"Better days," said Ex. "I'll see you then."

"No doubt."

Ex and Zelda got up from the table. August turned to leave. Ex and Zelda followed him. They made their way toward the exit. I watched them disappear through it. I welcomed the solitude. At the same time, I'd never felt so alone. By myself and with no other distraction, I watched the people from the fringe of the place, sipping my rum and coke. The usual cast of characters was assembled. Same people, different faces, sipping drinks and choking down cigarettes. It was late and people were dancing to the thump of the heavily based music. The base structured the environment, acting as a unifying force, oppressing individuality. It set the mood and defined the expressions of motion. The movements on the small floor were filled with erotic suggestion, making up a sexual tapestry. They moved with their bodies while their faces remained devoid of

expression. Their humanity had been pounded out of them by the echo base. I lusted for the women, some of whom were in various states of underdress and falling out of their clothes.

Fuck them. My depression was heavy. My mood darkened. I stared at the dancing people, shrouded by the smoke filled room and erratic lights, as I sunk. It embittered me. I felt the blackness in my soul as I sipped my drink. Dazed from exhaustion and drunk, I moved my gaze away from the dance floor. I turned my head and looked to the exit trying to escape from something.

As my vision panned the distance from the dance floor toward the exit, a beam of light ricochet off something familiar. I thought that I glimpsed someone I knew. It was a recognized silhouette, a remembered figure. Whomever it may have been, they were lost in the confusion of movement. I got up from the table and walked to the dance floor searching for a person I hadn't really recognized in the mob. An irrational sense of desperation overtook me. I looked over the people on the dance floor. I accidentally bumped into a woman. She dismissed the jolt with disdain. The look on her face made me want to rip her fucking head off. I continued to search, looking over the collective mass, but at the same time focusing in on the individuals. I failed to find whomever it was I thought I saw.

* * *

The woman entered the bar, a girl noir splashed into a fountain of vanilla faces. She already hated the place. It didn't matter. She was going to get smashed. She needed the escape. She sauntered through the place accompanied by the black woman who'd bankroll the evening. Her company was worth at least that. With her fine features, long neck and subtle sexuality, she never had trouble finding someone willing to buy her company for an evening, either as a social companion or as a magnet for society otherwise unavailable without her. She'd allow Melissa to bounce words off her for a few glasses of firewater.

She found the bar unextraordinary. The music was too loud. She

dreaded having to shout through a conversation with her date. The only consolation was that the club had a full bar. She was sick of the illicit raves and after-hour, underground clubs bathed in beer. Beer bars bothered her. If she was going to drink, she'd do it right, not spend the night guzzling glasses of sour, bitter fratboy "soda" and straddling the toilet pissing the night away. She made a bee-line from the entrance to the bar. Melissa followed attentively.

She fought her way Brooklyn style to the bar, edging herself between two guys wearing khakis, button down shirts and suffering from puffy white guy syndrom, a result of spending their college years drinking too much and doing little else, except to watch other people play sports. She ordered a seven and seven, "Seven-up double-up." Melissa asked for a draft Bass. Melissa looked quickly around the place. "Do you want to find a table?" she asked.

Melissa smelled of clove cigarettes, a kind of pleasant, sweet cinnamony fragrance. The smell mirrored her character, sugar and spice, an irritating combination of innocence and sin. The woman thought Melissa sympathetic, but annoying.

"See one?" asked the woman of Melissa. She quickly looked about as she stated the question, trying to see a free table through the crowd. Her gaze careened the place from one end to the other. She didn't see a place to sit down. She started to turn her attention back to Melissa. It was in that glance that it hit her, striking her deep and hard. She trembled, as if jolted with electricity.

"See a table?" asked Melissa.

Like a flash the woman saw him. She was silent for a moment before she replied to Melissa's question, "No."

"Over there," Melissa said, "C'mon."

She stood and stared at him as Melissa started across the room. He sat humbled over the table that propped him up. Like the flash that jolted her when she first realized what love was, she was struck by

the man sitting by himself across the room. Like the flash from a gun. She knew Gregorio Cruz. She knew the look of depression that shrouded him, and it scared her. She'd seen it before...when she'd loved him.

Melissa led the way, bumping and grinding her way across the place. The woman started to follow her. Gentle touches to the shoulder and an apologetic smile worked wonders at moving strangers out of the way. The woman followed Melissa, obliquely aware of her presence.

She had loved Gregorio Cruz, years ago. From the time he had pulled out a nine-millimeter automatic and let the muzzle roar out with thunder, she had loved him. Bang Bang Bang Bang. He'd kept firing. The flash of the muzzle lit up the dimming summer sky like lightening from the thunderbird. All she could do was fall to the ground and let Gregorio Cruz face the monsters as the brass was ejected from the gun and dropped around her...ching, ting, cling. He faced them, the threatening demons, with crazed resonance. THEM; the playboy crips, Los Avenues or the boyz from dog town, she didn't know? They were bad people; evil people who would rip the life from you and laugh as you bled, or worse...rape you senseless...gang bang...Bang Bang Bang Bang...The deafening sound shocked her senseless. And when the banging stopped, there were no demons. Just an eery silence punctuated with a ringing in her ears. And that smell...sulfur..something...spend gun powder. In that silence she felt no emotion. She craved a cigarette. She got off the ground and they ran. That was the Gregorio Cruz she knew. He'd been crazy, doped up and violent, but not towards her, and that's all that mattered.

She followed Melissa, very aware of the lone figure from her home and her past across the room. Highland Park, Los Angeles was a tough place. No mansions or movie stars. For her there had been little happiness there. Highland Park is nestled between downtown Los Angeles and Pasadena. It was built on the flood plain between the Mt. Washington hills and the hills of Debs Regional Park to the east. A set of train tracks, of which there was no right side, ran next

to much of the river. The river itself had been lined in concrete to stop it from flooding. Now it was just a fast moving stream that would engorge on rainy days and could sweep you to your death if you got too close. The river reminded Clara of man sitting across the room. Something that had been delicate and beautiful, but which had been changed by the neighborhood in which it ran.

Although the river itself had been destroyed, some of the topography around the river was undeveloped and left in its natural state. The poverty of the area encouraged a stasis that preserved some of the prehistorical aspects of the place, a stasis that would never have been allowed if modernity had arrived too quickly. If you were still, and quiet, you could imagine life as the Gabrielino Tongva Indians had lived it, the aboriginal people native to the area.

The woman followed Melissa to a table for two. The table was unsteady on its base and rocked when Melissa put down her drink, spilling a splash of beer onto the sticky surface. Melissa rocked the table back and forth a couple of times.

"Fuck," she said, "I hate that. Do you have a match book or something?"

The woman took the napkin coaster from beneath her drink, folded it up and placed it in the gap under the base to steady the table.

"How do you know Rachael?" asked the woman of Melissa, , referring to the person that introduced them. She wasn't interested in the answer. All she wanted was to get Melissa talking, giving herself an opportunity to clear her mind and think of the dark figure across the room. She could have an entire conversation without actually participating in it. A few well placed personal questions would keep Melissa, or anyone for that matter, busy talking about the subject they knew best and liked most, themselves. People aren't interested in other people. They want relationships on their own terms. She used this natural narcissism to get what she wanted. What she wanted now was to sip her drink and think.

"Rachael?" started Melissa, "I've known her forever. She and I went...school together...Came back...college...hooked-up...She...I...I-ke c--ld s-e m-s-If...Me Me Me Me Me..."

Simply an Encounter

by Rachel Eagle Reiter

Flowers was what she intended to study, simply flowers. Jade didn't show that she was a little startled when an older gentleman, maybe in his forties, took the seat across from her. He didn't request the seat, Jade realized, he just assumed he could take it. How does he know I'm not waiting for someone, wondered Jade. Although, she wasn't waiting for anyone at all.

The gentleman--the older gentleman, asked Jade what she was studying. Jade shrugged, smiled a little to be nice. She didn't want to tell. He asked again, the same question, only using different words. Jade's smile broke into a nervous laugh. Just plants, Jade told him, hoping that he would be satisfied with this. She had after all, answered him.

He was not. He wanted to know more. Jade realized that he was to persistent and although she was studying for an exam and intended to complete a set amount of reading, this gentleman--this older gentleman, who was in fact being quite rude and persistent, unlike a gentleman at all, really did want to have a conversation. Jade closed her book.

Jade figured that she might have closed it sooner if he had came right out and told her his profession--a scientist: no, not an ordinary scientist--a medical scientist. Jade imagined that he would be twice as interesting as a doctor, Jade knew because she had dated a doctor not to long before. This medical scientist intrigued her twice as much because he had his M.D. and his PhD.

The scientist, Ricardo, invited Jade into his laboratory to look at slices of rat brains; only there really weren't slices of rat brains, but he had said that partly because he thought there might be and partly because he wanted to see Jade's reaction. She agreed only on

the condition that she might introduce him to the flowers. How absurd to imagine Jade introducing Ricardo to flowers as if the flowers might introduce themselves back. No, no, the flowers could not speak. It is unfortunate, though, because if they could, they would say: test me, test me, test me.

Jade never had a first date like that, really. Ricardo bringing her into his laboratory where he was boss. In fact, that is what he called himself--boss. He bragged that he hardly had to do any work. He showed Jade his scientific writing which took her many tries to understand, science, having a language of its own. His awards fascinated her most; they covered his walls; there were so many of them that he had stopped hanging them up. She realized, I have met someone far too important to be in flesh.

Misery, Lust, Company

by Alexis Luna

Valentine's Day; 2005

As the plane touched ground at Sacramento International Airport I looked down at my Betsey Johnson pink leopard print dress and smiled. My gaze traveled down pink fishnet covered legs and ended at the six-inch pink Patricia Field stilettos which adorned my feet. My aching feet. I had had these shoes on for nearly 12 hours; since the idea for this trip entered my mind; since I had impulsively decided I absolutely had to travel across country. My baby needed me. I would run the three thousand miles which separated Kunda and myself had I not just earned the money for my nearly \$500 plane ticket. Even on Jet Blue, a same day purchase is not too reasonable.

While the plane was taxiing towards the gate my cell vibrated against my thigh and the caller i.d. read, "Unknown". I thought it was Mr. X, my other boyfriend, other wise known as the drug dealer I was leeching off of for money and a place to live. When I answered I was surprised to hear Kunda's baritone voice.

"Where are you?" He exclaimed loudly.

"I'm at the airport; my plane just landed," I could not contain my immense happiness at being in the same city as him, although my grin faltered at his next comment.

"Attiba is outside waiting for you."

"Where are you," since bipolar is such a lovely affliction, my exuberance immediately turned to delible apprehension and two other emotions, familiar when dealing with Mukunda– intense anger and disappointment. After a long silence I asked a question I already knew the answer to. "Are you drunk?" Moments of hesitation

flowed through the wireless network which was enabling us to speak. Again, I asked, "You knew I was coming, how could you get too drunk to come pick me up from the airport?" Although my voice started off strong and pissed throughout, the sentence it rose and quivered with clear evidence that I was now on the verge of tears. I held the phone away from my ear and stared out the window at the tarmac. I sighed and leaned back into my chair, the same time the other passengers scrambled up and into the aisle. I was now in no hurry to disembark. Hopelessness engulfed me. And a bit of hypocrisy to.

"Alexis," Kunda pleaded at me through the phone, "just go meet Attiba, he did me a huge favor by going all the way out there to get you."

