

*Thirst For Fire*

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# Prophet

## by Craig Terlson

"It's gonna thunder, it's gonna rain, we're gonna get hit and the queen's gonna talk."

The way the words tumble out of the guy's mouth, I can't tell if he's drunk or some kind of barroom wizard. He holds up a shaky finger and points at the yellowed portrait of Elizabeth that hangs, tilted, against the dark paneled wall. I look up from my pool cue and give the guy a look.

"C'mon shoot," Sammy slurs.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what? Just shoot." His voice oozes boredom.

I pot the pink. Sammy ambles over to the pocket, takes out the ball like he's grabbing a gopher turd, and puts it on the spot.

"I'm going to take a piss."

Watching my buddy leave, I look over at the bar prophet. I knew his name was Harry and the barmaid across from him was Mary. Since Sammy and me started coming to the Legion about a month ago, Mary's been perched across from Harry. She fills his glass like one of those dunking birds you get at the drugstore.

I call over to the bar. "Hey Harry... are you serious?"

Mary stops wiping the counter and looks across to the pool table. She and Harry are only about ten feet away. I can see her eyes, and I know what she's thinking: here's this punk-ass snotty kid going to hassle the veteran. She's probably thinking that because that's what Sammy would do -- and Mary lumps me together with Sammy like

we came out of the same womb or something. She only learned our names last week. But she doesn't know me. For one thing, I'm not like Sammy. I tell her that with my raised left eyebrow. She goes back to wiping.

"What did you mean?" I call over to Harry while I'm chalking up.

"Leave him be, John."

"Jones," I say.

Harry holds up his glass. Mary tosses in a couple of cubes and splashes rye into the tumbler. I'm thinking about tumbling words and tumblers full of whiskey when I say, "Kiss the red in the corner," even though I know no one's listening.

"It's gonna thunder, it's gonna rain, we're gonna -- "

"We know, Harry," Mary cuts him off.

He ignores her and keeps going, "... get hit and the queen's gonna talk."

I stroke the cue and look up to see him raise a nicotine-stained finger. The ball rattles the pocket. I set my stick down, roll it against the edge and walk over to Mary. I order another Pilsner. Mary looks like she's about to say something, until I fire her my "give me a break" look. I know she still thinks I'm a punk-ass. It's not that Sammy and me want to be accepted here -- we're the wrong age and the only war we've ever seen was at the movies. We come here because the snooker table's always empty and the beer is cheap.

I sit in the empty stool next to Harry. Harry looks like he's pushing seventy. His chin has that sunken in look that means when he came to the Legion the dentures stayed home.

"You think that's really going to happen?"

Harry doesn't look at me. He holds his glass of rye up to the fluorescents. I look at the reflections with him. He rotates it, shakes the ice, turns his head and spits on the floor.

"Hey, I said none of that," Mary yells.

Harry drains the glass, looks at me and nods.

A couple of feet over, I hear the whap of cards hitting a table. A cribbage player yells, "Looks like rain, Harry." The table laughs like hell. Sammy's back from the can, a bent cigarette dangles from his lips and a white shirttail sticks out of his fly.

"Jones, you playing or what?"

"Taking a break."

"Fine with me." Sammy still sounds bored. He goes over to be bored by the cribbage players.

Harry's glass has been magically filled again. I take a swig of my Pilsner and slam it down. The foam starts to ooze over the top. I grab the beer, take another swig, and before I set it back, Mary swipes the puddle clean. Damn, how does she do that?

"I bet a lot of your buddies over there think you're nuts," I say to my new pal Harry. "But here's the thing... I don't." I take another swig and try to gauge Harry's reaction to this bombshell. I'm not trying to piss him off -- truth is, I get some crazy ass notions myself. In about fifty years, I'll be the one at the Legion telling everyone it's gonna rain and the freakin' fish shaped ashtrays were going to do loop-de-loops over the shuffleboard table.

Harry just keeps on drinking.

I turn to watch the cribbage players. Their bald heads rise out of a cloud of yellow smoke, giving them all monk haircuts. They snap

the bent cards on the table, and speak in that clipped code.

"Fifteen two, and a pair is four, and there ain't no more."

"I said it's gonna thunder, and it's gonna rain and..."

"Knock it off Harry, we heard the damn weather report already -- not a cloud in the sky."

One of the players says something about thirty and go, and is about to add in another bit, before he slams back in his chair (hell, we all slam back when we see the flash) -- his little red peg flips sky high. The thunder is louder than anything I've ever heard. I'm thinking this place is gonna crack like a farm egg. Sammy, me and the crib players watch the lights flicker. We hear a rush of water smack down on the row of windows opposite the bar.

I watch every head in the place turn toward that bent picture. And then I look myself.

## America's Vice by Scott Fivelson

Hello. I'm the short-but-dashing investigative reporter Journalism Interfero, and this...is America's Vice. Tonight I will be your tour guide through the scary world of illegal drugs.

Who makes them? Who takes them? Who are the tooters? And who are the shooters?

We'll answer these questions by bringing you, the audience at home, closer to the story than you've ever been before. First, by going to the street – yes, the street – to show you a no-holds-barred, live, for-real drug bust. This will not be a simulation. These will not be actors playing parts. You'll be there, with me, feeling the heat, down and dirty, in the belly of the beast. And then, later, for the rest of the story...well, I'll get even closer. The secret world of junkies and pushers, next – after this word from L'Oreal.

L'Oreal...because you're worth it.

I've changed out of my sportcoat and tie, and slicked back my hair. Welcome to the street. Here's where it all begins when you're on the trail of illegal drugs. It's not a pretty place.

The crime. The grime. The very trees – filled with sleaze. In a moment, my small, hand-picked crew and I will follow narcotics officers as they charge through the door and invade the apartment of a known drug dealer.

What's it like to be here – on the street – in the final seconds before a drug bust goes down? Well, I can't speak for the narcs, but from where I sit, the adrenalin is flowing, giving my overworked crew and me back our edge, our eye of the tiger – in short, the kind of natural high the scuzzball addicts we're about to bust will never know. As you can see, the narcotics officers have just drawn their guns.

Here we go.

We're running up the stairs now.

Now we're running down the hall.

If you are prone to motion sickness, do not look at the screen.

We have reached the door of the known drug dealer. To our surprise, the door is wide open. Employing a trick of modern reporting, I stick an old hat on the end of a mike boom, out into the doorway. We still meet no resistance, no hail of bullets.

Something is wrong.

The moment we enter the apartment, diving to the floor, it all becomes clear. The room is empty. The TV is on. The show on the screen: America's Vice. The drug dealer we're busting? Out the window, long gone. As they on the street, I have "been made."

The narcs and I look around, and we agree it's a bad scene. That is, the scene has lacked drama, conflict; the scene doesn't work; it doesn't play.

But just for a moment – using your imagination – think what might have happened.

We crash through the door, and are met by gunfire. An officer goes down. Maybe I catch a slug. Maybe some skinhead throws another chair. But we still make the bust, get a show in the can. I change out of my bloodstained clothes into something a little more comfortable, and I jet over to 20/20, where I show up a minute late to be interviewed and am slapped by Barbara Walters.

It didn't happen... But it could have. Because anything can happen on the street.

We'll take an even closer look at the world of drugs...after this word from Cover Girl cosmetics.

America's look...is Cover Girl.

Hi, and welcome back to America's Vice. Well, we've been to the street. We've felt the heat, and we've heard the beat. But there's another side to the world of drugs, the "inside" story, the one under the surface. The window you're looking through?

A porthole.

The metallic walls around me? A one-man submarine.

The most puzzling question of all: Why do I look even shorter than usual?

I have been miniaturized.

Where am I?

As close to the story as you can get. I am inside the arm of an intravenous drug user.

Yes, using my enormous personal income to subsidize the development of technology only postulated in Innerspace and Honey, I Shrunk the Kids, I've made it possible - tonight - here - live - for you, the audience at home, to become an accidental tourist in a mainliner's vein. That red stuff outside the porthole - that's real blood.

In just a moment, somewhere beyond the Great Barrier, the junkie will put down his cooking spoon, and a needle will invade these tranquil waters. I can feel it... Here it comes!

DIVE! DIVE!

With a deafening whoosh, our ship is suddenly borne along at fantastic speed by the pounding wave apparently directly behind us.

There's too much pressure on the hull!

I'm hearing the beat, and feeling the heat. This is what reporting is about...

(N-O-I-S-E.)

(Silence.)

(Due to technical difficulties, the remainder of America's Vice will not be seen tonight. Here's the part of the story you don't see: the rescue operation – and the resuscitation. But following the emergency rescue of your drowning host from the arm of the intravenous drug user, and a subsequent cold-turkey period at the Betty Ford treatment center, Journalismo Interfera will be back with future specials, on a variety of issues of the day, but with one thing in common: You'll get a good look at America's vice. Good night.)

# The Fool's Story

## by Lonaya Gaston

I e'er tell you 'bout that time Iago wen' to C-Street?

That boy pretty an' he know it. He ain't pretty lak how Roderigo pretty, though. Roderigo got roguish beauty, if there can be sech a thing: well-defined jaw, dark curls, dark eyes, an' kissable dimples adornin' both cheeks.

On the other hand, Iago a pretty boy through and through, what wit his short plat'num blonde locks swirlin' 'round his head, his blue eyes lak a li'l white girl's baby doll, his lips lak an after picture in a plastic surgeon's office, an' his slight, muscled dancer's body.

Though, if'n you ask me, the boy look lak a girl. So it ain't no wonder why Emilia woul'n' eat but a fourth of food on her plate when she met Iago fo' lunch in the student union betwixt classes. The boy prettier than she is.

And then that poor girl had to go home an' share a suite wit size zero Desdemona. As if she needed mo' remindin' she was fat. As if her mammy didn' do enough remindin' e'er'day she was fat, what wit the email attachments of wonderful water-cabbage diets an' links to websites fo' revolutionary fat burnin' supplements. So it didn' really surprise me none when Emilia put her finger down her throat jus' befo' goin' to bed, jus' after gorgin' on a day's worth of calories in twenty minutes.

And why woul'dn' she? E'er time Emilia walked into a bar wit Iago, all eyes immediately wen' to him. E'er time she an' Desdemona wen' to eat in their residence hall cafeteria all heads turn to them flame-curls on Desdemona's head.

So it didn' surprise me none at all when Emilia ended up 'hind closed doors wit Cassio. When he wasn' drinkin' his football

scholarship 'way, that boy was good to her. He was compassionate. He was sweet. He let her cry out her jealousy an' her frustration an' her anger. He recommended a healthy diet, a great workout program an' the Good Food Store. Then that sweet drunk of a boy went an' became a bigger fool than me. He fell in love wit Emilia as her body became sleek an' lissome an'---

Girl, let me stop gossipin' to you 'bout Emilia and Cassio when I'm 'posed to be gossipin' to you 'bout Iago an' that time he wen' to C-Street.

I don' know if the boy really cares one way or the other what people say or think 'bout him. If you ask me, that boy don' care much at all 'bout anythin', 'cept fo' destroyin' what Othello an' Desdemona got wit each other.

