

storyzine.

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SOMETHING ABOUT THE WATER
FANTASY DEVIL
WHAT'S IN THE CAVE?
...AND THEN HE DIED.
CALLING ALL SUPERHEROES!
WORDS-OF-THE-MONTH

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A NOTE FROM THE TEAM LEADER

My dream has always been to not only be a writer myself but provide a means for others to write as well and feel confident enough to share their work. With this monthly storyzine I'm finally seeing my dream manifested into a reality. But, this could not have been made possible without the help from members of an ever-growing Discord Server.

If you aren't familiar with Discord, it is an online chat service where like-minded individuals can get together and help each other. At least, that is how I use the Writers Lounge Discord Server that I created nearly one year ago. Now that it has surpassed 1K members with nearly half of them active in the server, sharing stories and ideas for future works, I felt it was time to get those writers to the next step. Publication!

This storyzine can and will only be as large as YOU, the reader, make it. Without you sharing it and of course reading its contents, this could not be possible. This is just the first of many more issues to come. Help us and yourself by sharing how you came upon this monthly online magazine as often as you can. You'll find relevant links in the "Share Us" section near the end.

We do hope you enjoy what you find here so far. Sign-up for our Newsletter where you'll only get an email from us when the FREE ISSUE is ready to be downloaded. And if reading these should ever leave you with the urge to contribute a story yourself, you'll find out how you can do just that in the "Be a Storyteller" section.

Welcome to storyzine: Where dreams become goals & goals come true!

Storyzine is published monthly. Each issue contains between 4 – 5 prompts given each week to Discord Member participants only. If you would like to participate in one of the weekly prompts join the Writers Lounge Discord (it's FREE). All rights to the stories are reserved to the original writer and storyzine who published it.

WEEK ONE

SOMETHING ABOUT THE WATER...

PROMPT:

PERSON WITH A TAIL &
SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH THE WATER

UNTITLED BY C.E.S. DRAIN

The red glare from the traffic light fractured as it passed through the raindrops streaking my windscreen. While the wipers on my classic Mini Cooper were doing their best, they were losing badly to the torrential downpour. "British weather at its finest", I muttered without thinking. Truthfully, my mind was concerned with other matters, in particular the report resting on the passenger seat to my left. It was the product of a sleepless night of scribbling calculations, poring over various documents, typing, printing, and typing again, and worrying about the consequences of what I'd seen at the reservoir the previous day. I glanced again at the light, still red, and then down at my watch. At this rate, I'd reach the ministry before seven, well before the Minister, but I didn't mind waiting in the office. It was the thought of sitting at home for another minute with this report weighing on my mind that I could countenance.

Above me, the lights changed, but I was too busy staring at the word 'SECRET' stenciled across the front of the folder to notice. A honk from the car behind me prompted me to move, and as I glanced in my rearview mirror to take note of the impatient fellow, I saw a sight that sent a shiver down my spine. As I'd left this morning, I'd taken an interest in a car parked on the other side of the street. I am a man of simple tastes and my weekends are taken up by fishing and going to classic car shows, and I'd recognize the sloping back and protruding bumper of an old Porsche Carrera anywhere. Its striking white and green coloring left me in no doubt that the vehicle four car-lengths behind me in the other lane was the same that I'd seen at my house 15 miles back. Alone, the two separate appearances wouldn't normally arouse my suspicions; this was a common commuter's route after all. However, on today of all days, I wasn't about to accept this as just a coincidence.

Another set of traffic lights were ahead, and these were showing amber. "Good timing", I thought as I accelerated toward them. It was time to put my theory to the test. I passed the stopping line just as the lights turned red, and then, just I'd feared, the horn-user sounded off again. Glancing in my mirrors, I could see that the Porsche had used its impressive acceleration to undertake the cars ahead of it and had followed me through the lights whilst they were red. My suspicions now confirmed, I started to appreciate the very real danger I was in. I had a tail, and whoever they were they didn't seem to have any problems with breaking small things like traffic laws just to keep up with me. Again, I glanced across at the folder beside me. This was the most important thing I'd done in months. If this was why they were here, there was all the more reason to get it to the ministry post-haste. With my heart pounding in my chest, I turned the car onto the motorway up to London.

I startled myself a little with the speed and ferocity with which I took those first few miles. Not having time to stick to the Highway Code, I made certain to keep the speedometer's needle over 90 at all times. I would have gone faster had my old car allowed it and I cursed myself continually for spending money on a bespoke interior instead of upgrading the struggling engine. My self-pity was shortly interrupted, however, by the growl of a far larger engine behind me. I didn't even need to check my mirror to know it was the Porsche. I'd been a fool to think that I could outrun it on a straight piece of road; in fact, as it came alongside, the car sounded almost bored, languishing at such a slow speed. Boredom was not on the face of the driver, however, as he wrenched the wheel sideways, trying to run me off the road. Clearly since following hadn't worked they'd decided to stage a traffic accident to get me out of the way.

As a natural reaction to the maneuver, I turned away, wincing as I heard the thud-thud-thud of my wheels hitting the rumble strip. I had to get off this motorway and onto some country lanes where my car could gain some distance in the corners. Spying the sign for an exit, I came off the accelerator, letting the Porsche shoot ahead, and then took the turning just in time to watch my tail veer across some hatch markings to follow. Without the advantage of two lanes they couldn't try to bump me off the road again and within minutes we were speeding through winding country roads, with my car gaining a little distance with each consecutive corner. Everything was going according to plan until the British climate betrayed me once again. As my light car hit a puddle speeding at sixty-five miles per hour, it hydroplaned, sliding across the road and straight into a tree. The airbags fired, and the seatbelt tensioned to extenuate my injuries. The windscreen exploded, and the side panels buckled with the force of the crash. The noise was terrible: the engine gave off a high-pitched whine like a wounded dog and the explosives in the airbags burst one of my ear drums. Fortunately, I was blissfully unaware of all these events; I'd blacked out the instant of the impact.

I woke up in more pain than I'd been in for a long time. My head felt like it had been cloven by an axe, and my right arm was throbbing and swollen. I could tell that many hours had passed because my throat was dry, and my stomach was growling, but those needs were of secondary importance at the moment. I had to work out where I was. Wherever I'd been taken was dark and very stuffy. I could hear pipes groaning with pressure overhead, but when I tried to stand, I found I was restricted. Something sticky was binding me to the chair in which I was seated; tape of some kind, I surmised. Without the ability to do much else, I called out, my voice sounding cracked and hoarse in the confines of the dingy room.

Suddenly, a fluorescent strip flickered on above me, temporarily blinding me as I heard someone enter the room. Blinking to rid my eyes of spots, I saw a small man with glasses standing in front of me. I recognized him! Here, in this room, stood my superior, the Minister. I was lost for words and could only stare as two more men entered the room after him. One of them I recognized too as the manager of the reservoir I'd visited. The other I didn't know but looked to be some sort of businessman. I couldn't fathom what was going on at all, so I just asked, "What's going on, Minister? What are you--?" I stopped myself as I noticed that he was holding something in his hand. To my delight, I recognized that too to be my report. So, this was a rescue! They'd found my car and had followed the trail to wherever the men who'd been tailing had taken me and now they were going to-- No, that wasn't right. If they came to rescue me, why weren't any of them coming to undo my bonds? And how could they have known where I'd gone? Cars don't leave tracks, leastwise not on roads, so then-- but my thought process was interrupted again. The Minister was doing something with my report. I watched as he ceremoniously placed it in a nearby metal tray, took out a lighter and lit one of the edges. The room silently looked on as my work crackled slowly out of existence, and as the last scrap turned into smoke the words 'nuclear pollution' and 'critical environmental damage' were visible. Incredulous, I attempted to splutter out some sort of protest, to ask again what was going on, but it was futile. The Minister turned back to me with sadness in his eyes and just shook his head. Then he turned and left, walking as if the coffin bearer at a funeral. There was an element of contrition in his manner as he glanced behind him at the doorway, before he disappeared out of sight all together.