I silently gathered my belongings and limped off the plane. The pink felt letters on my green t-shirt read, "R is for Rad", earlier in the day it seemed to perfectly and profoundly express my mood. Now nothing seemed very radical; it just seemed so tragically predictable.

Interrupting my depreciating reverie, Kunda begged me to get in the car with my ride and said we would see each other soon. "That's not the point, Kunda. The point is..." holding back tears, keeping in mind I had on intricate eye makeup, "the point is, I just traveled three thousand miles to see you- to help you, and you couldn't even stay sober for one day. One fucking day. I'm going to get right back on a plane to New York." With this last statement I closed my eyes and raised them towards the ceiling in a futile attempt to keep my tearing eyes from overflowing.

"What are you coming off of by the way?" he asked, too knowingly.

"Nothing!" Rudely escaped from my lips as I remembered standing in a bathroom at JFK crushing up 60 mg of Adderall on top of the toilet paper dispenser using my NYU ID card, and then a rolled up receipt to snort the pink powder up my nose. The whole while, a cleaning lady was wiping off the front of the stall door; we made

eye contact, mine were downcast, hers— knowing. 'Fuck,' I thought to myself, then I thought, 'I'm sure I'm not the only one who's snorted drugs in this airport bathroom. Still, slightly ashamed, I waited until she left before I exited the stall. I spent the next hour so high I talked up a storm to anyone who would listen. I was obviously high.

"I'm not coming off of anything, Kunda, I'm just upset." I was too embarrassed to admit to him that I had gotten dressed up just to see him at the airport. I had dreams of jumping on his six foot, four inch body, wrapping my legs around his waist and passionately kissing his rose bud mouth. It seems nothing with Kunda ever goes right, no matter how hard both of us try. "Fine, I fucking sniffed Adderall in the airport before my plane took off."

"Ya, you seem a little moody," replied my love.

"Anyone would be pissed, it's NOT the Adderall." Then I hung up the phone and went to claim my baggage.

The ride home was uneventful, save for a comment made by Attiba, which consisted of him informing me Kunda wanted me to pick up beer for him.

The car pulled in to Arbor Oaks off of Watt Avenue, the complex which had previously held housing for the families which comprised the McClellan Air force base. Each second the car careened forward my anger melted off and a grin returned at the thought of seeing Kunda. As the car made a right onto Chippewa Way, I saw my baby standing underneath the carport smoking a Newport with a wide smile on his unshaven face. I pretended to be angry; but only for a second, then I was able to forget my annoyance at his lack of control concerning alcohol, and only remembered how much I had missed him the past month while we were apart.

I jumped out of the car and he held his arms outstretched, waiting for me. He picked me up and our mouths pressed against each others, soft at first, then harder. Finally ending when Kunda bit my

lower lip, put me down, and said, "Hey baby. I missed you." I could tell he was drunk, although I hoped some of his happiness was due to my arrival. Somehow, after doing this with him for eight years, I still could not be sure. No sooner than I had opened up my mouth to return the greeting, Kunda opened his. "Now go inside and let me talk to Attiba," he said with an exaggerated tone absolutely overfilled with authority.

"Okay, Kunda," I answered looking deep into his eyes and smiling. He smiled back, flashing a glance of naughtiness at me, then blowing me a kiss as I turned away.

No one gets me going like Mukunda.. I walked inside, suffering in my heels for aesthetic purposes only. As I started to unpack, I was surrounded by the most profound sense of happiness, and of fulfillment, that I have only ever known with Kunda. I heard Attiba's car leaving and I quickly abandoned my unpacking duties and stood perfectly placed in front of the door. As the knob turned I made sure not one pale pink chiffon strip was out of place; that the right amount of thigh was showing between the folds of my dress.

The door opened slowly, and Kunda's hand wrapped around the golden doorknob appeared first from outside. One of his broad shoulders was next, followed by his beautiful face that shone with a gleaming smile. We stood there like that for a second- then I was falling against a wall and Kunda was leaning against me softly saying he wanted my shirt off. We both half-pulled half-ripped it over my head, revealing the low-cut top of my dress. Kunda leaned over and began kissing the tops of my breasts and cupping the bottoms, in his hands. I placed one hand on the back of his head, rubbing it against shortly cropped, dark hair; the other hand I laid on his chest. I was always shocked at how big Kunda had grown. I smiled at the thought of him as a langlely seventeen year old, scared of my best friend.

It turned me on that Kunda was so big, it made him seem so sexy to me for some reason; although he has always been sexy to me. I felt hands running up the insides of my thighs. "Take these off,"

whispered Kunda, then he desperately added, "take everything off." Kunda carried me into my little sister's room, gently placed me on the bed, took his clothes off and laid on top of me. I started to cry, just being so happy to be touching him. Too little in so long. I sighed and turned my head away, but he held my head to his chest and said, "Don't get all sweet now," he taunted in a deep voice, "I know how you like it." At that I laughed, he did to.

Later that night I made a valiant attempt at throwing out all the alcohol in the house. There was only one Smirnoff Ice left for me to drain.

Kunda has a thing with movies. He thinks he is a critic, and he feels as though he has a psychic connection not only to the protagonists portrayed in the film, but also to knowing which films are destined for the right people. He had decided before hand that I had to watch *The Last Samurai*. This was his new favorite feature, such that Tom Cruise plays an alcoholic in a historical fiction movie. Two of my dorky lover's favorite things. Since I'm sensitive to Kunda's feelings regarding cinema, I didn't have the heart to tell him that I thought it sucked. Instead I feel asleep, softly cradled in Kunda Moonshine's arms.

Friday Number One

That week I played a very unlikely role. I was a housewife. I made Kunda breakfast with coffee, packed a lunch, and cooked him dinner. Everyday. I did his laundry and cleaned up the bathroom after his shower. When Friday arrived Kunda claimed he was going to do something he had seldom done for me in the past. Take me out to dinner.

The day dawned with the two of us making love in the shower. Then we rushed around since we both had to be out of the house by nine. In the bedroom as I was putting on another Betsey creation, I eyed Kunda, tightening a tie around his neck. The week had passed by uneventful- with very little alcohol or pills between the two of us. Although one morning I woke up to find Mukunda drinking watered

down mint extract.

"You're going to pick me up at Natalie's tonight, right?" I asked, hesitantly. He answered in the affirmative, smacked my ass, and ran out the front door, leaving me behind him in a daze.

Natalie and I spent the day returning various items to Target, Home Depot, and Walgreens. After potato platters at Cornerstone downtown, we ended up at her house. I hated to have to admit it; especially out loud, but Kunda's entire situation was upsetting me—and sobriety was only adding to the strain. During a walk to Starbucks, Natalie tried to suggest other things to be happy about besides getting high. Certain days I'm positive there isn't anything else. Our walk ended with a stop at a liqueur store where Natalie purchased a six pack of Mike's Hard Lemonade for my sorrows to drown in.

Around 6:47 that evening I was still a little buzzed, and I realized Kunda wasn't coming. I know Kunda, and if he is a minute late, he's three hours late. No in between, like so many aspects of our relationship. Natalie's fianc   Alex tried to make me feel better, saying, "He wouldn't just leave you hanging would he?" Natalie and I looked at each other, then I looked down and nodded yes. I knew he had been drinking and that's why he was late. Or why he wasn't coming in other words. The Emergency Contraceptive I had swallowed the previous day was wreaking havoc on my emotions, but I managed not to cry. I suppose if something happens too many times, you simply learn to accept it. Honestly, I didn't believe for one second the entire day that he would pick me up and take me out to dinner as so innocently planned.

I sat on Natalie's porch, listening to my friends console me from every corner of the country through my LG phone. A little past eight, the beeping alert of a new call jabbed into my ear drum, and as I lowered the phone from the side of my head to in front of my eyes, an unfamiliar 916 area code incessantly flashed before their glassy surfaces. "It's him," I told Dania, then said goodbye to her, braced myself, and answered the phone.

"Don't be mad," I could hear his large grin through the phone, and didn't like how he was close to laughter at my inaudible, yet noticeable, frustration.

"Are you drinking?"

"A few beers," he answered dismissively. I didn't know if, or how, to bring up my little excursion with Mike only a few hours earlier, so I didn't. I didn't have the problem with drinking, only Kunda, and my Dad. Which is why I'm sure I'm so forgiving; while at the same time, it should be reason enough for me to leave. One tear escaped from my eye, as I wondered why I had come; why I had spent my rent money on a 25 year old, former crack addict, current alcoholic, windshield salesman.

But I reassured myself that he would get better. We both would.

It turned out Kunda was only a few blocks away from Natalie's. She drove me, and on the way there I told her I was going to beat him in the head with my purse. When I stepped out of the car onto the concrete, and stared at his guiltless, drunk face, looming above his friends heads; I no longer wanted to beat him in the head with my purse, I wanted to kill him with it. He did not walk, but sauntered, up to me with the same goofy smile that accompanied all his fuck ups, but this time, when he opened his mouth to utter an apology, he made the mistake of lowering his arms to his side. Leaving his head wide open to my cute silver purse from Andy's Cheepee's on Broadway.

I hit him about three good times before he reached up, grabbed my hair, and tried to fling me onto the ground. His boss jumped in between us, and Natalie hurried out of the car. He dared to stomp away from me and I grabbed on to his bare forearm, which was sticking out of a rolled up blue sleeve, when he turned to look at me, his anger was so fierce and ugly. I decided to kick it up a few notches, and spit on his face. Kunda's my baby though, and not even a millisecond later I had the same disgusting bodily fluid on

me. We were pushing and screaming how much we hate each other, how it was all a mistake, seeing each other again, seeing each other now, seeing each other at all. Some old lady came out and said she was calling the police. I rushed into an alley and walked quickly to a row of garbage cans. I sat behind them and cried.

My uncertainty was endless. Every time we have been together, it always ends up feeling so bad. But other times are so incredibly blissful; I knew it had to get better. My anger had worn off; it was like a massive gas fire, extinguished with a mere piece of cloth. Who was in the wrong? What was I supposed to do? Get stood up and take it? Like so many times before? I don't fucking think so. Alas, violence is never the answer...but it feels so good. Like the sick woman I am, I smiled devilishly to myself and strutted around the corner.

Kunda and I met halfway, keeping a safe distance from each other; like two kittens meeting for the first time– or two pit bulls.

"You don't hit me! I was abused!" As the screams ripped from his throat, his normally almond shaped eyes grew large with rage. His neck muscles bulged, and his fists were clenched at his side. He gave me a demonic look, shook his head and pivoted in the opposite direction.

"I'm the only one who still loves you. The only one," I called out after him. I meant this in two ways. One of course was the manipulative mean way, interpreted to mean he better not leave me because no one else loves him. The other meaning was more of an astonished realization on my part– I am the only one who loves him, who deals with him, no matter what. And he treats me like this. We rush towards each other and I cry, "I came all the way across the country for you; because you said you were lonely, that you needed help," a melodramatic sob crossed my lips, "and you leave me on our only Friday night to go get drunk!"

"Look baby," he began, "I didn't think it was a big deal, you were at Natalies'.

"I got all fucking dressed up for you again you asshole."

"Let's just go to dinner," he grabbed my hand and we walked towards Natalie and his boss.

"See, it's history," Natalie said to Kunda's boss as we approached.

Kunda throws the car keys at me, asking me where I want to go to dinner. I will have none of it. I might have cooled down for a second, but now I was mad.