None of this proolly wouldn' have happened if people didn' know who Iago was befo' the fact, what with him leadin' the conference in receptions and receivin' yards this year and bein' in that controversial Ambercrombie an' Fitch catalogue spread two years ago, his senior year of high school.

So when he walked into that Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Alliance meetin' back in September, no one was really all that surprised. But jus' the same, no one was quite sho' what to do wit Iago. E'ryone 'ssumed he was comin' out by goin' to that meetin', but he never said sech when the Palm Tree interviewed him 'bout his sexuality. Iago ain't quite say the opposite either, though. He jus' said he only wanted to be true to hisself an' that he was openly supportin' a group of students he had always 'mired and respected fo' they courage in a place where hatred and prejudice and segregation was readily nurtured. He then went on to comment 'bout how politically incorrect universities could be, 'bout how labels unfairly defined students, an' 'bout how college life could accurately imitate the atrocities of the real world.

And no one was really surprised when that boy put on brazil blue eye shadow, brazil blue lipstick, a padded bra, brazil blue crushed

velvet panties, a brazil blue halter top, fishnet stockings, a short, tight li'l brazil blue hoochie-mama skirt an' metallic blue stiletto high heels, then teased those beautiful curls of his so wonderfully gorgeous, and went to C-Street one Thursday night as Savannah Blue.

But when the words fag an pillow-biter was scrawled in near illegible childish script on his locker an' Iago convinced Coach to suspend Othello fo' one game fo' bein' jealous and homophobic, even I was surprised, and I make it my business to know e'rybody else business.

It jus' ain't right fo' someone so wicked to be so pretty.

# Early Lasting Sunlight

## by JJ DeCeglie

He sat alone at Grand Central. The dull light was good to his eyes and the spinning in his head had stopped since he'd sat down. He was going up to 110th street. It was early, he'd left when she was still asleep. Stolen the beer from her fridge. Drank it walking down 33rd, his head aching like a busted bone, eye's rare under broken early sunlight sliding past trees and tenements. Trains had come and gone but he just sat. Looked at the shifting reflection darkly, the movie flicker window reel of himself drinking beer on the sly, reading dying Kerouac, the fatal mirror zoom spool then darkness smack when it had passed.

The suck of the void. He felt ill. Sick. No sleep hardly, a ton of booze, sex he couldn't remember.

People looked at him and he stared back when he could, some of the prettier girls gave him something inside but the rest was nonsense. When he was a kid, home in Fremantle, his mother had come maybe an hour late to pick him up at the station once. He thought about it quickly. He'd watched himself in the window's reflection the whole time he was waiting for her. Like he was doing now. When she finally arrived he started crying and he didn't know why. The sadness in him now he knew was past crying. The sorrow just was. It was there and felt like it always had been.

A schoolgirl sat by him. Smiled. She smelt like soap when he breathed her in. Smiled back. She wanted something. He could tell by the smirk. He felt like jumping in front of the next train but knew he would never let that happen. You got any cigarettes she asked him, he looked at her, nodded barely, didn't speak, said yes with his eyes, made a mark in his book, he reached in his pocket with his right hand, the pack and matches, he lit it in his own mouth, breathed the smoke deep, and then gave it to her, you'd better smoke it in the bathroom he said, she blinked, said yeah, she got

up and he caught the next train, up to 110th, the train made him dizzy, the doc said it was from when he'd been beaten that time in the city, his good buddy writer with him, said the insomnia was from that too, he thought it was from the writing mostly, the scrap with the language, the sadness leaking from the pages into whatever living was, whatever it was supposed to be.

When he came up from under the earth it was raining. The sweet scent of the rain on warm sidewalk didn't smell exactly like it did at home. He wished that it would. Beads of clear water on glass windows and falling off shaken green trees that stand out more in your eyes with grey skies overhead. With the cloud filtered haze. Glare you can see. Flowers and trees brighter and more heady when it rained. He was still drinking beer. He remembered his university back home by the river and the city, how when it rained there he'd always get romantic and suicidal and read alone til he was full, the smell of the fresh wet dirt and flowers, the salty river and old pages of books struck him hard and he would think about where that girl he thought he loved was, who she was with, what she looked like sleeping, or first thing in the morning, with sun cuts through the window slits on her, clean light and blue sky sneaking past wafting curtains.

Did her skin taste like cute salt, her lips and saliva like strawberry bourbon. He was dizzy and sat. On 110th.

He was he here to drink coffee and read in that little place just up the street a few blocks, the girl there at this time had pretty ankles and pretty wrists, clear blue eyes.

Her voice was very soothing and she liked him and he'd imagined sleeping her and wondered what she sounded like in bed. My fucking head won't quit damnit, he couldn't tell whether it was the hangover or if it was from that fight downtown with his writer buddy after the book launch, all the beers and word muck. All the people who could talk writing real well but couldn't write for shit. He tried to avoid a fight but his buddy had started the argument all horrid and had been served up a tidy solid right to the chin then

two knees on his chest and he tried to pull the guy off, tried to end the fists mauling his friends face and eyes first in front then into the street below in dull blunts of sidewalk but he'd been slammed with something not a fist in his head and was on the ground being crashed again and again sharp and hard and it ceased sudden so he got up and pulled the guy off his friend with a vice type headlock choking that throat in the corner of his arm bend with all he had but it was over then and they two quit together with hands to the air, so he let go, wised up to the fight's end, they were both bleeding fast, he and his buddy, his head pumping blood in spurts from an artery cut by the corner of the milk crate they'd used to hammer him with. Spatter pattern on his hand and sleeve held up to it. He remembered being hit four times with it while felled on the cement, his forehead from the force to the back of his skull cracking into the ground once or twice, the cops were there fast, he bleed slickly with sweat sitting against a lamppost with his buddy leaning against him, arms around one another, his shirt drenched cherry and drying hard to his skin, even his jeans blanched blushing with own blood, he looked up at the city bright against the dark of night, no stars in the sky, at the hospital he threw up with concussion, he'd had dizzy sections with nausea ever since.

He remembered his buddy had said the lips on that girl with blonde locks would probably suck your balls right through the eye of your cock. He remembered he said it very loudly. Very deliberately. He remembered that had started the whole dangerous mess.

He drains the first cup of coffee and she pours another straight off cause she was watching him from the counter. Watching him read. He wrote in his notebook at times. Looked out at the rain. He deliberately held her eyes for longer periods so as she would be unsure of him. She was. She wanted to talk to him about things and see what he thought. She would settle for sleeping with him a few times, though she thought they had the potential for much more. She wanted to see what he would be like after they'd finished in bed though. What words he'd form in that time, while they lay together content and warm. She thought he was a writer. Knew he wasn't from around here cause he had that attractive accent. That strange

way of talking which was good cause it was different.

She didn't know he was an all of a sudden big deal over here. That it had been building awhile. That he would rather drink and read and write alone than what they were doing to him. That he thought he may be finished with love, that it was finished with him. He finishes the second cup as fast as the first. She's over again just as quick.

You wanna come to some writing thing with me tonight he asks. She says yeah too fast and regrets it, she wasn't expecting it, I don't know if you know or not but at the minute I'm having some luck, I didn't she said, good, he swigged the coffee she'd poured, cut short his sentence than started back up when done swallowing, well it's at such and such a place at such and such a time and get there early or you won't be able to get drunk with me. She says ok, she knows the joint, says I'll see you there. He gets up, looks back, you're not from New York are you he says as he walks back into the rain, she's flush and smiling say no, neither are you, she hates work now. Just wants to go home and get ready. He walks slowly in the light clear spit, watches the puddles reflect streetlights whilst trembling ripples caused by misty raindrops, he pulls his hood over wet hair, walks, assumes they'll be together tonight, wishes for more than that, she is real loveliness, fine and authentic, her eye's a vivid burn like the blue of a far off planet, honey gold plain hair, she makes me feel what only a few have, makes me blaze with goodness inside, but I'm finished like that, there's nothing left, he thinks I should write some this afternoon, this rain has put me in the place to do it, my eyes and head feel sorta good just now, the beer and coffee helping me along, some clear prose, stark and true. She gives me this every time I see her. The only spot for it is in the library. It was all he could do, there was nothing else. He took the train back to Grand Central, then walked the two blocks west to Fifth Avenue. The rain had stopped, his head felt steady.

He found a place deep in the library. One of solitude where he could smell the delightful must of the books. Where he could feel himself amongst them. With his writing now there was no way out for him,

he'd delved too far, reached the depths, he'd written of the realities he'd been dealt, he felt few had done this, few had the ability, in Fremantle with a girl of his once walking at the wharf as the sun set blood orange against blue black ocean with licks of fire lapping pylons in close and the horizon out deeper, seawater winds, sharing beer bottles, she tried to convince him that his writing these words would kill him, would kill them, that no one wanted to read words like those, that he should just teach and quit his literary ambition, or write some other way, he paid her no attention, he didn't talk writing, she knew that, he asked her to be quiet, to shut up, told her she was prettier with her lips pouted, full and still, she took a long suck of the beer they were sharing, went to speak, didn't, he kissed her eyebrow, watched the sun sink and the ocean go pitch and choppy, so you could hear it more than see it, at the library in New York he missed her so that it was painful for him, like after you'd been suckered in the gut. He wrote from it. Thought you can't fuck them all can ya. You can only try. He wasn't sure of whether he meant women or publishers.

He didn't care.

Before he goes out into the night he reads in the bathtub. Smokes a quality cigar. Sips at bourbon. Early evening with the window open and water balmy. Reads someone trying the short story out, some New Yorker, not getting it right. He throws the book. Breathes the good smoke out through his nose. Picks up Bukowski. Reads and smokes. Looking out the window now, at university girls moving their asses from side to side, laughing or dead serious, he only reads one or two poems, he knows each very well already. With Bukowski that is enough. The cigar in his teeth, never wet, with practice he had become expert at it, blowing fine smoke out the window as the dark of night loomed up, smoke and steam, he rubs his shoulders forceful with his hands, slaps them, pulls his balls out from between his thighs, grabs a towel and dries his hands, takes the cigar from his mouth and places it by the mirror, drowns his face and hair, feels well, strong, the night will be a great one, he stands too quickly, is hit hard with light-headedness, more brutal than he had been on the train, the room spins anti-clockwise

express and he staggers, orange bulb light and mist whirling, has enough sense to step out the bath, though slipping, falling to his knees firmly, then weightless down and dead to the planet, shoulder smack then head, slumped wet and naked, Bukowski saturated and ruined, the other guy safe.

He woke ten minutes later. His ears ringing, head and consciousness there though distant and painful. It was dark now, he noticed it through the window. The neon throb and streetlight warmth. He was cold on the tiles and sat up. He was mostly dry. The dizziness subsiding slowly. He steadied himself as he stood, he could hardly recall what had happened. It took him a few minutes to remember he was in New York. In his own apartment. A writer. Bukowski was on the floor drenched. He walked into his bedroom and lay down naked. He was so tired. Partly ill. He hadn't eaten well all day. He picked up a book by the bed, read the same sentence ten times over and put it down. His head hurt. Fremantle was so far away, and his writing was all he had, all he could give everything he had to, his time was owned by it, he would work at it strongly all his life, find ways for it, he knew that even then, even being where he was. He rubbed his eyes hard. Missed girls who didn't miss him. He fell asleep quickly.