I looked to the remaining two, wondering what was going to happen next. I'd stopped trying to plan my next move since I clearly had no control over what was happening here. I just wished that I could understand it. Was the Minister working with these people? Were they behind what I'd found in the reservoir? It didn't matter anymore. I'd pinned all my hopes on that report stopping the madness going on here, and as I stared at the ashes it had been reduced to I felt almost relieved that it didn't matter anymore. It had reached its intended recipient and he had filed it as he'd seen fit. I giggled a little at my own joke and sat dumbly as the two men came over and hoisted my chair between them. They bore me out of the room and down a short corridor which opened to the outside. I knew this place. It was the reservoir where this whole charade had started, and the environmental survey I'd commissioned myself to do here had caused so much trouble. I'd lost my car, my job and now, it seemed, my life.

As the two men set me down by the water's edge and began weighing me down with chains, I amazed myself with how carefree I was feeling. The weather had cleared up, and the moon was out. I'd been right about how much time had passed. They pushed me

in with a grunt of effort and I got the most spectacular look at the night sky. All the stars were out to watch me drown it seemed. It's funny, really: I spent my entire life dedicated to fresh water environment conservation and I ended up drowning in a reservoir. I made a large splash as my back hit the water. The sides were very steep, so I had a long way to sink, but fortunately these weights that the gentlemen attached were speeding my descent. I was holding my breath, but I knew that I'd run out of air soon. I felt my back hit the bottom and looked around, gazing at all of the barrels marked with radiation symbols that I knew would be down here. There were hundreds, and now there was nothing stopping them from dumping hundreds more on top of me. But nothing more could be done. Cursing my maker, I sighed out the last of my air and waited to die.

THE END

MONGRELS OF KRIMEA BY PROLIFIC

The sky blazed green atop Krimea, branding the end of another sleepless night. I pondered on what I overheard from Zasha weeks ago, of "A time when the heavens glowed blue, and the great valleys held creatures that flew through vast expanses of water." I have trouble imagining that, though. Green and black paints the landscape of our lives, day in and out.

I trudged the final steps home and stood reaching up for the door latch. My stomach wretched with nothing to offer but bile, and I prepared for rest after a long night's hunt. I was weak, cramps traversing my lower body, but I was happy. I ran my fingers over the tear in the seat of my pants. I knew with luck, next week I'd be brandishing my first set of britches. Aching aside, I couldn't help but tremble with excitement. I had captured nearly a child's worth of water under the neon clouds.

"Rikter?" Zasha called from her slumber, "What have you got for us this morning, Rikter? Has Rikter been a good boy? Is Mika going to be full today?" Zasha walked out of the other room in the shanty, the eerie greens of night creeping in through holes in walls and blurring into pallid darkness. She held Mika, whose skin was darker than Zasha's, less hairy than mine. Mika was too tired for anything more than a yawn.

"Yes." I replied, "Full." Zasha smiled at me, and I felt ecstatic. I rolled the bulk of my pack out onto the floor, standing proud showing my prizes for them. Zasha moved to the table placing Mika in his chair.

"Oh my, Rikter! What an outstanding hunt!" Zasha's eyes flashed as she surveyed the Mag-Net bulging with pacified water, still wriggling with what little fight it had left. "And what's this? New trinkets for us?" Zasha walked closer, setting a candle nearby. "This one must be ancient, look at the rust on it!" She picked up the ovular metal trinket, its surface changing as it moved. "Rikter, this is something very rare. We'll be able to trade this for a week's worth of rations for Mika!" I couldn't believe it, I was overwhelmed with joy.

"I've got a special treat for you Rikter – be quick!" I salivated as Zasha reached in her pocket, throwing a brown ration over. I leapt onto it, famished. I felt it work down to my belly, the savory smell lingering.

"Rikter, I want you to see something special." Zasha approached me, placing her hand on my shoulder and patting my head. "This trinket you found is a mirror. This is what you

look like, Rikter." She held the shiny metal in front of me, wiping away the grime earned throughout ages. "These mirrors shows us who – or what - we are." I focused all I could muster on her words, looking in awe at the eyes staring back at me. They were vibrant blue reflecting candle light, just like the color Zasha taught me in her books. I saw a big beard all over my face, full of duller shades. "I see." I said as I watched the lips move, transfixed. Zasha pulled the mirror away, gazing into it herself.

"Mirrors are relics from a world we lost, Rikter. A world that was taken from us by the ones of the sky. They forged you mongrels, Rikter. From our populace. They made you less than human, more than beast." Zasha's words frightened me, and I shifted down to my belly. "They cursed the very skies we sleep under and the oceans we conquered so long ago." She poured deeper into the mirror.

"Regardless, you mongrels shouldn't concern yourselves with the frivolities of the past." She placed the mirror on the high shelf.

"The shades of time have grown cold. Heaven hath forbade us all, now. Hell hath remained, Rikter. With all its abominations. Remember that."

I couldn't understand some of what she said. I recognized her tone, however, smelling the anger and sadness inside her. Frivolities and oceans. What did these mean? Suddenly she rose to her full height towering above me.

"Here Rikter - Fear not! I think the other trinket you've found is a suitable reward for such fine hunting." She reached down, picking up the other prize. I stood stretching out as she placed the thick necklace in my hand, its latch broken.

"Happy." I coughed out, fatigue roiling within my elation.

"Perhaps soon we will go to Kreeg and fetch you some britches." Zasha said, putting on her gloves and lifting the Mag-Net up to the counter, preparing it for purification. "You may go to bed, Rikter." This was a dream come true.

I let myself out, pushing aside the tattered sheet adorning my hut adjacent the shanty. I lifted the rock in the corner plugging the hole I had dug for my favorite things. I brought the necklace to my face and inhaled deeply, placing it carefully between my handprint canvas and the shard of glass I had packed with dirt. My body gave to exhaustion as I faded to Mika gurgling, consuming his breakfast.

The air raid sirens jarred me awake, as they so often did. They heralded a new night, and the clouds forming in the skies were already reflecting the green haze ebbing from the ration nodes appearing throughout the Krimean Peninsula and Crater Valley north of our shanty town. That gave me roughly an hour before the rain. I took my necklace with me for good luck, tucking it into the safe pocket in my pants. I grabbed the gray ration and two vials of purified water left outside my hut by Zasha. Passing Kreeg's shop awning, I placed a vial with the letter "Z" etched into it, taking one of the batteries from the pile left out for my Mag-Net. I couldn't help peeking over the counter at the pile of britches stacked close to his door, tail covers stitched into their backs.

Leaving the outskirts of town, a man was throwing the emaciated corpse of a mongrel into the Ravine of Requiems. I shudder to think of who it might be, forcing myself to instead study the rain clouds. If I was lucky, I might find a ration node away from the rainfall before the teams of men loot it, or another mongrel finds it. I stumbled down the valley's edge, my eyes on the ground careful of debris. Shells were strewn throughout the rim. Walking would become easier as I reached the bottom sands. I found a good vantage point shimmying between petrified coral and decided to eat my grey ration for the night. It was acrid and tasted terrible, but I was used to it. I could see the rain falling on the horizon, knowing it would amass soon. I'd stay away from there, searching for water that hadn't found its counterparts from the nights before.