"Just leave me alone, you drunk fuck," I reply.

"Hey, hey, hey, I thought we were going to dinner?"

"I'm not hungry anymore. You make me sick." At that he got angry.

"Stop the car," I obliged and then he continued, "Get out." I shook my head so he got out and came around to the drivers' side. He opened the door, grabbed my purse and started walking away with it. He put it down on a stairway which led to a second story apartment. I got out walked towards my purse, and saw the car leave out of the corner of my eye. Goddammit, I thought to myself. I began racing towards the direction his black Honda Civic had taken, my silver heels were slamming against concrete, the only sound in this quiet city.

Suddenly Kunda turned the corner, walking. I threw myself on the ground and begun my hysterics. Kunda started yelling at me. I begged him to stop between my sobs, I was afraid the cops were going to come.

"I know, Ms. Two Felonies," he answered, as a car with two pigs in it rolled up on the scene. Kunda spotted the cops and let out a laugh full of disbelief. I immediately envisioned myself going to jail, again.

"Is everything alright out here?" asked one of the pretentious cops.

Oh yeah, I thought, I'm laying on the ground in disarray, Kunda reeks of alcohol and we were both disheveled due to our squabble.

"We're alright, just having a little disagreement," Kunda offered. After assuring themselves that neither of us needed any assistance they drove off. "I'm taking you back to Natalie's. This is ridiculous."

I didn't end up going to Natalie's. We went back to Roberto's where Kunda ordered Round Table Pizza for me. Which I would not eat. He was so mad, and I wasn't anymore, I just wanted things to be alright. In the kitchen he lifted up my dress and pulled my panties off. He started fucking me right there, but when I pulled him into the bedroom to do it gently, he pulled away, picked up his pants, and told me to get out. "And I'm sorry for that, I don't know why I just did that."

I never left, but before the night was over I had sliced my left thigh open and Kunda had drank eighteen beers.

The Two Crack Heads

I opened my eyes to sunlight. And whereas I had gone to sleep alone, I was now laying next to Kunda. I stayed motionless in bed, staring at the back of his head. His neck. His body. I wanted it to work. I knew now, from our two years apart, that I could live without him. But I did not want to. Before I even knew he was awake he said, "I'll be right back," and was up and gone within two minutes. I knew where he was going so I didn't ask. I snuggled into the pink satiny comforter and hoped that, if he was going to drink, at least we could have a good time.

Kunda returns carrying the telltale sign of liqueur stores everywhere. A plain brown bag. Only his was pretty big, and it was only an accessory to the twenty-four pack of Natural Ice Beer he held in his hand. "I don't want to hear anything about it. I wanted to take you out for a nice dinner last night and you made me snap. I had to run around the house keeping knives out of your hands." He opened the bag and took out two Mad Dogs, and a Spark's alcoholic

energy drink.

We sort of mopped around all morning, staying out of each other's way, until our cigarette breaks coincided. "They say I'm no good, 'cuz I'm so hood/ Rich folks do not want me around..." Kunda rapped continuously. I noticed his mood had undeniably perked up when I saw him dancing around the house. Then I realized he had changed his tune. Now he was singing, "I'm gonna get some crizzle," over and over again.

"Kunda, no." I knew him well enough to know he wasn't kidding. "Last time I was here, in January, you said if you ever gave me crack that meant you didn't love me." I waited for some response. Not getting one I added, "Remember?" quietly.

"You don't have to come," he answered as his tall frame moved to the unknown beat in his head.

"Well, you can't drive."

"I don't care, I'll drive," he shot back. We argued back and forth about the crack for a couple of hours. As I was getting dressed to go cop, I wondered at what point did my inability to ever say no to Kunda, hurt him more than it helped him? And what about me? Crack was one of the two drugs I had never done, I wanted it to stay that way. It has such dirty connotations. The phrase, "rock bottom", danced in my head as I struggled to get my arms into my jacket.

Is this, could this be, my rock bottom? "You don't have to do any, homie," Kunda said mockingly when he saw that I really did not want to go to Del Paso Heights.

"I can't not do it if it's in my face!" I shrieked.

"We're gonna get some crizzle, we're gonna get some crizzle," sang Kunda. I didn't even try to argue anymore. A part of me wanted to do it with him. Whereas other people are alcoholics, cocaine addicts, pot heads, ect; I wasn't too picky. Anything to numb the

pain worked fine on me. A part of him wanted me to do it with him too. So he wouldn't feel so lonely.

It was raining and Kunda was bothered by the fact that the streets would be empty. Once in the ghetto, we stopped for gas. I instantly spotted a crackhead, and a second later, Kunda was asking her where to go. The car next to me appeared to be full of meth addicts, and they wouldn't stop looking at me. I was nervous Kunda was going to say something to them and get stabbed, or shot. He looked them up and down, then got in the car with me when they drove away.

"We go to Tractor St. But first, take me to the deli, I gotta get some Pyrex, baby." I obediently pulled into a muddy parking lot and Kunda dashed inside the broken down deli. It's a good thing I have borderline personality disorder and suffer so greatly from disassociation. If I was inside myself right now, I'd be pretty upset. With this trusty mental disorder, I appeared to be present... only on the inside, I could barely pick my own face out of a mirror.

Kunda motioned me to pop the trunk and he placed his purchases inside. It made me sad to see that Kunda was skilled enough in drug use to single handedly create our own glass dick. Tractor St. loomed on the dark horizon and I made a right turn onto it. The streets were empty. The rain had run all the dealers indoors. After slowly driving up and down Tractor street a couple of times, we turned and drove aimlessly around the ghetto.

I took a deep breath and tried to relax, hoping we would come up empty handed. Then Kunda proudly exclaimed, "Who can smell out some rocks, baby," and pointed up ahead at a thugy kid moving quickly down the sidewalk. "Pull over," Kunda commanded. I obliged; while doing so I drove up the sidewalk and scraped the side of the car. "Shit Alexis," he said in what sounded like disgust. That was his parting comment; he was across the street in a second, and him and the suspect crack dealer were strolling along the side of the road together.

Halfway down the block Kunda turned and waved me forward. I had no idea where he wanted me to go, what he wanted me to do, so I drove to the end of the road, turned right down a side street, and parked. Apparently I had done the right thing because my crack head boyfriend soon turned the corner with his new friend. It was raining and I had worn a velvet jacket that was slowly getting ruined while I smoked a Newport. I hated Newports, I enjoy one Newport occasionally, but Kunda smoked them, and since I had no money of my own, I could not beg and choose.

The door opened and Kunda said, "Alexis, this is Sean."

"What's up?", I said and smiled.

"What's up?" As he answered, he slipped into the backseat. He was dressed in an NFL Starter jacket, a blue hooded sweatshirt stuck out of its neck, and baggy jeans. In one hand, he held a discman, and in the other, a Philly cigar.

Kunda jumped in the car next, apologizing for the fact that the inside appeared to have mold growing in it, and asked where we were off to.

I was directed to return to Del Paso Heights and to make a right. The entire time I held my eyes tightly to the road, scared to look at Kunda; scared to admit to myself we were both drug addicts. Kunda and Sean were talking about his plans to leave this place; to join his baby and her mother in Arizona. After making a left and parking in front of run down apartments, Sean jumped out and promised he would be right back. I rolled the window down and began smoking another Newport. The rain continued to stain my jacket.

"We're not supposed to park here, Kunda," I said in an annoyed voice that was meant to hide the fear brewing deep inside me. Within my stomach lay a hard knot, and I would not let myself think about the pathetic predicament I had placed myself in.

"Look, if the cops come, just say we got into a fight and that we

pulled over," Kunda was nervous, I could tell by the stress in his voice.

"No, I'll just say we're looking for crack," I rudely replied, without looking in his direction.

The bottom half of a white and blue Starter jacket, and the top half of baggy jeans appeared in front of the passenger side window. Kunda opened the door and they gave each other the indiscrete handshake, the "no, I'm not taking drugs from this person", hand shake. Whenever I had to do the handshake, I always got paranoid. Like the times I had to go to Jersey City, Grove St. Path Station, to meet my dealer for meth or coke. But watching the handshake between Kunda and Sean, I wasn't paranoid. I was ill.

"Later homie, good luck in Arizona," Kunda said in parting to Sean. To me he said, "I feel bad for black people, the cops always fuck with them, whether or not they sell shit."

"Well, I'm sure we're not improving their situation by coming into the ghetto for crack. If people like us didn't buy it, who would sell it?"

"So, you feel I'm contributing to the problem?"

I rolled my eyes. "How do I get out of here? Where are we going?"

"This is How We Do" by Game came on and Kunda turned it up full blast and started rapping along. He was moving his shoulders to the beat and I couldn't help but smile at him. He looked at me and sang, "I'll give it to you just how you like it, girrrl," I don't know if he was trying to or not, but he always made me laugh. I drove to Arden Way and we decided to go to the Extended Stay hotel right off of 80.

Well, drunk Mukunda's mood had certainly changed. And now that we were out of danger of going to jail, I tried to lighten up. I tried to forget that in a few minutes, we would be on crack. What the hell was I doing? Where was my life going? What had happened to my

baby? Tears welled up in my eyes and obscured my view of him as he stepped inside the doors to pay for our hotel room.

The door to room 605 slammed shut behind me and I stepped inside our crack den and took off my coat.

"If we're going to smoke crack, then we're going to have dirty, nasty sex all night long," I said and smiled suggestively at Kunda. He wasn't even listening, already on the bed stuffing his plastic dick with a piece of Brillo pad.

"Kunda, we don't have to smoke it. It hurts me that you do this," I was pleading with him to no avail.

"You don't have to smoke any," he said, not even looking at me, but gently placing small rocks into one end of the makeshift pipe. He was right, I didn't have to. But if it could help me escape this fucked up reality, and was in front of me, then I was definitely smoking some. I took off all my clothes, except for my thong, and climbed in bed with him.

"Take your clothes off," I commanded.

"No," he said, annoyed that I was distracting him from his current task of heating up the rocks.

"Kunda! Take your fucking clothes off. I want to smoke crack naked. Then have crack head sex. Take your clothes off!" Finally looking at me, he quickly ripped his shirt off, stood up, and pulled his pants off. "You can get hard on this, right?" I asked.

"I don't know. I never had sex on it before."

"Ya, right."

"Okay, but only with prostitutes."

I was shocked. Then he said, "I'm just kidding. Why would I buy

crack, and give it to someone I didn't even know? I love you, baby, that's why we're sharing."

"Yeah, you really love me. You said before, if you gave it to me, that meant you didn't love me," I reminded him yet again. I thought that if I made him feel guilty enough, he would stop, we could throw it away and go home. I should have known, from personal experience, addicts love nothing more than their drugs.

"I want the first hit because I've never done it before."

"No, it's mine, I bought it, I'm taking the first hit," he answered.

"Noooooooooooo!" I wailed. "Me first." I had resigned myself from thinking this could be avoided, and I wanted to "feel it" as soon as possible. So I could stop feeling the heavy feelings of failure at my life, which seemed to be weighing me down. I felt like I couldn't move. Intense defeat engulfed the hotel room; practically tangible. Soon it would be visible as smoke. Soon it would be coming out of my lungs.

"How do I do it?" I asked.