Wakes all sudden to the words I'm gonna die. The dream was him on the plane that hit the second tower, woken just minutes before the monumental hurtle, soaring too fast through sky unsteady and booming into the city limits, the pilots had a visual on the target, he'd been sure he could get control of the plane back and the words I'm gonna die didn't come with the imminent threat of the massive explosion and jet fuel inferno, but rather with the notion clicked that even if he did assume control of the thing and win that scene they'd still crash and die. It would still all end. He didn't even try to decipher it. It was still dark and he felt better now, he's slept maybe ten hours. He showered for a long time. Sat down in the hot rain. Smoked near the window and decided on a vast breakfast of eggs, muffins, toast, hash browns and much coffee. He'd take some Hemingway to read, the new African text. He didn't shave, dressed and threw on a coat and cap, the all night diner was just down the

street near the university buildings. It would be quiet this early. Neat and crisp outside. He couldn't get rid of words that played through his head now though, couldn't dislodge them, they were there with occasional ear buzzing deafness, brief and harsh static in his head, not painful at all, the words said that as far as he could tell nothing had any meaning, repeated clearly, that as far as he could tell nothing had any meaning, he disagreed, for him, writing had much meaning, and he was trying to gain some back with girls, with whatever they and love could offer.

As far as he could tell nothing had any meaning, he ate and read, heard the sentence in his mind, heard it and heard it, in the fluorescent dull light alone reading and eating as the traffic occasionally came by, as wild men walked their dogs in the gloom of not yet morning, him drinking much milky coffee, he wouldn't allow it to convince him, he wouldn't allow that, there was no way, though he knew he had to write from it, he must, it was important that he did, not just for him he reasoned. If he didn't write from it he would lose it and it was an important sentence and shouldn't be lost. He finished up and paid. As far as he could tell nothing had any meaning, walked home, he wrote til noon, nothing had any meaning, read some then, walked and got the paper, had any meaning, read over his work and cut it down, any meaning, rewrote it all and drank some bourbon whilst reading the sport's pages, meaning. His head had been well all day. He should go out tonight. Drink and meet some girls who think they're intelligent enough to fuck writers. He knew that someone he knew would know a place. As far as he could tell nothing had any meaning.

Out that night with others who wrote, some acted, others had paint, a brooding and noisy unit, drunk and sharp miscreant mob most handsome, he was asked questions thick and fast mostly on who he thought could write well, who he aspired to beat, he drank strong bourbon mixes with much ice, they offered him benny but he said politely no, maybe later, a lovely little painter girl commented on the strength in his arms and shoulders, on the cut of his jaw, another girl, a writer with long wheat coloured hair and glasses said she enjoyed his work, said it was very fine writing, stylistic to

himself alone, though the influences were clear, he just listened to her charmingly, drank constantly, not paying for many, attention or drinks, he talked baseball a while to some agent, wished he was talking cricket, as he drank further he felt better, still tried to avoid talking writing, here it was difficult, he praised Faulkner, convinced another guy to find Gutierrez, said read all of Hemingway and Kerouac, search hard for Fante, he bought the petite painter girl some melon vodka and asked her not leave without him, she said of course, we were leaving together from the instant you walked in, he just smiled, walked away to some group passing a bottle of tequila around and throwing around argument on the Russians, he lit a cigar, sat back on a couch, drew in the smoke and breathed it out adding to the cloudy murk of the place with it's thick sinister carpet laid on wood board hollow floors, red and blue lit orbs tinging everything, making faces and eyes evocative, their lips plush with fucking and variations of the act, stipulating that it was so, the painter with her short hair and fringe plastered across her forehead leading him out with her small hand gripping his, kissing him rushed and heavy in a thin alleyway down the street, pretending to sleep but blowing him gently on the cab ride to her place, he thought he saw the girl from the coffee shop lining up to see some late night Goddard film, wasn't at all sure, couldn't be with speed of the cab and shadow of night, she could paint the colours of any fuck she'd ever had were her words when reaching the curb at the front of her lush studio, he was very drunk and the night sky was clear, the air was good outside, she snorted coke and drank red wine in gulps from a bottle she handed to him on occasion, asking him to take her from behind because she was self conscious of her facial expressions when in bed, he said just turn out the lights and she said but we need the colour to have brighter orgasms, she had tiny breasts and wide hips with a very flat stomach, her backside was ample and fit, all her skin was the colour of vanilla ice cream, her bush an immense broad and beautiful forest spanning from under her belly right into between her salty thighs and beyond, all tucked away, it's darkness making her skin look purer, it was his favourite portion of her, so unkept and coarse, he didn't finish, she sprawled and passed out, in the morning he left her asleep, he could taste just charcoal filtered bourbon and good cigars in his dry

mouth, her pretty flavour was only on his hands, his cock, some on his neck, perfume and sex smudge, for his nose mostly, he thought on seeing the coffee shop girl for much of night, felt a sadness he thought had left him back at university or just after, wondered if it was her he'd spotted, he had better visit her, explain, ask her out for real this time, though it did mean catching the train, it meant that and a shot at something that he thought was finished, he didn't want another bout of what he'd had the other time, both with girls and trains, it was early, the sun up just a few hours, but he'd been there before at this time and sometimes she was there, and if not who cared, nothing mattered anyway.

As far as he could tell. What could he tell. He wasn't sure. He was quite sure he could write, somehow she made him surer of it.

Just by pouring his coffee. Just with her eyes and skin. He'd rather kiss her than sleep with her. I'll get a cab there. He walked through a green dewy park full of faint shadows and sunlight that seemed wet and yellow, he smoked, enjoyed it, the park reminded him of Russian land he'd been to when reading, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky earth, it had some of his home in it too, the greens when wet, sky clarity adding, at home the dew would dry off by around nine in summer and the heat would kick in heavy and hard, the light very intense and clean, in the winter you could smell the ocean better off the wind even deep in Fremantle and he took pleasure in walking much at those times, finding a place to smoke a cigar and read, the beautiful occasions of full grey sky and thick rain in the evening with a orange haze over the whole universe, sweet rain fragrance remembrance, seeing the fuller colours and damp roads, dry blond grass wet, burnt grey coastal horizons the sun behind clouds, going to a bar and drinking expensive fruity beer, raindrops on shirtless skin, exquisite feelings of lost love and hurt, sleeping in a not bright room with rain hum fresh window open double shadow in the afternoon, his head felt fine, he felt something he hadn't for long time, something he'd felt was finished in him. But he was wrong, it was still there, strong and real, not dead or completed, it lived in him and pushed him on now. He just hoped now that he wasn't wrong with other things just as important, things just as true, even

if he were somewhere, it if didn't work for a time, he knew he could find it anyhow. He had that ability.

Walking out the park and into sidewalk sparkling light. He was sure of it.

# Sex, Death & Other People's Money by Mike Golden

". . .yeah, yeah, yeah. . . ."  
- The Beatles -

"Vulgar contrast grossly perceived." That was to be the vision to ride into the future, according to the famous auteur plugging his latest spine chilling, heart warming boxoffice saga of gaga on the tube. This here excursion of three stray dogs lookin' to hide out of the holy night is something else: Silent, clandestine, completely indulgent, yet valid, unlike flogging your hype. When it's over we rock, not roll into some new born fantasy of what the future's going to be like. The Kid, Surf and me, the past is hot on our heels.

In the now it's a ghost town. Filled mostly with viruses.

Last night, blessed be His name, I thought I might find a miracle out there among the trees and one hundred percent Vermont maple syrup bein' peddled in the streets. But no, I've seen too many movies. Brought Capra into my Achilles heels and cried out, "Lookahere boys, this year we're not gonna do no blue Christmas!"

In short, the three of us bravely agreed to banish loneliness from the face of our topography. We made this pseudo Samurai pledge to go our separate ways all through the day preceding, the night, then come together as the chimes crossed in celebration, and in the process, tamp out insipidity and drown sentimentality in the gulf of memories of rotten holidays past. That may not be much but I had nothing better and no expectations, and a bad idea whose time has come is a bad idea whose time has come. Nevertheless. . .

Irresistible urges pulsate through the vacuum. Dreams of compulsion fill the stocking. On the wall, above the fireplace, dead

words are mounted in lieu of action. We are all waiting for something better to come along. Commitment is to something better coming along.

It's new blood. Brothers for the ride. But then sometimes a man's got to do what a man's got to do all by himself. So listen.

My job is listening. I don't make sense of it anymore. That's a compulsion I can't afford. Think I'm Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh*. Over and over, all in different rhythms, I have to stop when I catch myself listening to riders who only read their lines.

On the eve before, for instance, there was a new woman. Crazy, vulnerable, brilliant, sexy, writing on the wall, you know, the type that thrives on living out *The Laws of Manifestation*. And no doubt I had been summoned. The old woman got me that way too. Conjured me up in a New York minute, out of the fog.

The new one's psychic, of course. A wine editor to boot. You don't even have to ask questions. Or hold up the glass for a refill. Depending on her point of view, it's always half-full or it's always half-empty, and each bottle has its own story, its own history.

Her *LOVE LIFE-101*, for instance. I haven't heard it before, but I've been in the movie. She's got two lovers. One 10 years older, another 10 years younger. Lover number Older can give her stability, security and sesquipedalian pleasures far be it from me to deny her. Lover number Younger boffs like a dog with itching powder on his pecker, plus, he can still be trained. *Animasgodzillahead* no doubt. What should she do? How can she choose? Curtain number Older or Curtain number Younger?

I feel my Hickey coming on. Historically, men have been known to go crazy over good strange. Sometimes even bad. Only amateurs take the reverberations lightly. Pros get \$100 an hour and up just for listening, then segue free of involvement.

But this is not complaint. Just amazed experiential observation.

Which brings me to the second point before I get to the first. What happens when the objects of spells change without telling the spells? Are we talking new genres here? Symbolic mutation or mutated symbolism? (We'll skip the nature of thought, but use it later in the Media Kit.) It may be bugging, but there's no other way to explore the territory. And after all, are we not Space Rangers?

I'm not preachin' (though God knows I dig the energy), but just between you and me we're destined to invent a new brain! Probably before I even learn to use the old one. But that's progress. Or aggravated obsolescence, if yours is working at the moment.

Tonight the streets are quiet, almost brutal in their early morning promise. As the temperature drops the raving moves inside for the duration. No more lower east side slum Goddesses. Just slumming goddesses hungry for an appetizing fix, then quickly back to the cave-palace from which they've slithered. If honor were recognized on a Chinese calendar, this would be The Year of the Flea.

Still looking for miracles I spot Surf and The Kid waiting for me under a poster of MR. POTATO HEAD on 14th Street and Third Avenue, just as fluffy white globs start falling from the heavens. Potato Head's wearing a condom. Or a body-bag. But whatever you want to call it, celibacy's the new hot cult. Sperm only a rumor outside the dream state. The last time I tried to take the problem in hand it refused to cooperate unless I came up with a fantasy it could dance to.

In the old days, there was nothing truer than the love of a dog, unless it was the love of an 18 year-old heiress, but we, all of us still with half a brain, are contaminated by the possibilities. There's nothing sadder than the idea you have to be happy when you're not. I tried it once. Even believed it for awhile. But it wasn't the moment, it was accumulation. I just happened to be there at the time.