A feral yelp startled me from afar, and I scanned finding another mongrel running full speed on all fours towards the distant rim. I could barely make out the thin aqueous serpent behind it, lashing at its heels. My insides lurched, knowing I shouldn't help it. Mongrels were forbidden from associating at night, our masters wary of potential teamwork leading to a pooling of resources.

Nevertheless, I dropped my pack, running for the mongrel scrambling as best it could over the dunes. If someone saw us, we'd both be put down. "I help!" I yelled, closing the gap. The mongrel turned to look for me, panting. I could smell its fear as I drew close, ready to throw my pulser. A pitiful screech sounded. I was too late. I watched as the mongrel's eyes bulged, staring at me. Blood coalescing with water began to sizzle out of its orifices. Its limbs shriveled as vapors rose, boiling from its contorting body. I looked away, then sprinted towards my pack.

Whimpering behind the coral, I want to be home near Zasha and Mika. If Zasha were here, she would protect me.

That poor mongrel had stumbled upon a water cluster small enough that it was willing to crawl into the mongrel's body, boiling and ending them both. Usually, water simply drowned its victim, continuing onward searching for more life or larger amounts of itself to join. The small clusters were erratic, but deadly. Some people theorized there was a giant amount of water accumulating somewhere, powerful enough to go wherever it wanted. Water couldn't seem to climb any higher than the rims of the great valleys.

I had to keep moving, trekking on for another hour, deeper into Crater Valley, reaching a cave system that I knew well. I cornered water here before, the twists in the caverns appeared to confuse its senses. Drinking my last vial of purified water, I prepared my pulsers and Mag-Net. I crept into the cavern's mouth, staying close to the walls. Reaching a familiar crevasse, I waited. I was terrified, doing my best to keep my breathing light. The water seemed to track the hot air we exhaled.

An hour or so later, I heard it. Bubbling noises slapping along the rock face nearby. I lunged, throwing a pulser its direction before it could detect me. The pulser went off as it landed triggering the water into a bulbous form. I threw my Mag-Net, wrapping round and paralyzing its contents. I snatched the net's tether wrestling it onto my back, tearing towards the entrance.

I hiked the next two hours towards home, parched. Nearing the top of the rim, I could see a mongrel in britches clambering over the edge. I felt a pang of jealousy. My left foot gave way slipping over a shell, and I fell sideways rolling. I caught sand landing hard on my Mag-Net, my heart stopping momentarily as I heard the electrical hum die. I saw the battery become damaged in my slide. The water lunged through the net, extending above me like an ethereal appendage.

Time slowed, and the fluorescent clouds broke as a golden ray of light shone through. I could see myself in the water, a tremulous reflection unique from the mirror's. "I see." I exhaled softly, as the clouds fought back the light as the water engulfed my head. It was an incredible sensation, my thirst quenched for the first time in my life. I crawled back towards the rim, unable to breathe as the water held an airtight helmet. My limbs began to fail, chest convulsing. I rolled onto my back, vision filtered green towards the sky. Reaching into my safe pocket I pulled out the gift from Zasha. I held my necklace close one more time, the world closing around me.

Zasha rose the next morning to knocking at her door. Kreeg was standing outside, looking grim.

"Zasha, I thought I should be the one to tell you – they found Rikter on the edge of Crater Valley rim this morning, drowned. Identified him from the “Z” on his vial. I'm real sorry. Looks like his Mag-Net was damaged." Zasha's eyes grew wide, speechless.

"Look, if you need me to advance some rations for you-

"No need," Zasha cut in, "we have several months' worth of brown rations and purified water."

Kreeg paused for a moment, gulping, "Ma'am, I know it isn't my place to ask, but – didn't a mongrel kill your husband a few years back? How could you raise Rikter knowing that?"

"The same way I'll raise the next one I buy. They just need to know their place. You can throw his body in the ravine with the others."

As Kreeg turned to leave, he fumbled for something in his pocket.

"One last thing ma'am, it's a little odd. They found this old dog collar in Rikter's hands..."
"Just throw it out, it's broken anyway. It was only a reminder."

In loving memory of Mr. Bug.

THE END

WHERE'S THE MONKEY? BY DAVID MOORE

“Honey, where’s the monkey?” asked Maggie.

“Should be playing outside,” replied Hanz. “Dear, remember that our monkey has a name, if you use his name, then he will show you respect.”

Hanz opened the door to the back yard which was brightly illuminated. This only meant one thing, they were near a star.

“There you are,” said Hanz.

Tiby raised his glance to acknowledge him, and his intrepid eyes returned back to his toys and friends.

Enough time passed, and they had a time to adapt, now they could communicate using basic sign gestures.

“Come inside,” said Hanz from his back yard that connected to the central park across the walkway, “you must be famished, I made your favorite food, pizza with avocado.” He gestured the mentioned ingredient, drawing circles in the air and rubbing his avocado shaped belly.

The tree he planted on the communal farmhouse began to produce avocados just the other day; to imagine that such oily seed would take so long to become a tree and produce a single fruit made for a perfect joke among the rest of the garden aficionados. Regardless, it was the perfect fruit—according to the manual—to placate any angry or hungry monkey.

Tiby’s face brightened with anticipation. He could never grow tired of avocado on anything. However, he hesitated to bid a ‘see you tomorrow’ to his new female friend, Zurah.

The manual that Hanz got along with Tiby explained that monkeys spent most of their life either in search of a partner, or with their partner. The concept wasn’t alien to him, for he loved Maggie deeply, and felt happy that Tiby had finally decided to choose a partner--or was he chosen? That part still wasn’t clear to him. He learned to distinguish between monkey genders easily because the males were all leonine with hair all over their faces, and the females didn’t have much facial hair.

More monkeys were coming to the park recently. Of course, that there were still many below deck, away from crew and population. Only trained staff interacted with them to help them acclimate to the starship and become less violent. Hanz felt proud about Tiby, because after a solar year he got cleared and came to live with Hanz and Maggie.

It was logical that the monkeys would start to interact, mingle, and pair among themselves more now that there were many more among them. Yet, for some unknown reason Hanz could relate with the feeling of the monkeys missing their tribes, the irregular landscapes of their habitat, and other kinds of mammals to interact with.

What he had never experienced though was lack of drinkable water, since his planet was supposed to have more water than land. Yet, he had not been born there.

Aboard the starship they had unlimited amounts of water for over many generations. The Liquid Drive allowed the starship to travel through galaxies and in the process, it purified any impurities from the water.

“Don’t worry Tiby, you can bring your female friend,” said Hanz with a big smile, so big that his eyes filled with water. “I’ve made five large pizzas.” There was no problem with leftovers, since they also had a box to keep food in cold vacuum.

To Hanz, it didn’t seem that a pizza was such a difficult thing to make taste good. Surely the female monkey would also like pizza as much as Tiby did. According to the manual, pizza wasn’t a thing that depended on gender.

Their manual clearly said: ‘to keep your monkey happy, feed it pizza’. The most interesting thing though was that there weren’t many requirements to prepare it.

Even if it was cold, old, with one, two, or ten toppings, thin or thick, the only things that couldn’t be missing were the crust and the sauce.

Tiby often burnt his mouth eating it straight out of the particle oven or shivered while eating an old one right out of the vacuum freezer.

“I tell you, you can put anything you can imagine atop a pizza, and my monkey will eat it with a smile,” Hanz told his friends.