"Just let me go first, and I'll show you," he said. I shook my head and grabbed for the pipe. He deftly kept it out of my hands, for fear some pieces of rock would fall out. "Like this," he demonstrated by putting the empty end of the plastic in his mouth, while holding the other end at a forty-five degree angle with the ceiling. Then he took the lighter and began to light it. I swatted at the lighter, and managed to snatch it out of his hand. With an impatient look, he handed the pipe to me and watched. I mirrored his actions, and as my thumb began applying pressure to the orange button on our lighter, purchased at the deli specially for this crack, he said, "I'm so happy you're doing crack with me, baby."

I ignored his grin and comment, and began turning the pipe back and forth threw the flame. Looking down at the pipe, I watched the smoke coarse through the plastic into my body. I continued to

inhale until I felt I would burst, handed Kunda the pipe, and waited. I held it in for as long as I could as he watched expectantly. Finally I exhaled, and a huge billow of poisonous smoke filled the air.

"Shit Alexis!"

"I don't play around, baby," I said, happy now that I was high. Crack's not that bad, I thought, it's just a drug, like any other drug, it just has low class connotations. And aren't all drugs bad anyway?

As Kunda took his first hit, I fell against the fluffy pillows and pulled the blankets up over me. A calm feeling had passed over my body and I no longer cared about being in a room, smoking crack. That's not true. I still cared. Only now I liked it. I stared at Kunda and didn't see an alcoholic drug addict. I didn't see a college dropout; a homeless man... I saw my soul mate.

He passed the pipe back to me, and I took another hit. He laid his head on my naked shoulder and I stared down at his beautiful face, able to ignore the feelings of despair which lapped at the corners of my mind. I love Kunda, no matter what. I'll never leave him. I'll either end up on the street with him, or end up a famous writer with him. But either way, I'll be with him.

Finally putting the pipe down, he laid on top of me, propping himself up with his elbows. He stared directly into my eyes. "I love you, Kunda."

"I love you too," he answered quietly, and covered my mouth with his. I wrapped my arms around him and gently rubbed my tongue against his. Soon our hands were racing over each other's body, feeling the curves and ripples which were indented in our memories. The love we made was sweet and gentle and slow. He stopped and began to pleasure me. "You know, I've never tried to make another woman feel good. I've never cared about making another woman feel good. Only you. And with you I feel I try so hard."

"You know you make me feel good, Kunda." I sweetly replied.

After more sex and the rest of the crack, the mood changed.

"It wasn't that good," he said, referring to the crack.

"I know, I didn't really feel anything," I claimed.

"Look, Alexis. Look at me," he urged, and encompassed both of my hands with his. "I'll never do this again. I promise. I can't make that promise with alcohol, but I can make it with this. Never again."

"Please don't Kunda, I don't...I didn't.." I couldn't finish my sentence. I was empty, with no words. The high quickly wore off, and the two of us were left to deal with the reality of our situations. I felt bad for Kunda. I was worried about him, I didn't want him to end up like this forever. I still didn't have the courage to worry or care about myself.

"Will you go buy me some alcohol?"

"No," I said, seriously annoyed.

"Fine, I'll go." And he stood up and began getting dressed. I stood up and headed for the bathroom. The hotel room was nice, and two walls in the bathroom were covered with mirrors. I avoided them, and turned on the shower. I was shaking, and sweating from the crack. All I wanted to do was take a hot shower, and burn this day away. As I was carefully selecting shampoo, conditioner, soap, and face wash, the heavy door to the outside world slammed shut, and I knew Kunda was off to another liquor store.

The shower was small, and once inside, there was no escaping the scalding beads of water. Without hesitation, I stepped directly under the shower head, and turned my face up, permitting the water to beat against it. It burned, but I deserved it. Once I was saturated I stepped back against the wall, and slipped down, almost falling, to the floor. I laid down inside the small shower in a fetal position. My

skin was red, I wanted to cry, but the tears would not come. Too exhausted to even wash, I just laid there, until I heard pounding on the bathroom door.

"What?" I managed to utter. I suppose it wasn't loud enough because the pounding continued. "I'm okay," I yelled. The pounding stopped, I turned off the water, and wrapped a towel around my hair, and one around my body. The bathroom was foggy and hot. As I opened the door, cool air bombarded me, shocking me back to reality. Kunda was on the bed, shirt off, drinking a green Mad Dog.

"Come drink with me," he ordered.

"You know I don't drink," I responded. "I hate drinking, it doesn't taste good, and I either don't feel it, or I get completely wasted, and end up with tattoo's on my ass." Kunda held his hand out towards me, and I moved closer to the bed and to take it.

"I'm sorry, Alexis. I really am. I'm sorry about everything."

"It's okay. I love you. You'll get better, we both will."

"Please drink with me; I'll feel less like an alcoholic and more like a social drinker," he prodded, again, this time with a huge smile on his face. Not being able to resist him, I held my hand out for the Mad Dog. I took a small sip and grimaced.

"Don't be a baby, just chug it," he urged. I tried to comply, tilted my head back, and let the liquid flow into my mouth and down my throat. "That's it, baby, good job." Silence filled the room and after the green Mad Dog, he opened up a red one.

"I used to have potential," he began, "I was a prodigy, really."

"I know baby, I remember," I knew this was the beginning of another drunk monologue.

"I was so smart. Everyone thought I was going to do such great

things... And look at me. I'm a failure."

"Don't say that. You're only 25. You've had the most shitty life of anyone. You can still do great things, you just have to pull yourself together," I climbed onto his lap, placed a hand on each side of his face, and gently kissed him.

Pulling away, he continued, "I was supposed to go to a good college. I wanted to teach; make math fun for people. I had a gift. Now look at me— I have no vocabulary. I fucked my brain up for good with drugs."

"That isn't true. You're drunk all the fucking time! How do you expect to regain your intelligence through this fog of alcoholism?"

"No! I'm done, it's all over. I fucked up, there's no going back. I hate drinking, I hate it. But I can't stop. I don't know how. I have too much anxiety about life. I can't make it through a day without feeling like everyone's staring at me, talking about me."

"You're so egocentric," I tried joking with him, but the distant look in his eyes told me he could not be reached.

"I'm never going to be anything Alexis. I had a chance, I did. A good one, and I blew it. I blew it up my nose, I swallowed it in the form of a pill, and I drank it. I can't stop. I'm scared. I'm scared I'm going to die, I'm scared I'm always going to be homeless. I have no one. Everyone left me."

"I'm here," I said, softly, to him. It hurt me that he constantly complained of having no one. When I have been there since he was seventeen, and planned on staying there. Always.

"You still have a chance, you have a degree from NYU. You have a chance, I don't." He took another gigantic swig from the bottle and nestled himself deeper into the blankets on the bed. "You're going to get published. I don't have time anymore for fake compliments. I'm serious. But not me, not anymore. I could've been a writer too, I

wanted to. But not now. Now, I'm nothing." Then he looked deep into my eyes and said, "If I kill myself, will you write about me? If my story can help just one person, I want it to. Please promise you'll write about me."

"Kunda! Don't fucking say you're going to kill yourself! How could you do that to me? Do you think I could deal with that?" Then, either since I was drunk, or simply because the thought of living without him was too much, I began to quietly sob.

"Baby, baby, no. Don't cry. I'm sorry, I won't kill myself. But I worry about you doing it too." He turned my wrist upwards and traced the long, deep, scar on my wrist. He kissed it, and I took his hand, and turned his arm so his forearm was facing me. I kissed his self-inflicted cigarette burns. Then we kissed each other.

After drinking more Mad Dog, I wandered my drunken self into the bathroom. This time, I looked directly into my own eyes, staring back at me from the mirror. I was naked and holding a bottle in my left hand, and a cigarette in my right. I plopped down on the closed toilet seat, mere inches away from my reflection, and took a deep drag from my Newport. I leaned my head back on the wall and took a long swig from the bottle. All the while staring at my reflection. Wondering, who is this person? It is hard for me to put a face to my thoughts, my actions. Crying, I looked around the room for comfort. For glass that could be broken, could be used to cut skin. Because that is the only way I feel real. To see my skin break and pull apart from itself. To see the blood run out from underneath the broken skin. Then I was real. Then my pain became tangible. I finished the bottle and slammed it against the sink, trying to break it, to make the shards useful. It was too thick, and it would have to be slammed much harder against the counter.

I raised my arm high above my head and was ready to use all my force to break the bottle, when Kunda's hand grabbed my own. "Stop," he said. "Don't do it, it doesn't help you."

"Drinking doesn't help you, but you do it," I answered spitefully.

"And I have to watch you do it! You won't fucking stop!" Then I dropped the empty bottle and ran from the bathroom. "I hate you sometimes!"

"I can't stop, I don't know what to do!" he yelled back.

"How did this happen? How did we get like this?" I sobbed. He came towards me and I pushed him away, he moved back a few steps, almost bumping his head against a low outcrop in the ceiling.

"Don't fucking touch me like that!" He was screaming at me, I was screaming at him, he threatened to pour the contents of his third Mad Dog on my head and I pushed him again, this time his head did hit the ceiling. He rushed towards me and grabbed me by the hair. Then he slammed my head down onto the bed. I went limp and fell to the floor, crying.

This is so dysfunctional, so unhealthy. I didn't know what to do. So I got up and started getting dressed, "I'm leaving. I don't need this shit."

"You know I used to get beat, I can't take getting touched, I just snap," he was still yelling at me and I was still crying. "You're not going anywhere, you're not taking my car."

"Fine, I'll walk."

"Alexis! Stop!" Then he came towards me.

"Get the fuck away from me!"

"Fine, go back to New York, go back to your man. Your man who pimps you." I rolled my eyes and continued getting dressed, trying not to look at Kunda, trying not to think about how deeply I loved him.

"Look, let's just go, I don't wanna be here."

"I paid for this room, we're staying here."

"I'm not staying in this shit hole for another second."

Friday Number Two

The week passed uneventfully, and Kunda actually attempted to stop drinking. He succeeded for a few days. Then it was Friday again. Kunda called me from work and said he wanted to take me out to dinner. I thought he sounded a little too happy to be sober.

Turns out I was right. As soon as he picked me up, he got out of the car and told me to drive.

"Have you been drinking?"

"I had a few beers," he answered.

"Why?"

"I have to be relaxed at work. I'm on the phone all day talking to people, I have to be calm."

I did not answer, but rolled my eyes and took my seat behind the wheel.

"I wanna go to Garcia's," I said in a rude tone of voice.

"No, I'm not going to Citrus Heights. We'll go somewhere in Roseville."

"I thought you were taking me out to dinner? Doesn't that mean I get to pick the place?"

"Are you paying?"

"Fuck you, Kunda."

"Don't start with me, I had a good day, I wanna take you out to

dinner, I wanna do something nice for you. Can you please just drive to Roseville?"

"No. And you only had a good day because you're drinking again, and you don't wanna do anything nice for me. You want to take me where you wanna eat, you wanna remind me you're paying."

Once in Roseville, my mood had only gotten worse. "Where do you wanna go? PF Chang? TGIF's? Mexican food?" he asked.

"No, no, no."

"If you're going to be difficult, I can drop you back off and I'll go out by myself."

"I hate all these places. There isn't anywhere nice to eat dinner here. I wanted to go to Garcia's."

"Look, this isn't New York. I'm sorry, there's no little Vietnamese restaurant, or Thai places, or French places. You're in Sacramento, deal with it."