Which brings us back to now.

There are no miracles in the street.

Yet I believe!

How can that be?

Perhaps statistics. I'm not sure, but just like a ventriloquist's dummy you can make them say anything you want. For instance:

"Did you know that 4 out of 10 people are going to get it, and when they get it they're going to give it to at least 4.5 other people, who are going to give it to at least 5.5 other people?" That's what Surf says.

I don't understand the .5, which makes me one out of the two out of the original six who haven't got it yet but are doomed to have serious psycho ethno-eco-geo-socio-political problems. I have too much anxiety and too much desire at the same time.

"In reality," Surf says, "you can't cope!" Which is true, so I turn my back on the obvious and like a zombie cakewalk backwards into the void. Which is when I catch me a vision.

No, not KONG climbing up onto the red, blue and green X of the Empire's newest, highest, most spectacularly expensive edifice ever designed to take away mortal breath, but back down here on lonely earth, The Three Sisters of Apocalypse, Faith, Hope & Charity wave as they dart out of a the gale, into a sleazy low rent Blarney Shock.

The boys gather up all hopes, dreams and wishes from the night when I point back in the direction we came, but naturally, once through the doors there is no Faith, Hope & Charity in the bar. Just Sex, Death & Other People's Money.

Beautiful beyond imagination, but not what I was looking for this time around. Yet there's no denying this is a fantasy my problem can dance to.

"Hello delicious one," Sex calls to The Kid.

"Me?" He blushes as she tickles his chin with four inch nails glistening with purple lacquer.

"Vagina Dentatta," Surf whispers to me, and Death shoots a wad of neon bile across the mainstream to the jukebox, then smiles, thinking maybe blood, maybe sacrifice in the name of something more holy than the goof up on the X, overlooking her emptiness.

Music comes out of the jukebox, and Other People's Money sings to me, "I am the Queen, Queen of the Universe, Queen who encompasses the Universe. . .Enter my King, and spend your days in my fucking lap."

Bark now, Kid, and talk of Love, that fourth sister, fifth Marx brother, last opening in the wall of self. So he does.

Cuts right through. Starts hopping up and down like he found the vein. "She likes me! Did ya hear that? She likes me!" Then turns and starts kissing her fingers. "You do like me? You're not just saying what you're saying just to say it, are you?" Then slurping, like a suckling on a good tit, drops to his knees waiting for a pet.

Almost pompously, Surf regurgitates a line I know he copped from the editorial of last month's Psychotic Today: "Remember," he plagiarizes, "nothing is worthy except your perception!" Before he can go on. Death reaches over and grabs him, unzips his brain and begins fondling his ticket. The eye bulges out of his head, as he gasps, "Remember. . .nothing. . ."

Then Death sucks.

Looking back, I wondered if looking back was an indulgence the market would bear. With time as an enemy, Other People's Money had a hard-on for a baby. Earlier, years younger, before we grew blood, there was sweetness, but now I am a stranger. Intensity without intimacy is only tension.

Surf's jaw locks then, frozen in pleasure from his holy scream.

The Kid knows nothing of terror, of course. Just wants to wag his tail and savor the sweet scent of cunt.

"Love," Surf groans, "is a conceit, not a curiosity, above and beyond the call of contingency."

In the land of the celibate, philosophy flourishes, while on the other side of the fence wild things run free. In the background, the sound of soul climbs out of the jukebox as Other People's Money starts shaking her boogie and singing, "Does Papa want a brand new muse?" Have I seen this one before?

In the original, Colbert did it to Gable with just one bat of the eyes, but these days not even a Louisville Slugger will work. They say, even flowers kill. It's still the same dream that made a fool out of Swinburne and a liar out of poor Ibsen, but now even that is too much to comprehend.

"There is never enough," Other People's Money sings. "Too much is not enough."

It takes all my strength to turn away from her and face the bar. Stare blankly at the bartender's jowls chewing his cud.

A snake disguised as a witness, he draws me a long cool one and winks. But before I can even reach for it, Surf whirls out of the jaws of Death and blows the head off.

"Oh gimme ti-yi-yuppie, gimme ti-yi more," he sings, then kneels next to The Kid in the sawdust and begins praying.

I won't hurt you," Death whispers.

In distant ports heroes take their cues and march, howling up at full moons for a new mythology. "Oh give us back our balls!" they

chant. "Give us back the rumba."

And then we dance.

Oh, how we dance.

Each and every one of us. The moment we aim at something we have already missed it.

# Fragrance of Desertion

## by Lance Garrison Ballard

Creaking high-rise wooden planks, once painted pearl white, were now hole-ridden-weather-beaten—stripped atop a cement foundation—cracked remnants of yesteryear, little more than silent accord to how long the Winslow Manor stood tall among the forty-some-odd acres of Oklahoma soil.

As a young boy of seven (or maybe more around eight, come to think of it) just the thought of treading close to the door, harkened foreboding fear—fear that did not lessen, well into my teens. Yet, even then, fear of Winslow Manor, kept me far from ever stepping near the threshold. Until one day. My eighteenth birthday, matter of fact.

I had just returned from the post office, and had just mailed Uncle Sam my select choice of military branch in which to serve under. The army was where my allegiance would stand proud to protect America against all things RED, if the draft so much as called my name. 1964, the draft was still netting up America's youth, mostly—poor have-nots, those unable to dodge the draft, as the rich and well-to-do had, by simply gutting it out, as it were, for four years or more and obtaining a college education. Education only money could afford. Hard, cold cash in the circulated color of green.

So, the rich was college bound, to become economically viable, so as to live, as parents before, in homes spread across the Suburban landscape. Least not one forget those white picket fences, either. Nothing white picket for the poor, though. Disposable pawns, they were, the poor—all in the name of war, the Vietnam war, fought by soldiers, most, no older than nineteen, at the time—who shuddered high-alert scare, deep within the dense vegetative coils of jungle, that which was to be the lush camouflage to Charlie's stealthily rush of death. Death by sudden machine gun fire.

Only way not to die by such sudden onslaught of machine gun fire, was to retreat to the Great White North. Which many a young America boy did. So many so, vapor trails of burnt draft cards spread out across the horizon to the boarder of Canada in a blackened haze of smokelike soot.

I DEFECT, seemed the battle cry of the day.

Had notice for my appearance in army green been required in Guam, Nam, or wherever it was the less prodigal were sent—I DEFECT would have been my battle cry, too. I'll get to how I dodged the draft later. For now though, keep tuneful ear honed to the rest of what's about to be said. For what's about to be said, is sure to bring clear insight to that which seems, to you, I'm sure, incoherent ramble.

But believe me this, when the rest to what I have to say is finally said, incoherent ramble is the least of what you will think of all this. Just stick with me because I know. Know why you're here today. At Winslow Manor. Nevertheless, I'll try and be quick in haste and say all that needs to be, okay? Good, now that's there some level of trust between us, I'll get on with it. Yes. Yes, I will. And so will you, before too long. Sooner then you know.

Now, where was I? That's right. I remember now. Remember all too well. As will you. So, back to telling, all what will bring understanding to your confused thoughts.

After checking the box with a No.2 pencil, that 5x7 card that donned my choice branch of selective service was tossed in OUT GOING MAIL.

Then a sudden surge of rugged masculinity, never before felt, took hold. Fear of Winslow Manor had up and vanished, as if a sudden burst of obscure light to rational reflection had all at once lit the mind fantastic.

Fear no longer loomed over me. Nor dread to what lurked, just

behind the front door of Winslow Manor.

A rusty hinge squeak echoed out high and loud as I eased the door shut; then this swift sensation of being smothered had me. And wouldn't let go. Until I was en route—up stairs, second floor.

There, inches from grazing the door to the master suite was body armor to a knight unknown, which seemed to me, solid enough proof to prove existence of King Author and his Knights of the Round Table and the whispered plan of secrecy each knight to King Author spoke, under solemn oath to uphold, the quest to venture forth, out into uncharted land and do, that which must be done, to lay claim over the Holy Grail.

Seemed I was on a quest, too. Yet no inkling of a whisper, and certainly no Holy Grail to claim, on what had brought me here, and why, to Winslow Manor, other than that rugged masculine surge, first felt at the post office, and didn't let up until I was there, at Winslow Manor, upstairs, here, in the master suite—amidst dust-laden furniture, and a familiar stench of mildew that also lavished the drapes, blood-red velvet in color—frayed at the bottom; and the hardwood floor wasn't in any better shape, and aside from the mildew stench, the room seemed likened in being forever shunned from warmth of sun and succulent scent of Jasmine that swoons in the air like sweet savor of silent reprieve from harsh winter past and frigid caress, ominous white snow in blizzard wrath.

Be it ominous white snow in blizzard wrath, I didn't much care. Long as I escaped. From Winslow Manor. From where I still stood. There in the master suite. Only now standing there with me, sea bag at his feet, was a soldier, gazing out a dirt-stained window. Opened, if not but an inch, I was sure my escape was at hand. No such luck. Or escape. By me. Or soldier. Or sea bag at his feet. And the familiar stench of mildew now grew even more immense. Strange enough though, so did the blackened holes of stained gunpowder on the soldier's uniform. Blind to the obvious, I was, until now, and saw that the shirt of the uniform had once been neatly pressed in military-style creases and how they had been carefully

starched to aid firmness to each crease which ran parallel down the front of the shirt, tucked smoothly in, under narrow waistline where the leather wrap of belt held, snug-tight, pants to hips.

The soldier's hips. And his pants.

Had it not been for the holes, blackened as they were—his uniform, would have, without doubt, passed any surprise inspection. Immaculate detail spent on the uniform didn't seem much to matter now. But regardless, there he stood, the soldier—unflinching in stare at the dirt-stained window. A stare that was also unflinching over me.

Yet the soldier had this seemingly unabashed courage not to cower from that which seemed to stalk, somewhere out there, passed the dirt-stained window, among the dreary gray fog of limbo, where eternity awaits the coming arrival of a cursed soul—to cast upon a path, forever on, never allowed to falter away from.

Darn near close in thought, that was, the emotion I felt from the soldier and his unflinching stare. Like he knew why he was at Winslow Manor.

That, and why, he could never falter from the path he seemed destined to tread upon, nor speak in brilliant clarity and trite—that which could explain galling reason for silent accord, and undoubted reason in being there, at Winslow Manor.

Sad as it was, the soldier seemed to know this and also seemed to know, could never change what he did and the act he did that had him there, at Winslow Manor. With me. In the master suite, no less. Alone. We were. Me. And the soldier. In the master suite at Winslow Manor.

Me and...The soldier—

My stare stayed locked on his, for some time. But the soldier's stare never drifted very long or far from the dirt-stained window.

I could sense, in some celestial why, him wanting me within reach. Which happened, soon enough; the soldier had me, and we were no longer there, in the master suite at Winslow Manor. No. No longer there in the master suite.

Instead—

On a German battlefield, ready to dive into a fox hole, six feet deep—stained in crimson gore, the freshly dug earth of this fox hole.

Blood and death was the grave reminder to such death there in the foxhole; though freshly dug, the blood which stained the clumps of earthy soil was no more fresh than the rotted smell of the lifeless bodies.