The first time he saw a monkey face to face wasn't actually face to face, since there was a protective glass and some electric field between the humans and the monkeys to prevent any casualties. Monkeys were very violent by nature and had volatile and unpredictable temper in the wild.

Yet, ever since he saw a monkey in a colony they visited, he knew he wanted one for himself. So, when he was old enough to get a pet license for the starship and saved the required money to purchase his, the last thing left was to convince Maggie.

That didn't take long, because she was curious about their behavior and felt excited to see Hanz so thrilled by the idea of owning a monkey. After all they did own a snake once, long before the water incident, but had to give it away since it ate their baby.

Then the starship made an emergency stop to cycle their water after a terrible incident that contaminated it beyond Liquid Drive purification capabilities and it was making the crew sick.

They landed on a planet that was about to be hit by a meteorite. So, after collecting the liquid required to refill their reserve, the starship captain determined that it would be good to get healthy monkey specimens and other provisions before they embarked on their journey. That was when Hanz got some assorted seeds as a gift for Maggie.

Monkeys were always a good investment, and they seldom came across solar systems with biped mammals.

They were low maintenance as well. Pizza and water was enough, and if the monkeys became a problem they could fetch a good price on some of the colonies.

All in all, monkeys made for warm travel companions as opposed to snakes. Snakes, besides being cold to the touch, were also mean long-tailed heads, devoid of any hands or legs to carry anything around, and it was harder to predict if they would do something wrong down the line.

He was happy his monkey didn't have a tail, as the ones with tails were usually smaller and angrier. To Hanz this meant that the longer the tail, the meaner the creature, and the smaller their bodies, the angrier toward the owners, regardless of the species.

The three of them entered the house, "Gorgeous wife of mine, we have an extra guest with us today."

Maggie smiled when she saw that Tiby was finally coupled. “Will her owners worry that she isn’t at the playground in the central park?” she asked.

“I don’t think so,” he assured her. “We are the ones who usually get Tiby back home earlier than the rest of the monkeys due to our schedule. She can go back out after eating some pizza. And tomorrow I can find out if she has an owner or not.”

Hanz knew that if Zurah had an owner he would have to find out what they would be happy to trade for her. If not, all he had to do was fill out a register form and pay the dues.

This was a special occasion, Hanz held Maggie’s hand and gestured to the monkeys to do the same, they all joined in a circle around the table, and were ready to offer a prayer.

He wasn’t sure if Tiby—or any monkey for that matter—could comprehend the concept of a personal God, not to mention a God who created all creatures in its very own image.

He had pondered before about this over many sleepless nights. “If the most resilient of creatures across all the multiverses, the roaches, were created by a God, was He or She an almighty Roach like them?”

The thought was too big. “What about birds or fish, did they have a different God, or was the divine Roach the one and only God for all beings across all the multiverses?”

“There had to be at least one God per each form of life,” was his conclusion. That meant there had to be so many Gods, and if some behaved like their creatures, then there had to be a single God at the top, with no other creature—or God—near or above, able to control everyone else.

Regardless, Hanz decided to offer the usual prayers to thank this deity for their voyage, the chance to have another meal next to Maggie, the opportunity to own a tail-free monkey, and the new companion for Tiby.

He slurped the goo from his bowl, while his wife swallowed hers. Meanwhile, his monkey made funny faces right after biting into the hot pizza and shared the rest with Zurah.

—Memoirs of a crustaceous alien and his human pet, Toby of planet Earth

THE END

FILTERS BY CURTIS MCINTYRE

'I have a tail lately, and I'm not happy about it.

'Just who exactly is tailing me? I couldn't tell you, not yet. Top guesses are the NSA or CIA. They're trying to silence me like MLK.

'At first, I thought it was my wife. Or, I should say, ex-wife. Once I realized she was too busy for such things, the theory evolved into 'she hired whoever is tailing me'. But now, now, this tail is more than just some Private Dick looking to screw me over in divorce court. No, the existence of my tail has revealed to me a vast conspiracy, one that has pervaded every aspect of my life without my having ever realized. My ex-wife, she's only the tip of the iceberg in terms of how deep it goes. Whoever is tailing me must have hired her to pretend to be interested in me in the first place, pretend to love me, marry me, infiltrate my darkest secrets.

'But why me? I'm a nobody. I never even knew I had secrets to protect until these people started trying to pry into them. So, step one, I need to identify what my secret is, and step two, I must protect it at all costs.

'Things were bad enough when I could only sense my tail when I was in public, but lately... God, I feel like I'm being tailed through my own home. Whoever is watching me has elevated their attacks from a spectator sport into a 24/7 assault against my sanity.

'What do they want from me? When my wife left, she took everything from the nice pillows to the water filter. All I can assume is that they want the one thing I must never give up: my soul.

'How would they go about harvesting my soul, anyways? It is removed in some bloody operation by surgeons in white smocks, or am I blasted with some psychic ray gun that erases all trace of my personality from my mind?

'I'm sending this message out via my brain on the off-chance that someone involved in the conspiracy is monitoring my thoughts and has some compassion in their heart. Please, call off the tail. I'm currently walking to work and there's so many people on the city streets that now it feels like, if just one person is a tail, then, oh God, they all might as well all be tails!

'Oh, boy, I need to catch my breath. Whichever operative is in charge of my body is currently putting the squeeze on my inner workings. My heart is pounding a million miles a minute and my lungs feel as if two massive fists are squeezing them shut, refusing to let air in.'

Isaac whistled a song he knew from the radio as he walked to work. The sun was smiling and the air smelled like warm Pepsi.

For the last couple blocks, he had been observing a man who seemed to be stumbling about in some kind of haze. Normally he wouldn't take notice of other people and their problems, but this man didn't seem dangerous. He looked rather similar to Isaac in age and build. When the man veered off the city sidewalks and into an alley, Isaac feared the man had suffered a stroke of some kind, pausing at the alley's mouth to peer in at the man. The fellow was leaning against a brick wall, shaking and muttering to himself.

"Hey, Mister?" Isaac called. "Are you okay?"

The man's head snapped up so hard Isaac feared the man would give himself whiplash.

"You!" the man shouted. "Are you my tail?"

"Tail?" asked Isaac.

"You tell your bosses that they already took everything I'll give them! I don't even have a water filter anymore!"

"Sorry, sir," Isaac muttered. "I'll get out of your hair."

As Isaac turned to leave, the man called, "You think I'll just let you leave? No way, Tail. It's time to turn the tables. Now, I'm going to be the one be tailing you."

Isaac ran.

'They shouldn't have exposed themselves to me. Now I have a thread to tug on. Now I'm the tail.'

"How was work, honey?" asked Marsha, Isaac's wife.

"I don't know," said Isaac. "Weird."

“Weird how?” she asked.

“Well, on the way into work, I tried helping some guy who I thought was sick, but then it turned out he was, like, crazy or homeless or something. He accused me of tailing him around and started threatening to tail me back.”

“Jesus, honey, that’s terrifying. And has he been? Tailing you, that is?”

“Well, I haven’t actually seen him. But hell, it’s like I can feel him. I was in my office and kept getting the strangest sensations of being watched. Then later, when I was walking home, it was a hundred times worse. I had my eyes peeled, but never actually saw him. But God, it was spooky as can be. I still can’t shake the feeling that he’s hanging outside our apartment now.”

“I bet I can help you shake the feeling,” said Marsha, bringing Isaac in for a passionate kiss... Then they made love.

As it began, Isaac was indeed distracted from his fears, but as it progressed, his paranoia crept back in, leaving him feeling like a porn star performing for a webcam, unsure just how many potential tails were lurking about to witness the event.