Kunda decided on TGIF's, and I was in the midst of a violent mood swing. I was pissed. Pissed I had dressed up to see him, in yet another Betsey Johnson dress. Pissed I had carefully cut off the feet of my black fishnets for him. Had decided on silver flats. Had put on burgundy eyeshadow. He didn't care. Didn't give a fuck. Once inside the gaudy establishment, I wanted to order a margarita, to take the edge off per say; and came to the realization I had forgotten my I.D. This pissed me off way more than it should have, and I got up and stormed out of the restaurant.

I waited at the car for about half an hour. Finally Kunda appeared, strutting in my direction. "What was that little outburst for?" he asked. "Are you just determined for us to have a shitty night?"

"I guess if we're in shitty Sacramento, we're gonna have a shitty night."

"Well I'm never living in New York."

"Fine." Then, my next words came as a surprise to both of us. "Let's get some coke."

"You're gonna make me do drugs?" He asked in a stupefied voice. "You know coke is bad for me."

"But crack's not?"

"I said sorry about last weekend."

"Okay, I'm sorry about tonight. I want some fucking coke. And not a little bit, I want a lot, at least an eight-ball."

"No, I'm not spending my whole paycheck on coke."

"Only because you wanna spend it all on alcohol." He gave me a dirty look and sped past the Galleria mall.

"I fucking own Sacramento," he yelled out the window. We pulled up alongside an SUV full of wanna be thugs. "I fucking own this town, people give me respect," he continued yelling.

"Shut up," I said, "You're so fucking annoying sometimes."

"Oh sweetie, you're just a ray of sunshine," he replied, rolled his eyes, and laughed. "You want fucking coke? I'll get you some."

We drove to the spot, apartments off of Walerga in Antelope. He got out, went to the trunk, and returned with a 24 ounce can of Natural Ice Beer. "Look, Alexis, I'm just trying to make you happy. I got my hair cut today and I spent the whole time talking to the lady about how much I love you; how I just wanna make you happy and I can't."

"I'm sorry if I hate myself and nothing makes me happy. It's not you. It's me."

"I still bug out that we're together. A troll like me with a beautiful woman like you," he held his hand out and rubbed the side of my face, played with my hair. "You're so beautiful. The most beautiful woman I've ever seen. You know, every girl I've ever gone out with, I measure up to you. And I've never found another woman who even comes close to your beauty or intelligence."

I turned in the car seat and looked at him. He was slumped over in his seat, his right hand on my face, his left holding the beer. I hated it- that I loved him. Hated it that the two years we were apart I thought of him every day. Every song was about us, every movie documented our lives. I despised the holiday season, for with it came memories of past holiday seasons when we were together; and fantasies of future seasons spent with one another. Every Thanksgiving I dreamed about cooking dinner for him, being with him.

"I'm sorry you're not happy. I'm not happy either, but I know I love you. And I just want it to work," he whispered.

"Just hurry and go get it, I don't wanna sit here too long."

With that, he tilted his head back and let the remainder of the beer flow down his throat. Then he was gone, disappearing into the numerous walkways connecting the apartments to each other.

I played our theme song, Joy Division's "Love Will Tear us Apart," and smoked another disgusting Newport. Love will definitely tear us apart again. I hoped not though. It seemed that our love for each other, was just as destructive as our hatred for ourselves. But I hoped it wouldn't always be that way. We were once happy. Parties at my mother's house were considered "bad", now, there was nothing we wouldn't do. To escape.

Everyone thought we were bad together. The drugs, alcohol. But it was worse being alone. Doing drugs alone. Escaping from myself, by myself. At least Kunda understood. At least I was with someone

who loved me, and whom I loved.

His tall figure appeared in the rear view mirror, and I started the car. He got in with a look of disappointment on his face and I exclaimed, "What happened?"

He was silent for a moment, and I worried our attempt at getting drugged had failed. Then he smiled and said, "I got it, baby. Don't worry, Daddy got you the candy."

I threw my head back and laughed at his comment. After discussing the best place to inhale the powder, we decided a side street near Lone Oak Park would be best. While I was driving there I made sure he had a CD case and my NYU I.D. in his hands. That way, as soon as we stopped, I could begin crushing up the coke.

After parking, he took a plastic bag out of his sock and handed it to me. Carefully examining the contents, I happily noticed the powder was not white, but slightly beige. "Right on, it's good shit," I said to Kunda.

"Aw, my little cokehead girlfriend, how sweet," he gave me a feigned look of love. I poured out the powder, ignoring him when he said not to pour it all out.

"It's only a gram, Kunda." I pressed the powder between the CD case and my i.d. card until all the lumps were out, and divided it up into two fat lines.

"You wanna blow it all at once? Shouldn't we save some?"

"Naw, do you wanna get fucked up or not?" I teased. "Don't be a pussy."

"Fine, I'm going first, you always take the biggest line for yourself." Kunda rolled up a dollar bill and sniffed the coke up his nose, in plain sight of anyone who was nearby. Then he handed it to me and I expertly snorted the entire line— half a gram, up my nose all at

once. "Way to go, champ," said Kunda. "What do you want to do? I don't think we should drive."

"Let's go to the park," I suggested. We got out of the car and Kunda threw the CD case and bill down a drain in the side of the street. We joined hands and walked to the park. I gagged as the drip ran down my throat, feeling for a second that I was going to be sick. The feeling passed and all of the sudden everything became more vibrant. The grass, greener, the stars, brighter.

"Shit!" cried Kunda. "Have you got the drip yet? It's hella gross."

"I just got mine; I almost threw up." I looked around again and said, "awesome," for no reason at all. Finally, I was happy.

We arrived at some benches and sat down. Kunda sat on top of the table, his feet resting on the bench. I sat on the bench, between his legs. "Do you remember the first time I did coke?" he asked. "You brought an eight-ball home from New York, and we did it all night."

I laughed and said, "Do you remember how little your dick got?"

"Ha, ha, ha," he answered, sarcastically. "I try and forget that part."

"It looked like a turtle, with it's head pulled back in it's shell!" I couldn't stop laughing. I was shaking all over and everything seemed so hilarious.

"Come with me into the bathroom," Kunda began, "I have to show you something." Once in the bathroom he ordered me to stand facing the wall. He got behind me, lifted up my skirt and began eating me out.

"Kunda! What are you doing?" I laughed.

"Hey, don't laugh if you ever want me to do this again," he replied. Then he jumped up right as someone entered the bathroom. We walked out and spotted some police cars patrolling the exterior of

the premises. We decided it would be best to leave, but didn't want to drive, so we walked to the deli, got a six-pack of Mike's Hard Cranberry, and traveled to Dudley elementary school. We hid in the back, behind the playground and drank and made love, with me on top of him. After a few hours the coke had worn off. Kunda used my phone to call the dealer- he was out. But he offered us a good deal on e, so we decided to take him up on it.

We spent the rest of the night tripping.

The Messages on my VoiceMail.

I wake as the plane leaves air and slams against pavement. I sit up, pull open the window and see snow. Quite a contrast from the beautiful Northern California weather; New York City was a cold island filled with snow. Matching my mood appropriately. I close my eyes and picture Kunda, wondering if he was still sleeping; wincing inside while remembering our last day.

He had taken the day off work and the fighting started immediately. He didn't want me to go. Back to New York, to the city and man who he imagined had stole me away. I tried to console him, tried to make him believe this was all temporary. I was only living with Mr. X because I had no other place to go. Soon I would get out. I'd get a job, who knows where I'll be in a month? I tried to tell him. Maybe we would be together. He grew increasingly distraught and increased his alcohol intake. This, although he refused to believe it, only fueled our fighting.

Soon he wanted money. Money for cocaine. I didn't argue. Fuck it, I thought. He wanted to put up the title of his car for a loan. It was illegal. Then he turned towards me and asked how much my ring had cost. It was a beautiful ring. In Kunda's Christian opinion; it was demonic. It was a custom made 18 karat gold skull, surrounded by wings, with diamonds crafted into eyes. I loved it. It was \$900, I answered. And off to the Pawn Shops we drove. We let it go for only \$40. And although he promised he would buy it back for me; I wasn't holding my breath.

The coke was fabulous. I threw up mere milliseconds after inhaling. But Kunda wouldn't stop drinking. I felt I had nothing to say since I was snorting coke and thus did little to discourage him. I had to bum a ride to the airport. Once there, I drank up a storm at Capital City Brewery and passed out waiting for the plane.

I drove through Queens, down the Van Wyck Expressway, to my apartment. My own little version of hell. As I pulled up Mr. X was out front waiting for me. I felt ill.

Mr. X payed the driver and without offering to help me with my bags, walked into the apartment. The tension was tangible. I went to bed. And there I remained for two days. The jet lag, the trip, drugging myself, it had all taken a lot out of me. Immediately upon awaking, I checked my voicemail, not sure if Kunda would call. His recorded voice greeted me, "Call me tonight if you ain't gonna call me no more," he sounded tired and scared. "Call me in the morning if you ain't gonna talk to me anymore. I just want to know what's going on," his second message said.

I dialed his number. "Hello?"

"Kunda, it's me."

"So, you're done? You're done with me? You come here, ruin my life, and now you're not going to talk to me?" He sounded sick with sadness.

"No baby, not at all. I was tired, I've been sleeping."

"Look Alexis, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for drinking, I'm sorry for everything."

"I'm sorry too. For being so difficult."

"I don't know what do to with myself, Alexis," he cried. "I'm such an alcoholic."

"Well, do you think you're the only one with problems?"

"No, you just don't admit yours." I ignored the comment, we said our 'I love you's, and I went back to bed.

The next day I went to my shrink appointment. I got a prescription for Adderall, went home and took four. Four times my actual dosage. Then I took four Xanax and begged Mr. X to smoke a blunt with me. We had been sleeping in different rooms and our contact was limited to me needing money and him telling me how much he despised me. Although he didn't use that word, it was too big for him. I spent the night watching TV and making an ass out of myself on the phone to who ever would listen. Finally, I got in touch with Kunda.

"Feeling pretty good?" he asked.

"Yeah," I giggled.

"You're so fucking stupid, Alexis," he yelled. I was shocked.

"What is your problem?" I slurred.

"You're noticeably fucked up. Got your Adderall today, huh?"

"And then some," I answered, trying to annoy him.

"I don't wanna talk to you right now," he started, but I cut him off.

"Oh, so I have to listen to you when you're drunk but I take a few pills and we can't talk?"

"What are you doing to yourself?" he asked, then hung up on me.

Left by myself, holding a dead phone, I wondered. Shit. I have a drug problem. I'm not sure why I chose that exact moment to admit to myself that I was an addict, but the gravity of the situation

shocked me. For years, for years I've had a drug problem. I realized it a year ago, after I woke up from a two year sleep, that I had a problem with Xanax, but I stopped taking it every day and since then I figured I was fine. But it wasn't just xanax, it was any drug. All drugs. Any substance that could be abused; I abused it. Like father like daughter. Like mother like daughter. Goddammit!

I was so high off the Adderall that night that I opened a G-mail account for Kunda and filled it with my interpretations of Sleater Kinney songs regarding feminism, what it's like to be girl, and my undying love for him. I was still up at 10 in the morning when he called me. It was another Friday, and by that time in the morning I was starting to come down.

"Hello," I answered.

"You still high?" He asked.

"What do you wanna hear?"

"The truth," he said.

"You can't handle the truth," I joked. This pissed him off. "Just kidding, I don't know if I'm high. I'm awake, but that could just be my bipolarity flaring up."