Yes, blood and death. Seemed that's all war was good for. Out there on that German battlefield.

Soon I noticed, most of the bodies there on that German battlefield were riddled in bullets.

Yet for some odd, off-kilter reason, my body hadn't sustained a single wound—nor was there any wound to the hand that held the pistol. Held the pistol. My hand did. Held the pistol.

And like that—

**BANG.**

Back at Winslow Manor, I was. In the master suite again, this time standing just shy of the full-length mirror on the door; and as I gazed at my reflection, my clothes were not my own, but instead—The soldier's uniform. And his face was now my face, my eyes saw there in the mirror. But then there came yet another scare, a scare that could not be any more explained than the seven days taken to create earth.

And that scare was this: my name donned the soldier's dog tags!

My name! Same name of the soldier! For you see, I was the soldier on that German battlefield during World War II. And this time, when I gazed into the mirror, I saw past myself at Winslow Manor, back at the foxhole, and watched how I had squeezed down hard on the pistols' trigger, so as not to become a prisoner of war.

Prisoner of war, I did not become, when suicide was the sought option to ensure just that. So, if I knew why I didn't become a P.O.W. and reason for, then I knew, without doubt, for it had to be, that the soldier I saw in the master suite at Winslow Manor had once been me. Me, in a former life, I suppose.

Once that revelation came to pass, I also knew that my name had also been the same name of the soldier, and name that had and always would don the dog tags.

Yes, the name that would always don the dog tags.

Then. Now. And—

Here. Yes, here. At Winslow Manor. Exact where you are. Yes, you are. Here at Winslow Manor, you are. Which, more or less, puts you and I on the path of destiny.

See, I know just where it is your off to. The middle east, right? Course I am. There's a war going on there, you know. Just as there had been a war going on at that German battlefield, and just as there had been a war, I was due to get drafted in to. The Vietnam war.

Now, if you'll remember correctly, I was to tell you, later, just how I dodged the draft. Well, the Great White North wasn't were I high-tailed it. Far from it. See, I dodged the draft, right here, at Winslow Manor, sure enough. What I just told you about, the soldier and all, was the exact vision I'd, there at Winslow Manor, day before shoving off to Vietnam, see. Well, there wasn't much to argue with.

Not with what I had seen, that's for sure. The truth had been shown to be, by myself, in another body, in another time. And what I'd seen, I knew would be waiting for me there, in Vietnam. Death. By my own hand. Suicide.

You see, there was really no need to have fate play out, half way around the world, so I lent fate a helping hand and did the job sooner than planned. Far as destiny was concerned, that is.

See, I dodged the draft by suicide, pistol blast to the head. So you see, my young recruit to a new life that is sure to end the same as always, you too have come here to Winslow Manor, for reasons unknown, until now, to play out your role, that which fate has labeled destined unto you.

Yes, labeled destined unto you. Sad to say, young recruit, but your last breath on earth will be spent, here...In the master suite of Winslow Manor.

I know. I know. All this seems a tad bit far fetch, huh. Well, tell you what. Just take my hand, and you'll see, as witness to it all, how I am you and you are me and we are the soldier there, standing next to the nailed-shut window.

When what I'm about to show you has filled your eyes through, you'll be here with us, as if never belonging anywhere else but here. Trust me, you'll see. You'll see. And the pistol, soon to be used, is the same pistol that has always been used, and has always been stowed there, in the sea bag by that soldier's feet.

About all I can say more about any of this is that the smell of gunpowder from the pistol when you squeeze the trigger, will be the fragrance of desertion. Your desertion. Desertion from war. Your generation's war. Come now. Take my hand, for there is a journey you must take. With me. As guide. To show what you know now to be true and the destiny which awaits you. And the pistol which you're destined to grip. Not to mention, squeeze down hard upon the trigger.

So, now take my hand. For there's much for you to see. So much for you to see.

# Dallas Reunion

## by Edward Moore

Years later and I still find myself lying about my father, Jacob Leon Rubenstein.

When he became famous, my mother told me terrible things would happen to us if people found out we were related. Someone might even try to kill us. She always said he wasn't much of a provider, and when he died all he left me was a name he didn't even use.

Growing up, I didn't get to see him very much.

When I was six, my mother left him. When I asked why, she said, "Because he's a loud, obnoxious jackass."

Still, whenever I think of him, I don't dwell much on what made him famous; I just think about the last time we were together. That was back in '63. I was nineteen and on my way from Phoenix to Chicago, for my sophomore year at Northwestern University.

I wrote and told him I would be between trains for two hours, and asked if we could have lunch together. Because I hadn't seen him since I was nine years old, I assumed he wouldn't recognize me. My letter said I would be wearing my Northwestern school jacket. His secretary wrote back to say that he would meet me at the information booth at eleven.

One of the reasons I wanted to have lunch with him was I knew he owned a pair of clubs, and I was hoping we could see one of them.

At eleven o'clock sharp I spied him bulldozing his way through the crowd. As he pushed and bumped people out of the way, they just looked at him but didn't say anything. As I watched him getting closer, an uncomfortable tingling started in the back of my head. I

couldn't put my finger on it, but I had the feeling he was going to do something I'd never forget.

Finally he stood a few feet in front of me and said, "Boy, look at you. Who'd ever thought a dumb mook like me could have a kid smart enough to get into Northwestern? That's just too much to believe."

I smiled as I told him I wasn't that smart, and that some of my brains had to come from him. He was my father after all. He gave me a fatherly love slap on my left arm before giving me a big hug.

When he pulled back to look at me, I could see what my mother found attractive about him. He was a big, good-looking guy with waxy black hair, perfect teeth, dark cobalt colored eyes and a seductive bad boy smile. I noticed his eyes seem to dart around as if they were constantly looking for something. Sort of the way a trapped animal looks for an escape path. Oddly, I found that disturbing.

"I've got two clubs here, the Carousel and the Vegas. You wrote you'd like to have lunch in one of them, but they're too far from here. You'd never make it back in time for your train."

I was disappointed, because I wanted to see his clubs. Whenever I mentioned them around my mother, she would spit out the word "whores," before leaving the room mumbling obscenities under her breath.

Those memories faded as he put his arm around me, and I smelled him like my mother would smell a rose. His odor was an acute mixture of whiskey, cheap after-shave lotion, and shoe polish, commingled with the mustiness of a mature man. Still, I hoped someone would see us as we stood there, because at that moment I had a father. Later I ruefully wished someone would have photographed him walking with his arm around me, just so I could have a tangible memento of us being together.

We left the station and entered a restaurant on a side street not far from the depo. It was still early, and the place was empty. As we entered my father noticed an old bald waiter with a droopy eyes sitting at a table next to the kitchen door.

As we sat down, my father shouted, “Kellner, Garcon. Cameriere. You.”

I tingled with embarrassment as he continued.

“Could we have a little service here,” he shouted. Then he clapped his hands, twice in that Yul Brenner ‘King and I’ manner. That caught the waiter’s attention, and he shuffled over to our table.

“Were you clapping at me?”

“Calm down,” my father said. “If it isn’t too much to ask of you – if it wouldn’t be above and beyond the call of duty – we would like a couple of Beefeater Gibsons.”

“I don’t like being clapped at.”

My father smile as he said, “I should have brought a whistle. I have one at my club that only very old waiters can hear. Now listen carefully. Get your little pad, and your little pencil and see if you can get this straight: two Beefeater Gibsons.”

“I think you better go elsewhere,” the waiter quietly said.

The father’s expression didn’t change. He paused, looked at him, then finally said, “That is one of the most intelligent suggestions you will ever make. Come on, let’s get the hell out of here.”

I followed him out of the restaurant and into another. This time he wasn’t so obnoxious. Our drinks came, and he proceeded to drill me about school and sports. I liked telling him about myself, and I hoped he had some measure of pride in my activities.

After finishing our drinks, he struck the edge of his empty glass with a knife and began shouting, “Garcon. Kellner. You. Could we trouble you to bring us more of the same?”

The waiter guardedly approached and asked, “How old is the boy?”

“That,” my father replied, “is none of your goddamn business.”

With a steady voice the waiter told him, “I’m sorry sir, but I won’t serve the boy another drink.”

“Well I have some news for you. I have some very interesting news for you. This doesn’t happen to be the only restaurant in Dallas. There’s another one open on the corner.”

He paid the bill, and I followed him out that restaurant into another. There the waiters wore red jackets that looked like hunting coats. The place had lots of dark wood paneling, a couple of pool tables, and some dartboards on the wall along with a bunch of stuffed animals situated all around the place.

As soon as we sat down, my father began to shout again. “Master of the hounds. Tallyhoooo and all that sort of thing. We’d like to get a little service here. Namely, two Bibson Geefeaters.”

“Two Bibson Geefeaters?” the waiter said smiling.

“You know damn well what I want,” my father angrily replied. “I want two Gibson Beefeaters, and make it pronto. Things have changed in jolly old England. So my friend the Duke tells me. Let’s see what England can produce by way of a cocktail.”

“This ain’t England,” the waiter said.

“Don’t’ argue with me, just do as you’re told.”

“Just thought you’d like to know where you’re at.”

Banging his fist on the table he said, "If there's one thing I can't stand it's an imprudent domestic. Let's go, junior."

As we left the restaurant I glance at my watch. "I've got to catch my train," I said.

"I'm sorry, Junior."

"That's all right, Daddy."

As we approached the station steps he spied an old man of about sixty sitting in a newspaper stand. I saw him get a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

"Let me get you a paper to read on the train."

Before I could say anything he strutted to the newsstand and speaking in a W.C. Fields caricature voice he said, "Kind sir, will you be good enough to favor me with one of your goddamned afternoon papers?" The man turned away from him and started staring at a magazine cover. "Is it too much, kind sir," my father continued, "for you to sell me one of your disgusting specimens of yellow journalism?"

I know my face must have turned red. "Daddy, I have to go," I said. "It's late."

"Now wait a second, I want to get a rise out of this fella."

"Goodbye, Daddy," I said, and went down the stairs to catch my train.

A few weeks later I saw my father on the evening news.

The stunning images left no doubt about what he did. At the time it was the most shocking thing ever shown on television. Why he did it has been the subject of speculation for years.

Thirty-eight months after he shocked the world, he was dead.

His brothers and sisters didn't want anybody desecrating his grave, so they put his birth name on his headstone. In a poor Jewish cemetery on the south side of Chicago, his tombstone reads, "Here lies Jacob Leon Rubenstein."

Most people remember him as Jack Ruby.

# Dirty Little Cherub

## by Kalyan Dudala

I don't want to be here. Everyone is so different from me. It's been pissing rain almost all day now and it's impossible to stay in here any longer. Crowds have always made me claustrophobic and it's no different now. I guess I'm here for something important. I'm not quite sure what that is yet but it involves the dead girl in the next room.

I guess you could say we grew up together. I met her twenty eight years ago and like all things that old, the memories grow cloudy. I have never known her. Never knew what she liked, what she thought. I don't even know what kind of music she listened to. It was so long ago. Just too long ago. I've never been the type to stay in touch anyway. I'm surprised they even managed to find me. The more important question is why. I feel like a complete stranger here. I don't know any of these people. I certainly don't know the corpse next door other than by face and by name. And that counts for precious little. I must be talking aloud here. I have company.