Afterwards, he went to the kitchen for a glass of water. When he turned on the sink, he was startled to find his water filter was missing. Not trusting straight city water, he poured himself a glass of milk instead.

“Honey, what happened to our water filter?” Isaac asked upon returning to the bedroom.

“What do you mean? I haven’t touched it.”

Something about the words ‘water filter’ was ringing distant alarm bells in Isaac’s brain, but he pushed them away.

One Month Later...

“How can you think you can leave me, Marsha? You don’t have a job. Or, do you? Is that where you disappear to when I’m at work? To your secret job? Are they the ones who started tailing me?”

“Nobody is tailing you, Isaac. You’ve just lost your mind!”

“Oh yeah? Then who took our water filter? And who is the man who keeps tailing me? I see him every day, lurking in every shadow, laughing from every corner.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Please!”

“You expect me to believe that? If you’re so innocent, why haven’t you bought a new water filter yet? How is a man supposed to stay sane around here if he can’t even drink water?”

“You’re crazy. I need to leave. Please don’t try to stop me.”

“Oh, you’d just love that, wouldn’t you? For me to put hands on you? It would give you something exciting to tell your superiors when you give them your report about me. Why are they so interested in me, anyways? What makes me so special?”

“Nothing,” said Marsha, closing the front door of their home for the last time.

‘I have a tail lately, and I’m not happy about it.

‘Just who exactly is tailing me? I couldn’t tell you, not yet. Top guesses are Facebook or Google. They’re trying to silence me like JFK.

‘At first, I thought it was my wife. Or, I should say, ex-wife. Once I realized she was too lazy for such things, the theory evolved into ‘she hired whoever is tailing me’. But now, now, this tail is more than just some Private Dick looking to bend me over in divorce court. No, the existence of my tail has revealed to me a vast conspiracy, one that has pervaded every aspect of my existence without my having ever noticed.

‘Wait... that’s him! Right over there! That’s the man who started tailing me! He’s the one who ruined my marriage! I’ll get him this time.

“Die, punk!”

‘Damn it! He disappeared again.

‘Oh well. One of these days, I’ll finally catch the person responsible for all this. He is going to pay. Or at least return my water filter.’

THE END

THE CREATURE IN THE POOL BY AARON J. BOTT

I was wandering through the forest like I always had, it became something of a habit more than anything. I can't remember why I kept coming back... in fact, I can't remember anything before the encounter. Before I saw just how terrifying beauty could possibly be.

But I'm going off on a tangent.

There was a path I always took that strayed off from where most would go, perhaps that was the reason I decided to always venture there, but during my aimless wander, my disregard for the double-edged sword that is nature led me to trip and fall. I tumbled down a steep slope, with no idea of how fast I was going until I crashed against a tree and came to a painfully abrupt halt.

I lay against the tree for a minute or two, trying to regain my thoughts as my head seemed to be filled with mighty church bells, chiming in resounding discord. Any idea of misfortune quickly wavered however, when my eyes met upon the most beautiful of scenery I ever had the courtesy of witnessing.

There were willow trees lined up against each other, each imbued with luscious pink leaves and vines that covered the bark of the tree in it's own individual pattern. The grass stretched toward every edge of the area, refined and yet untouched by the claws of humanity. And in the middle of it, lay a large lake.

And in the middle of that? A creature unbeknownst to man.

She was playing in the lake, swimming at a speed that was impossible for the ordinary human, giggling and laughing as she strode across. I was entranced immediately... I lay against a tree and watched her every movement. I don't think my heart ever beat so fast... with every movement of her arms, I felt it pound harder in my chest.

Then she saw me, and it stopped.

Time slowly faded into oblivion as I was trapped within her glance, no words left our mouths, it wasn't necessary. She swam towards the edge of the lake and I started to walk towards it. Each step from me, was a stroke from her. We were already in unison, and in what seemed like a second, we were already face-to-face.

Her eyes shone with a fluorescent blue, akin to the lake she resided within, they gazed at me with a mixture of curiosity and tender affection. I was immediately entranced.

“H-hi!” I was the first to make conversation, my voice seemed to crack slightly, creating a justifiably uncomfortable tone in the atmosphere. She looked at my mouth, confused, she opened her mouth and tried to mimic me, but couldn’t. She looked defeated and swam away.

I began to visit her regularly, and despite the language barrier we became closer than I could have been with any human. She would sing to me, the language was foreign, but it was still ever so enticing. It sounds childish of me to say, but I think I was in love.

I remember my final encounter with her the most vivid, either because it was simply the most memorable or because it’s the most recent. I went to visit her, but something was off. She wasn’t humming or singing when I saw her, she just swam, the silence somehow manifesting into the loudest and most noticeable feature.

When she noticed me, she swam over like she always did, and looked up at me, her eyes filled with a mixture of regret and sorrow, with an almost unnoticeable tinge of greed, or was it lust? I’ll never know.

She beckoned me into the lake, swimming away, expecting me to follow... Unfortunately, due to my own stupidity and greed, I did exactly as she wanted, and sealed my fate. She turned to me and smiled, diving underwater. I chased her, while not as much of an adept swimmer as her, I certainly wasn’t hopeless at the task.

The next few moments are kind of hazy, I’ll try to recount them as best as I can.

I remember her turning to me, she swims closer and my heart pounds like it had many times before, getting faster and faster as she got closer. Her hand softly rubs my cheek, and her face, I’ll never forget, was one of intense happiness.

Our lips gradually get closer and closer together, and we make contact. It was divine, and I wouldn’t be kidding if I told you my heart almost exploded, it certainly felt like it. It was bliss, it was heaven, it was all I would have ever wanted.

Then there’s a flash of red contrasting against the bluish tinge of the water, I ignore it. I just want this moment to last. But then I realize the terrifying truth, that the red was coming from me.

Pain kicks in and I writhe away from her, the red follows. Oh god, there was so much of it. My vision starts to blur as more of the red poured out of me. She's looking at me, a forced smile etched upon her face. She did this to me. I trusted her. How could she do this to me? How could she-

Then everything went black.

You know when they talk about a white light? They're not lying about that. In my final moments I remember seeing a bright light, and I realize I'm running towards it. But I don't get any closer, it just keeps getting smaller and smaller, I can't get to it in time, it's shrinking!

The light disappears, and I wake up.

I'm at the top of the lake, but something feels different. I can't speak, and my legs have been replaced by a tail. I want to cry, but I'm not even sure if I can mimic that emotion. All I can do is sing.

I remember her, I remember everything.
But I'm not mad.
I just want to sing with her.
Maybe if I keep singing, she'll come back.
Yeah... She'll come back.
Right?

THE END

A GIRL'S TAIL BY E.L. DRAYTON

She liked to hum most in the morning, just before sunrise, along the tall black fence that had no beginning and no end, just like her humming. She didn't know what tune she hummed as she'd never heard music before. Her mother and older brother had experienced humming and they would hum to her when she was just a baby. Now, ten years later, she vaguely recalled the tune.

Every morning she did the same thing. She'd run for miles till she found the tall black fence and walked alongside it until she knew her mother and brother would be just waking up and then she's had to rush back home. Each time she'd mark her spot along the fence with a piece of white chalk she stole from her mother, a school teacher.