"Yeah? Are you rapidly cycling out of control?"

I laughed at him. "You spin me right round baby right round, like a record baby round round round round," I sang to him.

"Shut up with your 80's shit."

"You looked so cute when you danced at Pyramid," I said, referring to one of the times Kunda had visited me in New York.

"Yeah, that was really cool, my jacket got stolen," he said, forever a pessimist. Then he said, "Get some sleep, I'm going to work, to pick

up my paycheck. I'll call you later."

"I love you."

"Love you to, bye." And he was gone. I didn't fall asleep all day, but whereas normally I would take a xanax, I refused to. I was a drug addict. I was not a "partier", a "crack-head" (well, maybe), a "dopper", or anything cute. I was an addict. Shit, how did this happen? I sniffed some coke when I was 18, all of the sudden I'm 24? What the hell was going on? At first it was recreational. But only for awhile. I started every weekend, all weekend, then that moved to a couple of weeks on and off. Soon it was a month straight I'd been using. Then I hooked up with Dr. Feelgood and I was intoxicated for 2 years. This last year I have been doing good- not perfect, and ya, the past two weeks were bad, but before that I was doing all right. Let me think...March of last year; wait! May of last year I was in prison for meth and assault, so it hadn't been a year yet. Ok, I did good for six months... Fuck. I was still a drug addict. But now I will stop. Except for weed. Weed is not a drug; it's an herb. I could practically have a prescription if I lived in Cali.

I spent the day crying and connecting as I watched the E True Hollywood Story about Judy Garland. She was a speed freak in the morning and a dooper at night. Just like me. I feel asleep, although all day I was aware that Kunda never called me back. And when I called he was not there.

The room was dark when I opened my eyes, the clock showed seven something. And no phone ring. My reactions to the most mundane events are skewed to their most dramatic conclusions; false or real, and my anxiety drives me insane! Every little thing, so important. It's extremely tiring. I realized my phone had a missed call.

"Hey Baby, I got my job back. I decided I was going to walk back in here and take care of business. So you can call me back at 1-800-912-4144. Thanks, look forward to hearing from you," Kunda's voice rang out in obvious drunkenness.

Great, I thought. This is going to be hard. Yes, this is what we've been talking about. Us getting sober, me getting un-crazy, and us being together. This is going to be hard. But I can do it. I'm 24 years old, I need to get my shit together. I was serious about being done with pills, coke, e, dust, crack, meth, LSD, k, mescaline, salvia, whippets, what ever else should go there, I can't remember... I was serious. I'll still smoke weed socially; which meant every day for me, but I considered this attempt at sobriety very seriously. Kunda had mentioned going back into the program, and this I was, at first, not very happy about. I felt Sacramento Valley Teen Challenge was a cult. Kunda felt he had been saved and that this would cure him. I told him it was trading one addiction for another. But this night I decided I would stop that. I would try. I was scared for him to go. Scared he would come out a totally different person. I mean, he would just be a Christian. The thought sounded sour to me. That is so different from me. What if he wanted a nice Christian girl? What if the taunts of Jezebel and Satania stuck with me, and when he got out I seemed vile?

I can't object to this, if it can make him better. I was terrified of myself but happy that I would do it alone. No AA or in-house rehabilitations for me. Fuck that. Those are for people who are weak. I may be an addict, and I may have poor impulse control, but I will not relinquish control over my actions to a "higher power". That is so obviously weak. Kunda would say, "Believing one's self-reliant is a curse from the Devil. Meant to keep men out of God's reach." Ugh, I can't take that crap. I can't do it. Where were we headed? So different? Was I fooling myself thinking the old Kunda would shine through. Not addict Kunda, or saved Kunda; but my Kunda. The Kunda only I know; and have known for the past eight years.

I have a problem with living in the present. I know this. I'm not happy so I have to either return to a time when I was happy, or daydream about a time when I will be happy. I escape the current reality with substances. Remaining inebriated I was able to never face reality. That has to stop. It will. It stopped.

Mr. X called me into the living room and asked if I wanted to smoke a blunt. It's Friday night, I thought. Smoking a blunt seemed alright. As long as I didn't shove a million pills down my throat, or sniff any powders, I would be alright.

Mr. X and I smoked up and I played on my computer, and watched TV. Soon it was past 10. I found my phone in my jacket pocket on vibrate, and saw I had nine missed calls and seven messages. I was not the only one in the relationship with severe separation anxiety issues.

"Call me if you're not fucking your man, peace," was the first message.

"Your man loves you now? He gives you weed now? Fuck you Alexis, fuck you. I'm going into the program and that's it. I'm not talking to you, I don't care if you call here or not, peace," he was definitely in the process of getting fucked up.

"Answer! Why won't you answer?! Fuck you, you fucking slut! Go smoke weed with your man. I don't care. I don't care if I never make it anywhere (burp) I'm going to kill myself (burp). Don't call back. Fuck you."

Message number four rang out in my ear, "You fucking bitch, I should go out and fuck fucking broads since you're fucking your man. Call my mom's house in half an hour I'll be there. Bye, fucking slut, fucking whore."

"Not gonna call me back huh? Fuck you, fuck you fuck you, you fucking slut. Fuck your man, tell him you were manic tell him you were on too many pills you do what you gotta do. You didn't fucking call me back. FUCK YOU, get high, get drugged, whatever I'm never fucking talking to you again."

Shit, is that what I sounded like? In a strange and sick way the messages were comforting. Kunda, in his inebriated state, was distraught over me not answering. That must mean he really loved

me, because that is how I react when I can't get in touch with him. Or when I used to not be able to. Well I wasn't about to call his mother's house. Fuck that bitch. Just then my phone vibrated in my hand. The familiar phone number popped up. I answered.

"Hello Kunda," I began.

"Did you have fun fucking your man?"

"I didn't fuck anyone."

"I KNOW YOU DID! You fucked him ten days before you got here, you think I'm stupid? You think I don't know you're fucking him?" In the background I could hear his mother telling him not to speak like that in her house. God forbid foul language in her house.

"Baby, I swear, I'm never fucking any one else besides you again. I only want you forever." I didn't know what else to say. I wish he knew how I felt about him. How he made me feel. I wish I new the converse for my own sanity.

"I'm going home, I'll call you then," and our conversation ended. When he got home he was even more belligerent. He said something about wishing I was pregnant so I would never be able to leave him.

It was Monday morning. I'd been sober for five days and today was Kunda's first day in the program. We spent the morning on the phone; talking about how different we were both going to be in a year, even in thirty days. He talked about being a Christian for real; loving his wife and children above all else, being a good person. When we talked about no premarital sex, I said, "Ten years is a long time to wait for sex."

"Ten years? I was thinking we'd get married within the year at least," Kunda replied. The smile that that comment brought to my face was not a smile; but a face splitting chasm. I even giggled. I love Kunda

because he made me feel so fucking good inside.

"Do you really feel that way?" I asked.

"How can you not know?" he replied.

Marilyn

by Stephanie Nolasco

My mother's hands were sticky with her warm sweat as she tightly clung to my needle-like fingers. I panted loudly while our footsteps thumped on every piece on concrete we stepped on. Visa was already sending her collection notices but somehow, my mother was suddenly able to obtain all \$800 to pay up. The morning sun glimmered on my eyes as we walked on a breezy, Saturday morning. Finally, we reached Inwood Post Office, a gigantic building with sloppy cherry-red paint smeared onto the once beige bricks. According to my mother, the post office was just four blocks down from our apartment on Academy Street, but my ankles were throbbing from the pain of staggering a thousand miles. Yet, I would never realized how this simple trip to Inwood Post Office, would actually become my Caucasian soul-search.

Although the post office was huge on the exterior, the inside was not. The inside was diminutive, with grubby ivory color that was coated with gray powder. Saturday mornings always greeted with soft, blowing winds during springtime in the city. Yet inside this disbursement dungeon, only two miniature fans blew on one direction, nowhere touching me. My baby-blue t-shirt was already sticking against my back and I pouted in frustration. Mom said this trip would be short, but how was that ever possible when there was over a million people on line ahead of us? Oh how I wished someone could save me from such boredom. God, are you there? It's me, a very annoyed child. Please send over some entertainment, a flash of lightening, rain of cats and dogs, free flying dolls, anything, will ya?

"Mom, can we leave now?" I questioned, while holding my hands together in prayer, squinting my little brown ovals in her direction. She looked down at me, saying nothing, but instead, pointing towards her black leather belt. I stayed quiet. Every now and then,

some obese whale would push behind me with her lumpy pounds of flesh hidden under a multihued, flowery dress. Despite the swarm of people who had last minute bills to pay, like my mother, with the exception of having absolutely no manners, I saw her within the distance. There she was, the glamour queen staring back at me. My tiny mouth expanded as I gawked in awe. She just never stopped looking at me and I couldn't stop falling into her deep cerulean eyes.

I let go of my mother's hand and walked towards the lightly dusted painting. The portrait was similar to a stamp, only 8 times as wide, maybe even more. At that moment, it didn't matter how big that stamp was. Indeed, she was untouchable, soaring above the cracked frame that confined her. Perhaps, it was just merely my miniature height. The woman continued to stare, her coral red lips exposing squared pearls for teeth. A russet-brown mole lay slightly above her lip, not far from her flaring nostrils, as if she was holding onto her breath. However, it was I that was holding my own breath in wonder. None of my Barbie's was as striking, even with their heads in place. Her eyes, continuing to stare at me, were hidden by extensive, black eyelashes, resembling the fragile wings of an English sparrow. Her bullion locks shimmered like morning sun rays, reflecting her curvaceous figure. From the inches of her petite neck, going down to her arms and large bosoms, shimmered and glittered from twinkling specks of gold. She was beautiful, to say the least, and she seemed confident enough to forever stay still within the same position. She flaunted her splendor towards me, luring me within her gaze. I looked up above her golden crown of hair to read the white, loopy description. "Mmmm . Moorlyn... Mmm...Maryln Mor...Mor, Mor, Mor, Mouse! Marlyn Mouse!" I yelled in excitement, believing that I could read her odd name. I giggled in delight. What a funny name! Seconds later, I heard hefty footstep and suddenly, the cartilage of my left ear snapped. My mother's hand, now firm and stinging, grasped my ear, pulling further away from my skull with all her might. I howled in dismay, not knowing why I was being punished for worshipping my new goddess, my iconic figure. People behind us stared attentively at the spectacle my mom presented in swiftly tearing soft skin apart from its tender

bone. One red-hair boy in front looked straight at me and gleefully giggled. "I'm done with my errands, no thanks to you for misbehaving." My mother sneered, continuing to pull my ear forward. Tears swelled my eyes and I continued crying. I glanced back at Marlyn Mouse and followed my mother outside the post office. After finally releasing her grip, the chilly breeze soothed my blazing, throbbing ears.

We walked back to our apartment on Academy Street. My mother wasted no time in figuring out why her misbehaving daughter was gaping at some overly-done white cracker.

"What were you looking at anyway?" She questioned.

"Um, her name is Marlyn Mouse...I think." I responded.

"What kind of name is that?" My mom questioned again, while smirking.

"I dunno, that's what I read," my voice quivered, hoping she would run about her business and leave me in peace.