"Hey. What's up?"

"Nothing. I'm here for the funeral."

"Yeah. You live up in Des Plaines or something, right?"

"Des Moines."

"Yeah, whatever. I'm Chet"

The first things you notice about Chet are his jowls, weighed down even further by the variety of piercings at all sorts of locations on his face. The second are the mythic tattoos that cover every visible region of his body. That is, of course, till he gets closer and the rancid breath will not let you notice anything else.

“Take you awhile to find the place?”

“Not really. Is Jenney a friend of yours?”

“Was. We’ve been together for six years.”

Shuddering involuntarily, I rack my brain for an appropriate response but none comes. I nod at him and mouth the words “excuse me” as I walk to the porch to light a cigarette. This whole place is such a mess. Wine bottles everywhere, some broken some whole. Having been locked in here for seven days without food, her cat had apparently begun to lose its mind. They found it lying dead in the bathtub along with her mistress and an electric hairdryer. As I open the screen door, I notice the earthworms. They’ve always been huge in New Orleans. I remember stuffing them down the back of my baby sister’s shirt and laughing my head off as she screamed in terror.

“So. You going to stay awhile?” Chet is back.

“No. Don’t see why I should.”

He nods his head solemnly and opens his mouth as if to say something but stops himself. He repeats this curious routine again before settling down on the garden chair, crushing a few earthworms beneath him. I’ve always found their predicament a little peculiar. Imagine not being able to make a sound when you die. Just a dull little squish as your internals free themselves.

“I could take you around town if you’d like.”

“Been here before.” There is nothing I want less than to spend the day with Chet and the creatures that inhabit his body.

“No man. You know...the places she used to hang out. The coffee shop, the bar....her little book club place.” At this point, Chet’s voice starts to quiver and it occurs to me that the trip isn’t for my

benefit. What fucking difference does it make to go to the places the dead used to inhabit? They're dead, right? Not there anymore. If you really want to feel her presence, she's right here in the next room. Sometime today she'll be forced to leave and move to a new hole.

As things stand, it seems as though I don't have a choice. It's something I'm expected to do. Pay my respects. Make a fucking pilgrimage across town while the deity lies right here.

Nodding my head, I flick the cigarette away and walk back indoors to grab my jacket. Chet waits outside in the garden chair, staring into space, overcome by the maudlin sentimentality that passes for mourning. It's awfully cold in Des Moines this time of year. I was hoping for some better weather here but so far it's been cold and soggy. I guess it's warmer than Des Moines but there, you're used to the cold. You expect it. You wear three layers. Here it's just incongruous and it throws you off.

I'm outside now and Chet is still moping among the earthworm remains.

"I don't know what to feel," he proclaims. I nod my head gravely as though I know exactly what he's talking about. "She was great, man. Made me feel like less of a loser."

I am exceedingly uncomfortable with this confessional and hope it shows. I don't know what to do or say in these situations. When people cry, it's really just an expression of self pity. They're mourning for the fact that the dead people aren't going to be a part of their lives and they aren't going to derive the same things from them anymore. The inherent selfishness in that disgusts me. In fact, this whole affair disgusts me. A bunch of people congregated to collectively feel sorry for themselves. Thankfully, Chet doesn't say any more. Instead, he gets up, wipes his eyes and leads me to his car. The passenger seat is littered with the contents of a purse: a few photographs, some mascara, a stick of lip gloss and what appears to be a poem of some sort.

I allow Chet to replace them in the purse before I get in. His windshield is cracked and it only has one wiper that works furiously as if to make up for the absence of the other. It's going to be a long day.

Summer can be a bitch in New Orleans. The air is hot and sticky. Walking through the streets can seem like a bad dream sometimes. The French Quarter is populated by characters that are having nightmares of their own. Gorgeous transvestites beckon you to the seedy clubs where indescribable things happen. Losers and winners compete to chat up women at the local watering holes and girls with boyfriends imaginary and real graciously accept the free drinks. In the midst of it all are the pill pushers promising you a day of ecstasy while peddling headache medicine that numbs the pain of the futile wait. Further down, on Bourbon Street, is the Hustler club where conservative men gather and pay to be teased with no hope of release. That was the last time I saw her, perched atop a stage surrounded by men anxiously waiting to deposit their contributions into her accepting thong, and waiting, perhaps, for a private dance later. She smiled and waved to me from her microcosm of lust. I ordered another shot of Jack Daniels.

In the driving rain of winter, the nightmares continue about their business but there are fewer people and a few more ghosts around. The coffee shop next door to the club is quiet and has a surprisingly homely appearance for being located where it is. It is brightly lit, owing to the multitude of windows in the place. We sit down at a table in the far corner with a "reserved" sign, the only one that is illuminated by a candle instead of a window.

"She loved this place." I nod, seeing no need for a verbal response. The table is ordinary enough but I see that there are three books perched on top of it. Rushdie's *Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Kundera's *Unbearable Lightness* and a collection of short stories by the man known as O'Henry. This appears to be Chet's little memorial to her. I pick up Rushdie and idly flip through the pages. There is a passage highlighted in red with the word "genius" scrawled on the

side of the page in her terrible handwriting. I don't understand why one would choose to use red highlighting. It obscures the text and makes it awfully hard to read. Chet and I sit in silence for a few minutes because it seems to be the appropriate thing to do. As I look at him, his embellished ugliness forces me to wonder why a woman like her would have chosen to be with a man like him. I gently remind myself that Beauty needs the Beast to make her feel human.

Chet rises abruptly and I follow him as we walk next door to the club. Groovy sixties music plays as beautiful women dance and writhe, showing more skin with each beat. I would rather have skipped this stop on the tour altogether but Chet seems intent so I follow him to a booth by the bar. A fully clothed waitress comes to take our order.

“Water”

“Jack Daniels on the rocks”

A booming voice sounds on the speakers, announcing that the green light is on, meaning two for ones. Several men around us spring into action as the girls stream out of a door behind the stage. At this point, Chet begins to cry uncontrollably. I think about putting a hand on his shoulder but the dragon on it glares back at me menacingly so I stop short.

“Dad touches me,” said the nine year old girl as we lay in the grass.

“Yeah, so what? Parents hug their kids all the time.”

“But he touches me there. It's dirty.” Her face began to cloud as she grimaced.

“It's just his way of showing you he loves you,” I said, only half convincingly. Enough, I hoped.

I closed my eyes and breathed in the moist air. I had enough

problems of my own without having to worry about her problems with family. Besides, she always did have a hyperactive imagination. All I could think of was the brand new guitar my dad was buying for me. Fifteen years old that day. Almost old enough to drive.

Chet continues to cry and people are beginning to stare now. I sip my drink and smoke my cigarette as nonchalantly as I can while a concerned stripper walks up to us. I wave her away making gestures with my hands and lips that I don't really understand. I hand him a napkin as the snot begins to drip down his nose and into the glass in front of him. My cigarette is almost done and I have just one match left. I light another one just before the cherry burns out. There's something about this place that bothers me. It's not the strippers; it's not the horny patrons. It's that my drink is so fucking watered down that I can't even taste it.

It's still raining outside and it looks like we're going to have to soak ourselves while burying her. I don't really mind it. At least it'll be a quick ceremony.

"She would have wanted you to be here." I take his word for it since I don't really know what she would or wouldn't have wanted. On our way out, the bartender nods at us with knowing eyes that seem a little too somber for the happy music wafting from the speakers.

Beads hang from store windows in preparation for Mardi Gras, still a few months away. I guess its ideal for those who want to get a head start on the celebrations, or for the loud tourists to take home meaningless souvenirs made in China. Soaked to the bone, I follow Chet as he walks irritatingly slowly. My vision is blurring slightly.

I see floaters all the time. My ophthalmologist tells me it's because my retina is detaching itself from my eye and the fluid in the back of my eye is solidifying in those spots. In bright light, I see shapeless forms drifting back and forth. Sometimes, if I concentrate really hard, the shapes begin to make sense to me. Like ghosts trapped between my eyelids. An eternity ago, I stood by my grandmother's grave while they lowered her into it. For a brief

second, I looked up at the moon and thought I saw a bed with a woman atop it, floating...floating into the moon itself. Sometimes I'm glad for the floaters. Most times they're just an inconvenience.

"Think happy thoughts," she said. My face darkened further and my lips twisted themselves into a scowl. My parents had just died in a car wreck. My father had been drinking too much and my mother had been miraculously pregnant at forty two. Jenney was fourteen, that irritating age when you think you have the perfect words for every situation when what might in fact help is for you to just shut the fuck up.

"You'd feel better if you cried."

We are in a cathedral and Chet's head is bowed in prayer. I'm not religious and don't see the sense in bowing before a wooden cross. However, I don't want to make a spectacle of my defiance so I stare at my shoes and the layer of mud on them. We sit on a pew in the corner of the third row.

"This was the only place she could keep her mouth shut."

I smile quietly.

"We should be heading back." I find myself saying. It is three thirty, there are two hours to go for the funeral and I've had enough of my wet clothes. I return to Des Moines tonight. I did think about staying longer but it doesn't make any sense. The only person I should care to see is dead and it's not much fun talking to a grave.

Chet mumbles incoherently, getting up and leading the way out. There are a few worm heads stuck to his trousers. Or maybe they're tails. Who can tell anyway?

The ride back is largely uneventful. The lone wiper continues his spirited fight against the torrential rain 'til at last, the rubber slips off and the metal begins to scratch the windshield. Chet seems not to notice. I reach into the glove compartment and examine the

contents of the purse. I glance at the photographs and find one of myself. It was supposed to have been a silly photograph with both of us making faces at the camera but she had tripped over a rock and was in the process of falling while I looked directly at the camera, doing my best Gene Simmons impression.

“She loved that photograph man,” says Chet “y’know how her face came out all blurry and shit. She loved pictures like that.” I remain quiet. Chet seems to be having increasing difficulty talking and I wish he’d stop. “She’d spend all day shooting squirrels or rain...or earthworms. Freeze frame life. That’s what she called it.”

Visibility is really bad and the claps of thunder in the distance aren’t making me feel any better. There is standing water on the streets and our engine is beginning to sound like a different beast altogether. Chet has finally stopped talking and I’m remembering how she couldn’t stand still for long enough to pose for a family photograph.

I pick up the sheet of paper and it has scrawls all over it to the point where most of it is no longer legible. On the top left, however, are four letters written in capital with a red marker. They spell “CRAP”. I look out the window at the trees whizzing by, the water spraying everywhere and wish I was safe at home, far away from Jenney.

“That’s her song. Do you want to hear it?” Chet asks and inserts a tape into the deck without waiting for a response. “I made it for her,” he says, his voice a strange mixture of intense grief and pride. The tape begins with a loud hissing noise followed by some clanging noises, evidence of Chet’s expertise. Eventually a piano begins to play, followed by a voice....her voice, barely audible with all the magnetic static.