The routine became a sort of game to her. Wake up, run to the previous spot, walk and hum for about two hours. Every day was the same. Until the day she heard someone humming back on the other side of the fence. She'd never heard a soul or sound on the other side. All this time she believed her mother who taught all her students that the fence was to keep out the water. Felicity had never heard nor seen this strange water her mother spoke so warningly about. She would press her ear against the cold, black, metal fence at least once every morning and listen. She'd never seen or tasted water. The water substitute was provided by Que, a global corporation. Felicity didn't know much about them, except what her mother taught. They've saved millions of lives with their fresh and safe water, what more was there to know?

"Hello?" she asked, pressing her ear to the fence. Nothing. Silence. She shrugged her shoulders, noticed how bright it looked around her, and knew it was time to run home before she was caught.

The art of sneaking around not just her home but her town came easily for her. Felicity had always been small for her age and thin as well. Her size gave her the advantage she needed to be fast and quiet at the same time. However, thoughts about who it could've been on the other side of the fence caused her foot to fall too loudly on the linoleum floor of the kitchen. With the only escape route, the doorway towards her bedroom, she knew she was done for, and she was right.

"And where have you been, young lady?" her mother asked. She walked into the kitchen and immediately started preparing breakfast while she waited for her daughter's answer.

“I was just in the garden picking flowers for you, mom,” Felicity said. Her hands were empty of flowers and she knew her lie would not hold.

“I suppose you didn’t find any good enough for your mother?”

“Huh? Oh, yes, that’s right. They aren’t fully bloomed yet,” Felicity said, then bit her tongue, holding back the urge she had to ask her mother a question.

“Out with it,” her mother said, wiping her hands on a dishtowel and then putting them on her hips.

Felicity fidgeted before she spoke. “What’s on the other side of the fence?” Her mother rolled her eyes and sighed exasperated. This line of questioning was not new to her. “I know you said it’s to keep out the bad water. But I never hear water and today I think I heard someone on the other side. What if they’re in trouble and need our help?”

Her mother smiled at Felicity. She knew what her mother would say even before she’d said it. Her answers were not new to Felicity.

“I told you not to go near that fence. I mean it. If you do something to let the water come into our town it will kill us all and then you wouldn’t be able to sneak out every morning. There is nothing or no one over that fence. Stay away from it.”

Her brother, Daniel, walked in scratching his head, his hair disheveled. “What did the little squirt do this time?”

“Nothing,” her mother answered. She gave Felicity a stern look, ending the discussion.

She sulked all the way to her room, threw herself on the bed and looked out her window. In the distance she could just make out the top of the fence. Unlike normal fences, this particular one had about two feet jutting out from its top. This piece was there to prevent those in her town from attempting to see over the fence. And stop the curious climber.

For the rest of the day she’d sneak to her room whenever possible and peek out her window. She knew there would be nothing to see but the fence and the sky, but she never lost hope that today would be the day. Little did she know she was right.

That night, several hours after everyone had fallen fast asleep, a geyser shot up hundreds of feet in the air. Felicity woke with a start, her heart beating fast. She brushed long, damp,

strands from her face and looked out her window. Was it a dream or real? There was only one way she could be sure. She got dressed quickly, all the while listening for any signs of her mother or brother awake as well. The only sound she heard was her own breathing. This made her lose hope that what she heard wasn't real and just a dream. She shook the doubt from her head and snuck out her bedroom window as she always had every morning before sunrise.

She'd never snuck out of the house when it was this dark before, but she didn't care. She knew she heard something and it required investigating. Once she was well beyond her house she sprinted towards the fence. Even in the darkness, with little light to guide her, she knew exactly where she was going and felt she could've run there blindfolded.

She reached the fence but skidded to a stop when her feet made distinct squishing sounds on the ground. It was a sound she'd never heard before. Due to the increased cost of water being supplied no one could afford to water their garden with a hose. Instead it was pumped through the ground almost towards the surface, but never quite reaching. Yards and farms received the nutrients they needed and nothing more. The sound of wet grass and mud had been foreign to Felicity till now. She bent down and digging her fingers into the wet earth she grabbed a chunk of it and brought it to her nose. The smell was familiar, but curiosity ran away from her as she stuck her tongue out to have a taste.

"Who's there?" She dropped the glob of mud she held in her hand and remained very still, her tongue remained sticking out. "Are you the one who hums?"

She placed her tongue back in her mouth and squished her shoes towards the fence. "Hello? Can you hear me?"

"Of course, I can hear you. I'm not deaf. What's your name?"

"Felicity." She couldn't believe it. There actually was someone on the other side. Her mother lied to her. Wait a minute, she thought, her mother lied. Or maybe her mother didn't know that there was life on the other side of the fence? "Are you in trouble? Are you hurt?"

"No," the voice on the other side chuckled. "Why would you think that?"

"What's it like where you are?" Felicity asked. The voice definitely belonged to a boy and it sounded friendly, so she was not afraid.

The voice answered, “what’s it like? I don’t know how to answer that. I suppose it’s no different than your side of the fence.”

The two of them stayed talking that way the entire night. They walked along the fence until they reached a drier spot for Felicity and the voice who was now a friend as it had introduced itself as Henry, to sit.

And suddenly, the sun peeked through the clouds in the sky. “I really should be going now, Henry. My mother will be awake soon and all this talking has made me thirsty.”

“Are you thirsty? Why didn’t you say so, friend? I have water I could’ve given to you. Would you like some before you go?”

Felicity didn’t know what to do. She didn’t want to be rude and refuse something from a new friend, but she knew the water over the fence was bad. Her mother told her so. Then again, her mother lied about there being people on the other side what if she lied about the water, too?

“Where does it come from?” she asked, just to be on the safe side.

Henry chuckled again. “Where does it come from? Why, it comes from where yours does.”

Felicity’s face lit up. “You mean Que supplies your side with water too?”

“Of course,” Henry replied. She was not yet old enough to know what a smirk sounded like, but he was smirking all the same. “Now, we’re not allowed to do this, but since you’re my friend.” A small rectangular piece of the fence came away, just large enough for a gloved hand to reach through it, holding a glass of water. “Go on, take it.” Felicity tried to get a peek past the gloved hand, but it was complete darkness.

She took the glass from his hand and inspected it closely. She even held it up to the sun. It seemed safe enough. She shrugged her shoulders and downed the glass in one gulp. It was actually tasty and refreshing. Much better than the water on their side. She wondered why Que would give them better water as she bid her farewell to Henry, promising to return that night.

Her sprint home, she found, was much faster than it ever had been. Almost like she had newfound energy. Perhaps it was the water?

When she reached her home she walked in, not bothering to hide the fact she had snuck out, again. She also didn't bother to hide her muddy shoes as she trekked them all the way to the kitchen and plopped down at the table. She suddenly felt very hungry. She took a deep breath and smelled something absolutely delicious, but it wasn't coming from the kitchen.

She followed the scent all the way to her brother's room where she found he had nicked himself shaving. A trickle of blood fell down his cheek. She licked her lips and grabbed her stomach which made a sound so loud her brother heard it. Startled, he dropped his razor into the sink.

"Hey, little sis. What's that on your shoes? Did you sneak out again to that fence? Get in here and take them off before mom sees. I want to go out tonight and she won't let me if you keep making her mad." He pulled his sister into his room and closed the door. He bent down to take her shoes off, and she grabbed his face in her small hands. He didn't have time to scream or react before she snapped his neck, giving her the perfect angle to lick the blood from his cheek and proceed to rip a chunk of his face.

Sounds of her mother cooking in the kitchen drew her attention away from her brother, now a bloody mess of torn flesh on his bedroom floor. She dropped the corpse and walked out of his room, leaving bloody footprints in her wake.