"Her name isn't Marlyn Mouse silly, it's Marilyn Monroe." My mom reacted, accentuating each syllable on the last two words. How silly of me, how stupid of me! Why was I foolish enough, with horrendous Dominican accent and all, attempted to pronounce Marilyn's name wrong. No wonder that annoying red-haired prick laughed at me! Anyone would have laughed at some Third-World stick figure, trying to speak in an unfamiliar language. I stood quiet, my cheeks transforming into a light pink. I was embarrassed for such an awful mistake.

"Oh." I answered quietly.

"She was an actress from the old times in Hollywood. She died a long time ago." She firmly stated.

My mouth opened in shocked. Dead?! How could someone so

beautiful, so amazing, so attractive, so everything...be dead? I mean, I just met her, for crying out loud! How could I have met someone whom I will never even see again? How will I know who she is? Where she came from? How she keeps so golden? What was her favorite Barbie? How could I find all the answers to my questions when she...was dead? I didn't understand why she was somehow so important to me. Marilyn was merely a photograph of a woman that I would never meet. I would had continued asking my mother more and more questions, but she seemed annoyed enough for having such a disobedient daughter run off to a portrait of a dead woman at the post office.

After reaching my pastel-pink room, I turned on the television, hoping I could catch up with the halftime Saturday morning cartoons I already missed. Since commercials were on, my fat little feet ran towards the kitchen, serving myself a salad bowl filled with Coco Puffs and four tablespoons worth of skim milk, the only milk my mother would purchase. Walking back to the bedroom, my hands held tightly to the edges of the porcelain bowl. Ay dios mio, (Oh my God) commercials were still on? Attempting to find my remote control, the peach tinted bowl I held collapsed down to the ivory tiles. The explosion of shattering ceramic echoed, piercing the insides of my already-bruised ears. The floor was now a liquid jumble, with chocolate elliptical Coco Puffs rolling in every direction possible within the room. Surely enough, there was the remote control, underneath the ruins. One triangular shaped portion of the bowl pressed against the "change" button, making the channels change in fast-paced motion. My attention was now lured to the crystal screen, not the catastrophe of spilled milk and escaping chocolate. This will be the only time in my life where chocolate would easily escape from me.

The channels kept changing into a never-ending swirl of images. Brazilian boys playing soccer, a man revealing his infidelity on "Maury," New York 1 News, a bombing in Indonesia, a naked couple humping on a flat mattress, dogs running on dewy grass, Marilyn Monroe, Marilyn Monroe, Marilyn Monroe.

The channels stopped changing on American Movies Classics, number 54. She was alive! There she was, I knew my mother was wrong! Not only was she alive, but she moves, speaks, giggles...she giggles like me! Marilyn Monroe was walking along New York City, saying things I couldn't comprehend. God, why was I the only girl in all of America that couldn't speak English? If I could speak English, I could hear what Marilyn was saying. Maybe she was saying her address, inviting me to visit her and prove to both my mother and me that she's indeed alive and well. Constantly grinning, she seemed like the ideal neighbor, who would invite you for tea and cookies. Smiling, her pallid dress flew in the air, whirling along with the wind. There was Marilyn, an enchanted heavenly fairy, floating within a New York evening, untainted by those who stared or smirked. Marilyn wasn't embarrassed at all! Here was I, complaining how plump people would stare at me for talking out loud at the post office and here she was, without a care in the world, exposing lacy panties! Of course, what woman wouldn't show off slender, bruise-less legs, unlike mine, short chop sticks with wine-red blemishes and elongated scratches? Oh Lord, what was she saying! Was Marilyn exposing the secrets to releasing yourself to the world, without a care of people's expectations, doing whatever your heart desired for the sole purpose of being happy and free? Was she calling out for me? Demanding for my presence, desiring to make stick-figured non-English speaking girls like me, into life-sized Barbie's that all would desire? How could I, be like Marilyn? How could I be as beautiful and have my own picture hanging on some building. Where was the ambrosia Marilyn hid from everyone that would transform little girls into goddesses, forever making them beautiful and American?

The television screen turned black and Marilyn vanished from sight. A thunderous, bursting noise immediately punctured the silence. My face jiggled, my eyes widened in shock. More salty tears dripped, trickling down to my nostrils. My left cheek reddened and burned, while my lip oozed from lukewarm blood. My mom walked in front of me, glaring at my fragile figure. "Pick up the fucking mess you made." She scorned. "I'll be preparing lunch. When I'm done, this floor better be whiter than chalk." My mother thudded

away to the kitchen and tears continued to drip on the drying crust of broken skin. Only Spanish girls like me get slapped and spanked for simple things, such as dropping a bowl by accident. It was an accident, for crying out loud! Why couldn't I become a true American, like Marilyn Monroe and speak English? Maybe my mother would treat me the same way white mothers treat their daughters. They ever get hit for little mistakes they make. Their mothers take them to museums, rather than post office trips, prepare them cheeseburgers and fries for lunch, not wild rice with kidney beans and fried plantains. White girls had golden blonde hair, glimmering blue eyes, just like my Barbie's, just like Marilyn. If Spanish girls were equally beautiful, then Marilyn would have similar features matching my own appearance, such as dark hair or lightly tanned skin. Yet, I am not fine-looking, like these girls. I have dark features, unfit for a wannabe American chick, like me. I have waist-length long brown hair, wide matching coffee toned eyes and sun-kissed skin. Nothing like the goddess I yearned to be. Nothing like an American girl.

I bend down to pick up the shattered pieces of the bowl, along with milk-soaked Coco Puffs, now mushy and cold. My fingers touched the droplets of milk, forming into a pale half shaped moon. My fingertips encircled the half moon, soaking my loose cuticles. While doing so, I viewed at my arm, observing how tanned, how dark, how dirty it was. No matter how much I bathed, I could never erase the dark features, which tinted my skin. My fingers rubbed along the suppleness of my skin, hoping that maybe, the whiteness of milk could slowly erase my bronzed impurities. If I became white, then maybe I can speak English, without sounding muffled and jarring. My features would match my dolls and I can be as perfect as them. I could be like Marilyn, always smiling and illuminated by her Hollywood-blessed traits. Of course, my skin tone remained the same, and the mess was still waiting to be cleaned. Deciding to have some sort of entertainment while I washed the floor, I turned the television back on.

Marilyn was on the screen, this time, her pale body lying within layers of bubbles in a white tub. Her lips, still lustrous and red,

formed into a smile, as she giggled and curled a lock of loose hair with her soft pink finger. Her toes, an orange-red, wiggled along the waters that hid her slim, feminine body. Again she spoke, but unfamiliar with English, I just couldn't comprehend what she was whispering to me. I sulked in wretchedness, realizing that no matter how hard I hired the television screen, how closely I paid attention, how carefully I followed her lips, my limited understanding of English would never translate the sacred secrets of being alluring, of being white, of being Marilyn. My curiosity couldn't take it any more. If I couldn't walk up to Marilyn herself and ask her the secrets of being someone like her, an American, then I would have to detect what was she saying on television. After finally cleaning the filthy tiles, I walked towards the book shelf, merely inches away from the television screen. "Ingles Sin Barreras" (English without Borders) was still enclosed within its plastic case. Maybe if I glance at the undiscovered pages, I could easily comprehend English. Then, I can translate what Marilyn was saying on television. Hooray for me!

I scrambled to reach the book, but my 4'9 stature was too diminutive for snatching the book with ease. After jumping about five times, my hands grasped for the book and the plastic ripped. My legs crossed as I began to sit and turn the pages, observing each printed word printed onto the pages. For a brief moment, I forgot the television screen was on and instead, focus on the bolded terms that translated to familiar phrases. Now, how was I supposed to know what Marilyn was saying, if the first lesson was how to say hello and goodbye? Time cannot be wasted, the film would so end and Marilyn would disappear again. My hands scrambled throughout the pages, until a chapter on common sentences was posted. Observing each sentence, I wondered if any of these matched with what Marilyn was saying on screen. At the bottom of page 85, section 62, a single sentence was bolded and underline. It stated, "It's all make-believe isn't it?" Once I read it's translation in Spanish, my mind jumbled in understanding what is the book exactly talking about? What does this sentence exactly mean? How could everything possibly be make believe? Was this some sort of teaser question? Am I make-believe because I am not like the other American girls? Is Marilyn Monroe make-believe

because she was supposedly dead, but somehow giggling and smiling on screen? Was my mother in a make-believe world, thinking that little girls would enjoy trips to post offices, and not museums or Hollywood? Perhaps, there was no purpose in learning such a complex language with various forms of pronouncing strange words that somehow never made sense to me. It was just too hard to learn this language, so why bother? Maybe I should just accept myself for who I am, a dark skinned American with no understanding of English. I wasn't beautiful because I wasn't white. I just wasn't Marilyn Monroe, the golden goddess who exemplified all the womanly traits I desired to inherit. Perhaps, Marilyn was telling me that, despite whom I was, my Spanish traits can never leave me. I can only be a Hispanic American, a blend of exotic charm and undiscovered knowledge of being a New Yorker, not a glamorous Caucasian. As my mother thumped closer to my bedroom, Marilyn waved from the screen, her body reaching forward from her crème window. The television faded into darkness.

This Place Off the Coast of America

by Matthew Joseph Missetich

The two of them started sinking around dawn, though neither realized their actual descent until noontime, when the sun no longer cast shadows across the deck of the vessel, and a glaring halo of white encircled the sky. Mr. Hollis first noticed a tilt in the Pacific horizon, a shift in balance between the bow and the stern, and assumed his often-times trembling legs had little to do with the fact he couldn't stand erect. Something terrible had happened.

"You see this?" he said to his assistant. "This doesn't seem right." The yacht groaned. "I'm sure this doesn't seem right. Does it?"

Mr. Hollis' personal aide peered out the cabin's window and immediately became disorientated, which passed once he confirmed their sobering state of affairs.

"No, Mr. Hollis. Seems like we got a leak."

"A leak," Mr. Hollis said, more of a frustrated statement than a question. "Well, now, you fix it."

His assistant frowned and unlocked a cabinet beneath the wine refrigerator. "Might not be that easy."

A scraping emanated against the walls, followed by the sound of splintering fiberglass. Mr. Hollis leaned on his aide's shoulder for support, and the aide pulled a lifejacket out of the compartment.

"Put this on," he said in a hushed whisper, as if not to disturb the dying craft.

"But, son, I—"

The assistant stepped outside the cabin before Mr. Hollis could

decline to wear the awkward contraption. Six inches of water had flooded through a gaping hole near the bow. The assistant tried to scoop out puddles with an empty decanter, but it was of no use—the boat was fading fast.

“How?” Mr. Hollis muttered. “Christ’s sake, what caused it?”

Shaking his head, worried and perplexed, the aide approached the hole, stared deep into its seemingly bottomless pit, and saw a rusted metal bar poking out.

He nodded. Aware.

“Caught up on something, Mr. Hollis. Something buried under the water, maybe.”

Mr. Hollis worked up the courage to exit the cabin, albeit reluctant to expose himself in the now dangerous open air.

“You think it’s something underneath—?”

“Oh, hell,” the assistant said. “Ain’t that a bitch. Look.”

He gestured above them in disappointment. At some point during their weekend jaunt, a rusted, six-inch-thick steel flagpole had snapped at the base and thrust itself through the already weak wooden floor. Mr. Hollis and his aide could credit the minor squall they encountered late the night before. The result: a five-foot-by-seven-foot crack in what was once a grand and luxurious personal cruiser—at least, it was 20 years ago when Mr. Hollis had the money to afford the flagrant, prefabricated eyesore, nicknamed The Capricornia.