Dirty little cherub, that’s what you are

They think you’re so cute what do they know

Puke your food and hide your scars

Hang up your halo when you sink so low

Dirty little cherubs who cheat and lie

Won't go to heaven when they die

No father no son, no holy ghost

No holly holly to the lord of hope

Just the endless night black and cold

A wooden box and a filthy hole

Dirty little cherubs who cheat and lie

Won't go to heaven when they die

Won't go to heaven

Won't go to heaven

.....when they die

At some point during her ghostly performance, I begin to cry. Hot salty tears. Tears of selfishness perhaps or tears of remorse, or crocodile tears. I don't fucking care anymore. She was right, this feels really good. Eventually, I open my eyes to the light and I see a shower of floaters. No lunar ascendancy. No shape at all, just grubby blobs. It's like I was saying. They're just like little sisters, really. You're glad for them sometimes but mostly they're just a pain.

# Selling

## by Mark Barkawitz

“How much, Marty?” Sarah Fields asked. She lived just down the block. She had come to his house to buy some pot.

“Twenty-five bucks.”

“Is it good?”

“Wouldn’t sell you anything I didn’t smoke myself.”

Sarah looked closely at the Columbian weed at the bottom of the clear baggie. The living room was dark with the curtains drawn on all the windows.

“That’s the last of it,” he said. “You can have it for twenty. I give pregnant women a discount.” He smiled.

She took the money from the pocket of her flowered muumuu and gave it to him. It was just about the only thing she wore now that the baby was almost due. She was a big woman anyway, almost a head taller than he. And the springy, black hair, which rose inches above her dark face, made her appear even more so.

He sat down on the couch and counted the money. There were a lot of ones.

“I’m glad I got this from you before you ran out.” She put the baggie of weed in her pocket where the money had been. Leaving, she leaned on the door knob a moment. “I haven’t been feeling myself lately. I was just about to get a little wine from Sal’s Market to see if it helped any, but then I thought of you.”

“You’d better not,” he said. “You know you shouldn’t drink while you’re pregnant. Take a toke. It’s better for you. How much longer

till the baby's due?"

"Not for three weeks yet?"

"Boy or a girl?"

"I'm hoping for a girl. I already got Lamar and Joey."

"Yeah, I guess two boys are enough for anyone."

"Anymore likely to kill me," she said. "I better get back before they wreck the house. Thanks a lot, Marty."

"Take care of yourself, Sarah. And no booze. And don't go smoking your brains out either. One a day. Just like the vitamins."

"Yes, doctor." She laughed and went out the door.

He looked at the money in his hand. Marty Hepp sold pot to his friends and other smokers he had become acquainted with on the block. Someone had to. But that was all he sold, no pills or blow or anything like that. He didn't like any of that other crap. But pot he liked. And he was between jobs. So he sold enough to help pay the rent, monthly bills, and tuition down at the community college, where he had signed up for classes next semester. The rest he smoked. And he liked the neighborhood. The people were friendly. Just last month, when old Al and Rose, who lived next door, were painting their apartment, he and a few of the other neighbors had pitched in and helped. Al had lung cancer from too many cigarettes and Rose was a bit dimwitted, the result of brain surgery years before. So he and the others hadn't charged them for their labor. He picked up the tray from the coffee table. There were a few buds and some loose pot on it. More than enough for a joint, so he crushed one of the buds between his fingers and sifted out the seeds. Taking a paper from the Zig-Zag pack, he rolled a jay and was about to light it when someone knocked on the door.

"Yeah?"

“It’s me—Lamar,” his small voice answered from the other side of the closed door.

“Lamar? Just a minute.” Lamar was Sarah’s oldest boy. Marty put the pot out of sight in the roll-top desk next to the TV, then opened the front door. “Hi, Lamar. What’s up, man?”

“My mom wants to know if she can borrow a couple a’ papers?” He was tall for ten and dark-skinned like Sarah.

“What kind of paper?”

“You know, rollin’ papers. My mom don’t wanna walk to Sal’s Market, and he won’t sell ‘em to me.”

“Oh. Okay. Wait a minute.” He pushed the door half-closed, walked over to the desk, and pulled a few papers from the Zig-Zag pack, though he wasn’t sure at all if he should give Lamar the papers. Little kids had big mouths, and he wasn’t sure how Lamar would feel about someone who sold pot to his mom. But he didn’t want Sarah walking to the store in her condition and having a miscarriage or something. So he went back and laid the papers in Lamar’s open palm. The boy’s long fingers closed around the thin, white papers like the legs of a crab.

“Thanks, Marty. See ya’.” Lamar ran off the porch and down the street. It was just getting dark.

Marty closed the door, got out the joint, and lit it, then turned on the TV and sat on the couch, smoking.

The next day, he was up early because he had to drive down south to John and Casey’s house to pick up some more pot. He put the sixteen-hundred dollars he kept stashed under the corner of his bedroom rug into his pocket, made himself a smoothie for breakfast, and filled a thermos with coffee. Wearing shorts and beach flaps and with a joint in the pocket of his denim work shirt,

he left the house. He climbed into his '68 Ford Fairlane and drove to the freeway.

Going the other way, into Los Angeles, the rush-hour traffic was bad as usual. Across the freeway the cars were already backed up. He was glad he wasn't on that side. Going towards San Diego, there wasn't so much traffic. At nine a.m., it was already starting to heat up and get smoggy. Typical September in L.A. He poured himself a cup of coffee, turned on the radio in the dash, and lit the joint. The news was on. It was mostly bad: bloodshed in the Middle-East, a hole in the ozone layer, raw sewage in Santa Monica bay, and the AQMD predicting a stage-two smog alert for L.A. county. He smoked and listened; his eyes glazed and became heavier with each puff. The world outside became softer—less real. As if someone had honed-down the edges.

Because he preferred the slow lane whenever he smoked (Life in the Fairlane, he often joked.), it took two-and-a-half hours to get to the Leucadia off-ramp in north San Diego county. He got off the freeway and onto the familiar streets—many without sidewalks—of the little coastal town. Back here, a mile or so from the beach, there were still green avocado orchards and hothouses filled with red and white and orange and purple flowers and even some billy goats in back yards. The condos were still all on the coast. It was almost noon and it was hot, but not oppressively, like in L.A. The sky was clear. No smog alerts down here. He turned the corner of a small street and pulled into the dirt driveway of his connection's house at the end of the block. Primo, a large German shepherd, and Duke, a Dobie, came growling out to meet him. As he stepped from his car, the hair was already raised on their backs, even though they'd met him a few times before.

"Hi, Primo and Duke." He offered his hand for the dogs to sniff. "How you doing, boys?" The dogs wagged their tails when they heard their names called and recognized his scent. But they were still suspicious and moved stiffly around him. He patted both dogs. "It's okay, boys." They accompanied him to the front door. The hair was still up on their backs, and Primo, the shepherd, walked in half-

circles, eyeing Marty as he knocked.

“Hey, John, you home? It’s me, Marty. Let me in before your dogs eat me.” From inside the door, metal clicked on metal as the dead bolt slid open. The door opened about six inches. John’s suntanned face stared back from behind the chain. His eyes, bloodshot, darted from Marty’s face to reconnoiter the area behind him. John shut the door, slid off the chain, and opened the door all the way.

“Hi, Marty.” John shook his hand, pulling him through the doorway as he did. He locked the door behind them. He was wearing new, blue overalls with no shirt or shoes and he reeked of fresh pot. All the shades were drawn on the windows, as usual, so it was dark inside. There was a strong, piney fragrance in the house.

“Come in the back room.” John led him to the door of a closed room and knocked. “Hey, lemme in, man. It’s okay.”

The door opened and they walked in. Casey, the guy who’d opened the door for them, sat back down on one of the three, wooden chairs at a wooden table—the only furniture in the room—and began trimming one of the plants with scissors. Marty had seen him the last time he was here. He was John’s partner, barefoot and wearing swimming trunks, a typical So Cal surfer/seller. His hair was very blond and he, too, was very tan. There were pot plants hanging upside down in every corner of the room. Plywood covered the only window. A bare bulb on the ceiling lit the room. On the kitchen table with some dried plants were a triple-beam scale, another pair of scissors, and a large pack of zip-lock baggies. On the bare, wooden floor were more baggies filled with pot.

John locked the door, then walked over to the table and picked up a bud that Casey had carefully manicured, cutting away all the large, green leaves and uncovering the fat, purplish-green bud. He handed it to Marty.

“How’s that look to ya’?”

Marty held it up to the yellow light in the center of the room, then under his nose and sniffed its piney fragrance. He bit off a small piece with his front teeth. Chewy. Sticky. It was definitely good pot. Just how good would determine the price. “Have any papers?”

“Already got one rolled.” John pulled out a reefer from the breast pocket of his overalls.

“I’d rather roll this one, if you don’t mind.”

John laughed. “Sure, man. Still don’t rust anyone, eh? Papers are on the table.”

“I buy for a lot of friends.” He sat down at the table and began to break up the bud. It was sticky and hard to pull off the stem, so he used the scissors to cut it up. Taking a leaf from the Zig-Zag pack, he rolled the pot into a thin reefer. He lit it, took a hit, and exhaled slowly, tasting the sweet smoke as it blew out over his tongue and lips. He took another draw, then inspected the end of the joint. The resins were already starting to build up.

“Very nice.”

“Dose a’ the good stuff,” said John.

“How much?”

“Two.”

“Two-thousand?”

“Yup.” John smiled.

“You guys are killing me. I know it’s strong medicine, but two grand is a little steep.”

“It’s dangerous these days.” John took the jay from Marty and took a hit. He explained as he exhaled: “The Man’s bustin’ fields every day.

We're damn lucky we got this crop in. Right, Casey?"

Casey nodded. "We can't grow much here, but what we grow is the best. Once you break it up, you can turn it to those friends a' yours for twice that."

"I don't know if the smokers on my block can afford that?"

"Don't worry about those chumps," Casey added. "They take no risk. It's just like Prohibition in the Thirties. Cops mostly bust runners and distillers, guys like us. We get caught, we go to jail. You, too, Marty. They'd make a real she-man outta ya' in there," he joked.

"Eighteen," Marty said.

John looked at Casey, then back at him. "You have cash?"

"I have sixteen with me. I can bring the rest in a couple days."

"Do you believe this guy?" John asked. "Credit and a break, too. Nineteen. And make sure you're back here on time. Our rent's due next week."

"I'll be back."

"We know," John said. "You have a good credit rating with us."

"Besides," Casey added, "you'll need your prescription refilled for those friends a' yours." He smiled. There was a little piece of green pot—like spinach—stuck between his front teeth.

A couple days later, around midnight, there was a knock on Marty's front door. He'd fallen asleep on the couch, his shoes off and only his levis and socks on. He wasn't sure where he was when he first awoke. The TV was still on. Barretta was dressed like a fag, but he was beating the hell out of some poor guy. There was more knocking at the door.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m coming.” He yawned and rubbed his neck, which was stiff from the position in which he’d been lying. He opened the door. It was Lamar.

“Hi, Marty. You sleepin’?”

“Naw, man. Not anymore. What’s up?”

“My mom’s havin’ the baby an’ she wants to know if you can drive her to the hospital?”

“What? She’s having it now?”

“Yep. That’s what she told me.”

“Now, huh? And she wants me to take her?”

“Uh huh. She called Auntie Barbara, but she’s still out on a date or somethin’.”