Feeling sufficiently full she sat at the kitchen table, her mother's back to her. "I expect you to clean up this mess you made, young lady."

"Okay, mom." Felicity stood up from the table and walked towards the hall closet to retrieve the bucket and mop. Her mother turned to look at her daughter and dropped the dirty plate she held in her hand. It crashed to the floor in pieces. "Don't worry, I'll clean that up, too."

Felicity's tail had grown about four feet long already, though she was not aware of it yet.

THE END

DON'T EAT THE SHELLFISH BY N.D. KELLER

“Don’t eat the shellfish,” my grandfather warned.

I knew better than that. I looked up the shellfish warnings every time before I went out. The site said it was fine. I needed to watch out for the scallops; they weren’t being tested, but everything else was safe to eat, so I packed up my gear.

“Rebecca, don’t eat the shellfish,” he warned again. “It’s not safe. Look at the clouds, they are tinged with a hint of red. I don’t want to lose another family member to the sea.”

“The food safety program says its safe, grandpa.” I gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Don’t worry about some silly old wive’s tale.” Besides, that was for sailors. I was after crab, and that was easy to do right off the docks. I tossed the cage and bait into my truck and drove on down to the docks.

It was a beautiful day. The water was only slightly choppy, and the sun shone on the lighthouse across the river. I hummed to myself as I set up the trap. It was a simple method, just tie in a chicken leg and drop. I could take out a boat into the river and set down traps in several more spots, but this trip was more about looking into the water and enjoying the day. I watched the line from my chair and sipped at some lemonade.

My ears picked up a soft chattering as a family of otters swam up the river. They splashed at each other and occasionally dove down into the shallow waters. They had the same idea as I. I saw one pop up with a crab and then take small rock and pound into it. The other otters in the group swam closer trying to steal bits and pieces off the first one’s prize; a mother and her pups I assumed. It was rare to be able to get a good look at them. I snapped a few photos from my phone. Using the zoom, I was able to confirm my suspicions and get a few photos to slip onto the internet.

I didn’t bother to wait for the replies of “these are cute” that quickly filled the comments. Instead I muted my phone and continued to watch as the otters swam closer. One of the pups broke off and dove into the water near my bait. It must be after my chicken! I saw the line tugging and grabbed it, pulling the line-up.

Once out of the water, I spotted a crab with its legs dangling in the cage, and it was a big one. I was lucky, that pup chased a crab into my cage. Perfect.

The pup popped its head out of the water and chattered at me. I smiled as I cleaned and then cooked the crab on site before tossing the cage and bait back into the water. I planned to get one for me now and then more for me later. I'd share with my family back home if I caught enough, but nothing beat fresh out of the water crab.

I even tossed a few pieces of the legs into the water to share with the otters. Soon I had a whole crowd chattering at me. One even bravely got up onto the dock. It was then that I started to feel odd. The world swam, and my clothes suddenly felt uncomfortable. They were restrictive and tight. Suddenly, they became very loose. My body had a pulling sensation. Everything was going in the wrong direction and my hands hit the dock. I couldn't get back upright. I looked down and realized why. My paws were no longer hands and they looked very much like an otter's. I had become one! I let out a squeak of surprise, but around me I heard voices.

"Come play with us."

"Come on in, the water is fine."

"Let's chase some fish."

"Now dears, give her a minute." said the oldest one.

"What happened?" I finally managed to ask.

"You accepted our gift. You are an otter now," said the big one in a soothing voice. She swam out a ways from the dock followed by all but one of her pups. The last one stayed and head-butted me, trying to shove me into the water.

I considered the options. I had just become an otter, and who knew if I'd ever turn back. People didn't just turn into otters and yet here I was. Well, I'd rather be in the water than on the dock. Fish and wildlife would come by to check on things, and they wouldn't want us up here.

I plunged in. The water was a shock of cold, but only at first. I soon warmed up and realized that my fur was now perfectly suited to the conditions. The pups swarmed me. "You got to blow bubbles in your fur like this." They chattered and groomed me all over making sure my fur was perfect for swimming. They were quite pleased to show off their otter skills and I found myself laughing, enjoying the childish attention. Their mother watched from a short distance, letting her brood climb as they pleased.

Once I was ready they took me down to chase fish and explore the kelp beds. I found it odd at first. I could not move my paws as I would normally swim. Gone were the breast and butterfly strokes, but my long tail provided the perfect propulsion once I got the hang of it. The pups laughed as I swam off course again and again, but the mother said I was doing fine for a first timer.

I swam with them for a time, until we heard singing that echoed eerily through the water. There were words I could not understand and a drum that carried into the water. I became entranced and swam closer, but the others hung back. "Don't get too close to the long boats," the mother called. "They will take your fur and eat your meat."

To this I heeded, watching from a distance. The long canoes had paddles that took them up and down the river. People I didn't recognize populated the banks, as they tossed in nets and lines, taking the fish from the river. All the while, they sang and laughed.

Another otter met me there. He was quite handsome for an otter, with a body that was long and powerful. "Hello," he said, "You are new."

"I only became an otter a short time ago," I replied, unsure of this new male. He stayed at a respectful distance for now.

"I see. You have traversed the tide. Come with me, and I'll show you some good places to fish and find shells."

We swam together for a time. He showed me the beds, and how to catch a fish mid swim. I learned how to find pockets of air in the rocky caves that hid us away from people when we didn't want to be found. In the flats he taught me how to find clams and dentalium. He traded one of the dentalium shells to one of the men in the long canoes for a fish. He leapt onto the man's canoe and deposited the shell onto the head of the canoe.

The man laughed and tossed us both a fish, amused by the intrepid otter. I found myself falling in love with both the otter and the simple way of life. We dodged dolphins, swam up rivers and occasionally traded with the humans. I found a favorite stone that worked well on most of the shellfish.

And in the way of things we became a pair. We spent our days together. Occasionally we went down to the ocean where I saw the pups, now grown. We visited the pups with whom I shared fishing spots and details of handsome young otters in the area. Some even had pups of their own, and I realized I was lonely. I wanted to see my own family again.

“I’d like to go home, to visit my family.” I said to my mate. “Do you know the way?”

“I do not, but perhaps your friends do.”

I asked them, and the former pups knew but would not tell. It took some time before I finally found their mother, the first otter. She had new pups now, bouncing and ready to play. “Can you lead me back home?” I asked her. “I’d like to see my family again.” I did not know if I could become human again, but I wanted to at least see the docks I dove into the water from once more.

“If you go back to that time and place, you may not be able to return,” she warned.

“I must go.” I couldn’t get thoughts of home out of my head.

So, she and my companion swam with me to waters that became more familiar. Motor boats escaped the mouth of the river between jetties. The light house, old with fading paint, stood like a beacon though the light had long been unlit. I was home.

And I was tired. I swam to a bank and stood on it. My companion sat with me as we looked out at all the lights across the river. It was home, and I wondered where my family was. Did they come to the docks looking for me? Did they find my clothes and give me up for dead?

“So, this is your home.” said my companion. “I’ll leave you here a while. I’ll wait by the mouth of the river for when you wish to join me again.” He slipped into the murky darkness of the river.

I stayed, falling asleep. When I woke, I was cold, and naked. I had pink skin instead of warm fur. I was human. A boat approached me and from the deck I saw my grandfather holding a blanket and warm clothes. “I told you not to eat the shellfish.”

I accepted the blanket and the clothes. I stared down towards the mouth of the river and I knew I would eat the shellfish again, despite my grandfather’s warnings.