“Oh,” Mr. Hollis said. “That’s not very good, is it?”

“No . . . I’ll call in our coordinates to the coast guard—”

Mr. Hollis held him back with a frail 70-year-old arm. “That won’t

do you any good, boy. I left our little radio on-deck.”

The assistant shut his eyes, and when he opened them, he saw Mr. Hollis peering down The Capricornia’s fissure, despondent.

“I was just hoping,” Mr. Hollis began, his voice marked with a sympathetic and unhappy lilt. “That we wouldn’t be interrupted. That we would have a day”

They stood in silence for a few seconds, both acknowledging to themselves that they needed to take the initiative and hurry, find a lifeboat stowed away somewhere, gather up rations for a potential overnight stay in the middle of nowhere, mend the boat’s tear. Anything but wait for the deep to swallow them whole. But Mr. Hollis knew just as well that he hadn’t prepared for a disaster, that there were no flares or phones or form of salvation onboard, besides the outdated lifejacket he still held like a child in his arms.

“We should have heard that, Mr. Hollis. Last night when we were sleeping. Coulda mended her then and there.”

Mr. Hollis turned his back to the hole (it was staring at him, he was sure of it), and focused instead on the western skyline. Another storm was headed their way, and this was no trivial cluster of rain clouds. A tempest was brewing.

“That’s another one,” Mr. Hollis said. “Isn’t it, boy? Another storm?”

“Looks like.”

“A hurricane, maybe.”

“. . . no, Mr. Hollis. We don’t get hurricanes in California—”

“A tsunami, then!”

The aide turned to his employer and smirked in spite of their

situation. “I don’t think you know exactly what a tsunami is, sir, but no. Not that either. Just a mean ol’ storm. From the looks of it.”

“Yes, well, you go by your looks. I’ll say there’s more than that, all right.”

“Gotta hold out on the chance the coast guard’ll find us. Won’t be no one else out here. Not with the weather like it is. Just us two fools.”

Mr. Hollis nodded, solemn.

“So let’s see if we can’t get that leak plugged.”

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Over the course of forty minutes, Mr. Hollis and his assistant discovered the following: the engine was inoperable, the deck’s puncture could not be repaired by whatever means or materials available, and, most importantly for Mr. Hollis, his entire 12-bottle inventory of syrah and malbec had shattered to pieces due to the ever-tilting Capricornia. Witnessing the damage firsthand, he attempted to compensate for this loss by shoving the remainder of his valuables—petty cash, watches, jewelry, and other things—into a safe he stored behind the yacht’s sole king-sized bed. He wrapped his lifejacket around the metal case and made certain nothing would weigh it down should the boat fall under.

Regardless of his aide’s contention that the 70-pound safe was too heavy to stay afloat with a half-inflated Chinese lifejacket manufactured in 1979, Mr. Hollis tried.

“Without trying,” Mr. Hollis had said years ago. “One cannot know if one can succeed. If one can be.”

The assistant peeled broken planks from the deck, and Mr. Hollis rambled on about the past and the burgeoning future. As a pianist,

he had made millions in the 1980s and the first three years of the nineties in his home town of Crestwood Harbor. He profited from the dot-com boom, the bull market, and the sales of high-yield goods, guns and the like, to overseas clients. He was a rich man that lived richer, a man that saw light at the end of every dark tunnel.

“The year 2000,” he said while the aide tied together rotting wood to form a makeshift raft that wouldn’t connect properly. “It will mean big things for this country. It means the end of the working-class and the age of the elite, where everyone will be rich.”

The winds had picked up significantly as the warm afternoon waned into a cool evening, and it became difficult to hear Mr. Hollis speak over the lapping waves and the caw of wayward seagulls.

“It will be a wonderful time, son. For America, you see.”

They couldn’t detect the bow of the boat twisting deeper into the water.

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At 5:00 sharp, they dined on truffles, Gouda cheese and crackers, and downed the leftover champagne and chardonnay. No sense letting everything go to waste, Mr. Hollis thought.

Afterward, both agreed that they had never consumed a more satisfying meal.

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They talked.

“Son,” Mr. Hollis said, pointing his furrowed chin toward the aide. “Where is it you’d like to live? If you could live anywhere.”

“Anywhere . . . I dunno, Crestwood Harbor’s nice—”

“No, no, no. Besides the obvious.”

The assistant wiped his forehead and propped his legs out of the watery mess. Not even the most able seamen could stop the bleeding.

“I’d like to live off the mainland,” the assistant said. “My own personal, private island. You know what I mean? Maybe get aides for myself.”

He exhaled and tilted his body against the cabin’s window, where the intruding Pacific chill had fogged the glass.

“There’s a place just like that, too,” he continued, his eyes trained on Mr. Hollis. He could see his reflection in his employer’s bifocals. “This little island up north, way past Santa Rosa and the Channels[1]. Nice weather, no one around for miles . . . just you and God in this place off the coast of America.” He laughed to himself. “Ain’t that somethin’, Mr. Hollis? That something like that could stick around all this time?”

Perhaps moved by the aide’s honesty, Mr. Hollis nodded, solemn and fully conscious of his surroundings.

“How about you, Mr. Hollis? If you had gotten into the senate way back when.”

The old man forced a grin and patted the side of The Capricornia, just as she began to roll to her side.

They couldn’t help but notice this new perspective, and the assistant prayed.

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The late winter’s haze finally rolled in, making the odds of rescue that night invariably worse. Mr. Hollis hung on to the railing of the

cruiser, which in seconds would reach a perfect 90-degree angle.

“Will it be cold?” Mr. Hollis asked.

His assistant nodded.

“How long can we last in there without . . . ?”

“A while, sir. I wouldn’t worry too much about that. Stayin’ afloat’s the problem.”

Mr. Hollis shifted his grip. He could see what was left of the yacht’s flag—a shredded red, white, and blue cloth that no longer resembled what it once was—lying atop the sea. He knew it would never sink. It was weightless, and he wished he was weightless, too.

“Don’t you worry. Someone’ll come in the morning and find us. We’ll be wet and maybe beaten up a little. Hungry as a dog, too, I’ll bet. But it’ll be just fine.”

The yacht pointed up to the ivory sky, and the two men, pulled down by the mass below, slipped simultaneously and dropped into the water. Ripples gave the surface a temporary wrinkle, and then all was silent. And peaceful.

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The aide swam to the top first, followed by Mr. Hollis.

“I—I can’t stay up, boy.”

“Just tread water. You know how to tread water. Like when you were a kid in your pool. You had a pool, I’m sure.”

Mr. Hollis took a mouthful of water and lost his glasses. He searched for some kind of physical support, but found nothing except the blurry image of his assistant.

And he realized.

“I didn’t tell her why I went,” he said, pronounced, dipping beneath the surface and up again. “She’ll never know why I went.”

“Don’t you go and talk like that now, Mr. Hollis—”

“Please This is no time for formalities, Micah.”

And for a moment, Micah believed him.

“Yes, sir, Kenneth.”

For a fleeting moment—

— — —

The storm ravished the Pacific. Rain fell, and then more rain, so much that it was like two oceans stacked atop one another.

Kenneth refused to fight the affliction. He had fought long enough. The storm burned his pale skin, and he imagined the water would soothe him. Seconds after The Capricornia disappeared in the void, Kenneth would lose his battle.

“Kenneth!” Micah pleaded.

Unable to physically suspend himself, Micah, a dark, obscure shadow in a rampant gale, dove headfirst into blackness.

— — —

Underneath, in an even murkier ocean, Micah witnessed Kenneth plunge faster than the yacht, which hung above them, deteriorating miserably. The steel strongbox tore through the bottom of the derelict ship and descended, life preserver included, atop Kenneth’s head, knocking him into a state of lethargy and ejecting his last

lungful of air. A dull veil of blood streamed to the surface. In haste, he thrashed about to catch up, but lost his sense of direction.

Micah, realizing Kenneth's final few moments of distress, willingly accepted the inevitable and embraced his former employer, a mass of weightlessness, in his arms. Their fingers interlocked—closed tight, tight together—and their lips met to share a tepid breath that was one in the same. And then, with refracted sunlight shimmering through the flag above, they surrendered to the supremacy of the sea.

Ceremony

by Melissa Sweat

Somehow I had made it to the ocean. It was 8 a.m. I rolled up my jeans to dip my toes in the water, but got wet up to my knees.

It always happens that way.

The scent of the sea reminded me of the beaches back home. The smells are pretty much the same: rank, rotting seaweed carcasses, metallic, salty breezes. But it's still so different here, no matter how much I try to convince myself otherwise. Something in the climate, the pretense of clear skies as the smog looms at my back. The littered beach cordoned by concrete strands and parking lots. This place unsteadies me like the tides. I want to drink the whole ocean up like tonic water...

That morning I left Lana's house like a thief. Quietly tying my shoelaces, I took one more look at the sleeping body curled up on the blue, wine-stained couch. He had early morning stubble and his face was red and puffy. He was a stranger to me now.

I finished with my shoes and remembered something I had forgot. "Have you been hiking or something?" the body had smartly remarked as he struggled to untie my double-knotted New Balances. "Yeah," I replied, and took off my bra to help him...

I'd been all over town last night, haunting buses, staring at strangers, trying to piece something together, this city? me? I was heading home when my phone rang. Lana's boyfriend had cheated on her, so of course, I had to meet her for a drink. I hopped on the 1 toward Santa Monica where I met Lana and two of her guy friends at Renee's. I thought their names were Tom and Colin, but they weren't. One drink led to two, three, then we bought a cheap case of beer at 7-11 and soon we were at Lana's playing drinking games till we couldn't count our cards anymore and nothing mattered...

And now I'm all wet and sandy, with a headache.

Last night, I'd planned to go home to a healthy evening, resolved to start over, a ceremony I'd repeated many times before. But my plans laid crumpled and tossed. I thought of the note I left on my pillow yesterday: "Do 20 push ups and 100 sit ups. You can do it!" a benign smiley face drawn beneath.

I put on my shoes to head home, and as I left the beach I couldn't help but laugh. I knew I'd be back here again.

Current Affairs in Brasilia

by Polaire Kiume

Complicated life of images, sensations, fetishes and lies.
Pomosexuality featuring shiny restrictive things and sleek black
guns. In pictures. Digital transmission, sexual. No STDs.

Pretty pouty pink lips and black stockings. Bruises, hinted at.
Spotched with blood drawn with a large gauge syringe. Writing on
paper I'll cut up later and place in a mixed media work along with a
photo transfer on polymer clay and copper. Circuit board.

Bar code tattoos and pierced lips.

Essential oil in an amulet around your neck, replacement
pheromones. Lavender over musk. Ylang ylang fantasies. Smelling a
perfume once worn by an old lover, flashing on the memory.
Wearing it like a sweater, savouring the imagery over the idol.

Watching you on video, online, your personal life cam 24/7. So
beautiful to see you sleep. Chatting with you for hours about
nothing, about images, art and photos found and shared and
discussed. Saved and cropped and turned into avatars. Your eyes,
never wavering from the screen.

I was going to meet you, at a Con, sometime next year. I hoped. It
was what I lived toward. We didn't live in the same cities and I could
only plan to be together in the flesh. But it didn't matter. We had
text and video and mp3s. Ours was a modern edge.

Ours was the future.