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

Lamar leaned closer to the screen door. “You all right, Marty?”

“Me? Yeah, man.” He yawned again. “Tell your mom I’ll be right over.”

“Thanks, Marty.” Lamar broke from the porch like a greyhound. He was tall for ten. In the yellow moonlight his thin frame looked like a shadow as he cut across the grass and down the block for home.

Marty turned off the TV and put on a sweatshirt, then ran out of his house and across the front yard towards the old Fairlane in the driveway. The grass was wet and now so were his socks; he’d forgotten to put on shoes. What the hell? He was just driving her. And it was still summer-like in L.A., so his feet weren’t cold. Just wet. He backed the car out and drove to Sarah’s place, where the porch light was on. The front door opened. She was wearing the

same muumuu with a green Army jacket over her shoulders and fuzzy, purple slippers on her feet. She waddled towards the car. Lamar ran out of the house to help her. Marty opened the door for her and slid the bench seat all the way back, so she had more room, even though his feet barely reached the pedals now. She plopped into the seat.

“How you feeling?”

“Not real good. I’m very close.”

“Which hospital?”

“Huntington.”

“Lamar, you coming?” he asked the boy.

Lamar closed the car door for his mom. “Naw. I gotta watch Joey.” Joey was standing in the open, front doorway now. He was only four, but it was obvious he wasn’t going to be tall like Lamar. And his skin wasn’t dark like Lamar’s. They really didn’t look like brothers.

“Okay, man.” He put the transmission in Drive. “I’ll see you when I get back.”

“Bye.” Lamar waved and his mom waved back, as Marty accelerated away from the curb. He raced to the corner, but had to stop for a red light. He wasn’t sure what to say or ask, so he turned on the radio but kept it low. He looked over at Sarah.

“You okay?”

She nodded, then her faced tightened. “Contraction,” she explained and a little groan passed through her clenched teeth. “You better hurry.”

“Okay.” The light was still red. He looked in both directions. There

was no traffic, so he drove through the intersection. He didn't care that it was illegal so long as it was safe. He needed to get Sarah to the hospital on time. As he sped through the streets, he began to imagine the worst. What if she had it now? In the Fairlane! He stopped for another red light, checked the cross traffic, then drove through the intersection. He imagined the cops red-lighting him. Where's the fire? He imagined the Fairlane escorted behind a flashing cop car. Then he imagined himself handcuffed and in their back seat. Sarah groaned again. This time louder. Another contraction. They were just minutes apart. He didn't know much about pregnant women but he knew that meant she was close. Really close. He kept his foot pressed to the floor on the accelerator pedal and the tires squealed around each corner.

It was normally a fifteen-minute drive in traffic to the hospital from their place. He cut the drive time in half. He tried parking in the Emergency Drive-In area—he figured their predicament warranted it—but the security guard wouldn't let them. "Ambulances only." Marty explained about Sarah, but it did no good. He had to park on the street.

Sarah began to climb out of the parked car. "Thanks, Marty."

He ran around the car and helped her out. "Want me to go in with you?"

"I can go alone."

"I'll go with you. A lady should have an escort when she's having a baby. Come on." He put his arm around the back of her waist. She put her arm around his shoulder and leaned on him. They walked into the Emergency Room together. A dozen or so people, sitting or standing around the waiting area, turned and stared at them. He was aware they made a strange-looking couple—he a small, white man in stockinged-feet; she a big, black woman in flowered muumuu, Army jacket, and fuzzy, purple feet. They walked up to the reception desk, behind which sat a middle-aged woman in wire-rimmed glasses with tightly-bunned hair.

“She’s having a baby,” he said to the receptionist.

The receptionist took out a form and laid it on the desk.

“Now,” he said, disregarding the form. “She’s having it now.”

The receptionist looked up and Sarah nodded, then groaned—another contraction. Within thirty seconds, a nurse had Sarah in a wheelchair and was pushing her through the swinging doors marked “Emergency” in red. He waved until the doors swung shut and he couldn’t see her anymore, then turned and started to leave.

“Just a minute, sir.” It was the tightly-bunned receptionist. “You’ll have to fill out this form for your wife. They’re taking her right up to Maternity.”

He walked back over to the desk. “She’s not my wife. Just a friend.”

“And the husband?” she asked.

“I don’t think there is one?”

“Insurance?”

He shrugged. He didn’t know, but doubted it. Sarah hadn’t worked outside the house since her pregnancy.

“Are you responsible for her then? Should we call you if there are any problems?” She was scribbling something on the forms.

“I’m not responsible for anything. You can call me if you want, but it’s like I said—I’m just a friend. I know she has a mother somewhere. And a sister Barbara. But I don’t know their phone numbers.” So he left his name and number. Just in case.

He drove back to Leucadia the next day with the three-hundred dollars—the high-end bud was selling fast—that he owed to John and Casey. It was another nice day. He took care of business quickly, then decided to go to the beach. That's what he liked most about his job; it left him plenty of free time. Most of his friends and customers were in the nine-to-five trap. He was glad to have gotten away from that for awhile. Even if it were only a temporary respite. He parked his car in the lot on the cliff overlooking Beacons, one of his favorite surf spots. There was a small swell running with waves breaking about three-and-four-foot with nice shape. A slight breeze blew out of the north, but it wasn't enough to cause any ocean chop. He cursed himself for having left his surfboard at home on the garage rafters. A poor decision made in haste (he hadn't felt like taking the time to put on the roof racks) as he was leaving the house that morning. He chalked it up to a lack of sleep from the previous night's emergency escapade. But he figured a joint might get him a ride. So he put a pack of matches and a couple jays in the pocket of his T-shirt, grabbed his towel, and headed down the zigzag steps that led down the cliffs to the beach below.

The sun was sparkling on the water. It was mid-week, mid-day, and school was back in session, so there weren't too many surfers in the water. He spotted three, young surfers with their sticks on the beach, sat down near them, and lit one of the joints. When they looked over, he held it up and asked: "Want a hit?"

All three came over. By the time they had finished the joint, he'd borrowed one of their boards and a shorty wetsuit. Even though the water was still pretty warm this time of year, he still liked the insulated security a wetsuit offered. He spent the rest of the day in and out of the water—catching waves, getting high, joking with his new friends, Tom, Larry, and Kevin, who had wild, curly, red hair and liked to be called Neptune. Marty didn't leave the beach until late afternoon. Instead of rush hour traffic on the freeways, he drove the coastal route, as the sun began to set—bleeding red, gold, orange—over the ocean's horizon. He was in no hurry; Life in the Fairlane, he sang to himself. He stopped in Laguna Beach for a late lunch at a natural foods store: an avocado sandwich with

sprouts and tomato on wheat berry bread with a big glass of orange juice. He was famished from surfing all afternoon. He remembered a girl. They had had lunch at the same wobbly table. Had almost married. He wondered where she was now? Didn't matter. That wave had broken and washed over the sands.

It was dark by the time he got home. He took a shower, read a little, and had started making a late dinner when the phone rang. He turned down the heat on the zucchini and covered the rice, then went in the front room to answer.

"Hello."

"This is Huntington Hospital. I'm Doctor Davis. Is this Mr. Hepp?"

"Yeah."

"You brought a Miss Sarah Smith into the Emergency Room last night?"

"Yeah. How is she? Boy or girl?"

"It's a little girl."

"That's great. Sarah was hoping for a girl."

"Mr. Hepp, we're trying to locate Miss Smith's mother. Do you have any idea how we can get in touch with her? I'm afraid it's rather urgent."

"Urgent? What's wrong?"

"We need to get in touch with her mother."

"I don't know how to get in touch with her mother. Is there something wrong with the baby?"

"I'm afraid I can't give out that kind of information unless you're a

relative.”

“Look. I’m her neighbor. I brought her in there. She doesn’t have a husband and you can’t find her mother. I’m about the closest to a relative you’re going to come up with presently. Now, what’s wrong?”

“Well,” the doctor paused, “maybe you can help. Miss Smith died this morning.”

“Died?” He felt his legs weaken. He sat down on the arm of the couch.

“I’m sorry. We did all we could. There were complications with the birth. And she had a violent reaction to the anesthesia. She went into shock. We couldn’t resuscitate her. The baby’s fine though.”

He didn’t say anything, so the doctor continued:

“Her two boys were in here earlier. Apparently, they had taken the bus down here. I sat them down myself and tried to explain. I asked about the grandmother, but I’m afraid I couldn’t get much out of them. I left to get a nurse to watch them but when we returned, they were already gone.”

“They probably went home. I’ll go down and check.”

“And would you try to get their grandmother to call us?”

“Sure.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hepp. And again, I’m sorry about your friend.”

“Yeah.” He hung up the phone, but just sat there awhile. Dead? Then he remembered the boys, grabbed a shirt, threw it over his shoulder, and hurried down to Sarah’s place.

The evening outside had turned cool. His hair was still wet from the

shower, and again, he didn't have on any shoes. At Sarah's, the front porch light wasn't on, but there was a light on inside the small house. He put his shirt on as he knocked. Lamar answered the door. His eyes were swollen and red.

"Hospital just called, man. I'm really sorry about your mom."

Lamar didn't answer. He just stood there, staring back at Marty.

"You and Joey all right?"

"We're okay."

"The hospital's trying to get in touch with your grandma."

"I already did. She'll be comin' over soon."

"That's good. Want me to stay with you guys until she gets here?"

"No."

"You sure, man. I don't mind."

"No, I'm sure."

"Well, okay, if you're sure."

"I'm sure."

He nodded and Lamar closed the door. He began to walk home. His feet were cold now. So were his ears. His hair was still wet. He felt like smoking a joint when he got home. Nothing else to do. Then he remembered his supper was on the stove at home, and he began to run.

# How Silly Questions Can Be

## by P. H. Madore

Sitting on the middle-school steps waiting for the world to change,  
I saw you walking up the sidewalk changing your mind.

We both know now it doesn't matter where.

Hustling on the corner of Fifth & Central Ave., I heard you were  
roaming the mid-west in search of life; later that what you'd found  
was a man, that he made you happy, and gave you a ring.

We both know now that it doesn't matter when.

Straddling my grandfather's suitcase waiting for my bus to leave  
again, I saw you weaving through the chaos of the street. You  
looked like you knew where you were going, but you hadn't  
changed in my eyes, and still haven't in my mind.

We both know now that our destinations didn't matter.

I was fighting for the government in Fallujah, waiting for the war to  
end, and you were giving birth for the second time.

Then in my last hour, I was waiting for my lungs to quit. You were  
in my thoughts--light brown eyes, picturesque, unforgettable, so  
few words for me saying so much.

We both know now how silly questions can be. That ends are what  
we make them--if we should've met, been together, then we  
should've done a thousand things we forgot, reached a thousand  
other points we sought, made endless conclusions lost; done  
everything different.

Yet I'd still be here right now, thinking about how nothing's  
changed, the games we play, assumptions we take, the lives at

stake, decisions we make.

And maybe I'd hold your hand, drink your tears, confirm your fears--that we are, always have been, just waiting to become wind-born sand.

And I'd still wonder if dead people can think, because I'm sure they can't move, and since I don't regret, I wonder can they do that too.