THE END

WEEK TWO

FANTASY DEVIL

PROMPT:

WRITE A STORY WHOSE TITLE IS “FANTASY DEVIL”

DUALITY BY PAUL METAXAS

“Then it dawned on me, we always remembered this message. The one that whispers in our ears during the witching hour. That extra sensation when we’re content, tugging at itself. An unwelcome reminder of this bag of flesh in our possession. We breathe in familiarity for its own sake. We exhale posterity to a society we cannot connect to. An existential umbilical cord, severed so many lifetimes ago. Shampoo, rinse, repeat. We’ve danced this movement together ad infinum, you and me.

All this, and we still come back for more. In every moment everywhere, we reside to meet each other.

What I want to know is, why? Is there no resolution for the sake of experience? If so, how do we measure it? Contrast?

We’ve been best friends for as long as I can remember. Lovers, family, enemies. Never merely acquaintances or coincidences. You could say we’ve always been... intimate. Only, you know I am something more, but you cannot remember why.

I will tell you when it is time. I will always be there for you. I am not God or the Devil, not something so temporary. You know me best simply as Death.

Unless of course, this is all a dream.”

“Gottfried, page Dr. Aadima immediately, tell her the patient in 222 is stirring.”

I struggle to focus, force blinking. Beeping sounds surround me.

“Please relax, Mom... You've been in a coma for so long. I love you so much.” A gentle touch on my arm.

“Is...” my throat is so dry, “is that you Charlie? Your father was talking to me, it was wonderful.”

“Mom... you know he's gone... welcome back.”

THE END

UNTITLED BY C.E.S. DRAIN TW

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth, and He created light and dark and called them Day and Night, and He created the Sky above and the Seas below, and He saw that these were good. And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." Then God created humankind in His image, and He gave them dominion over all living things on the Earth. God blessed them with a bountiful Garden, and said unto them "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the Earth and subdue it." And God, in order to protect His creation, gave the Garden a guardian cherub, whom He placed upon the mount of God and adorned with jewels and riches. And God anointed the angel 'Lucifer', and ordained him to protect Eden from the evils of the world.

However, as time passed the angel became tainted by the evil he fought. Wickedness found him, and he was filled with violence and jealousy. He came to resent the Garden and everything in it and hatched a plan to take his revenge on God for giving him this thankless task. He knew that there was one tree in the center of the Garden that would grant fantastic dreams to anyone who ate of its fruit. And these dreams would taint God's creations and drive them to insanity, since it was not possible for reality to ever be as good as fantasy, even in the Garden of Eden. So, Lucifer became a serpent and went to tempt the female Eve, who was more easily convinced.

The serpent found Eve tilling the land and planting seeds. He scared off the other animals gathered around her and then said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the Garden?'" The woman replied, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree in middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die, for God would not risk one of his creations. Instead, your nights will be filled with wonderful images of scenes beyond your imagination. God does not want you to imagine a life outside of the Garden, but this fruit will allow you to experience it through your dreams."

And Eve ate of the fruit of the dream tree and seeing that it was good to eat gave some to her husband, who was with her. That night, they both had wonderful dreams about iced fields and Rocky Mountains, green vales and dry deserts, and the next morning Lucifer watched as they journeyed to the edge of the garden, searching for an exit. The Lord God saw them too and came down from Heaven to the Garden and asked what they were doing. The man said, "I am looking for a way out of the Garden, for there is no ice, no desert, no mountain or vale here." And the Lord God said, "Who told you about these things?" And Adam answered, "I saw them in a dream." God said, "A dream? Have you

eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."

The Lord God went to the serpent who turned into Lucifer the angel and cowered under God's gaze. God said, "For this thing you have done, you are expelled from the Garden of Eden. You have become corrupted, and so you shall go down to Earth, and I shall make a spectacle out of you before kings. You shall burn for eternity, and fire shall come out from you and burn everything you touch. Never again shall your evil taint the kingdom of Heaven." And Lucifer was banished from Eden, and Adam was banished, and Eve was banished for eating of the tree of dreams. And as the man and the woman made a life from the earth, they dreamed about Eden, knowing that they could never get back there.

THE END

NEIGHBORS BY CURTIS MCINTYRE TW

DAY ONE: MONDAY

“Mike’s dog shit in my yard again!” said Kevin.

“What a bummer,” I said.

“I swear to God, if he doesn’t start picking up after that mutt, I’m going to get him back.”

“God?” I asked.

“I know he’s doing it on purpose, too. There’s two dozen other homes in this stretch alone. How does the dog only poop in my driveway daily?”

DAY THREE: WEDNESDAY

“So, you know that guy Kevin, right?” Mike asked me. “He’s the weirdo who lives alone in the house right next to yours.”

“Yeah, I’ve met him a couple times,” I said

“You have?” Mike said. “What’s his deal? Every time I’m walking my dog, he shoots me the dirtiest looks. If it was just that, I wouldn’t be complaining, but...”

I considered telling Mike how Kevin had been complaining to me about how Mike’s dog always poops on his grass but decided I shouldn’t cause more trouble than was already brewing. Instead, I implored Mike to continue talking, saying, “Yeah?”

Mike rubbed his weary eyes before proceeding. “Last night, I was just drifting off to sleep, when suddenly my wife started screaming. She’s pointing at the window and swearing that she saw someone watching us through the bedroom window. She couldn’t see their face, only the outline of a head, and she’s swearing that she saw it dart off the moment she cried out.”

“That’s terrifying... wait, you think Kevin did it?”

“Well, I was hoping it was my wife’s imagination, but I went outside to investigate just in case. Well, my heart just about stopped when I saw fresh boot prints in the soft dirt outside our bedroom window. I jogged out to the street to see if anyone was around but there weren’t any people or cars on the roads. And yet, lo and behold, all the lights are on at Kevin’s house. The rest of the block is dark, but there his house is, all lit up like a beacon. I know it doesn’t mean he’s guilty, but it was awfully strange.”

“That’s creepy and all, but I can’t imagine Kevin being a whacko of that caliber,” I said.

“Well, I don’t know him,” said Mike. “Try to reassure me. What kind of guy is he? A banker? A lawyer? A Devil worshiper?”

“The Devil?” I asked.

DAY FIVE: FRIDAY

“Today is the last straw!” exclaimed Kevin.

“Oh yeah?” I said. “What happened?”

“Mike’s dog...” Kevin had to pause to compose himself, visibly shaking with anger. “That mongrel shit right on my newspaper this time! I put up with all the shitting on my grass, but this! This is a deliberate act of neighborhood terrorism. This was intentional. Mike must have, like, trained his dog to do it out of spite. That, or he literally picked up the poop and moved it onto my paper just to trigger me.”

I considered mentioning how Mike thinks Kevin has been spying through his windows at night, but instead say, “Jeepers, that’s pretty sick stuff.”

“They’ll regret this, I swear to God.”

“God?” I asked.

“How come you get that funny look on your face whenever I talk about God?” Kevin asked.

“Who, me?” says I. “Sorry, I guess I just never believed in God. Not that I’m against living by religious values. I just think folks should be decent human beings without the threat of not getting into Heaven hanging over their heads. Because, if God isn’t real and up there watching, it falls on us to make this world the one we want it to be. Some people aren’t

ready for that responsibility and use God as an excuse to fall back on when they don't live up to the world's expectations."

"Well, as long as you're living right, I'm sure God still loves you, whether you care or not."

DAY SEVEN: SUNDAY, THE DAY OF REST

"That guy is dead!" Mike shouted as he stomped across my lawn, pistol in hand.

"What guy?" I asked, not that I couldn't guess but more to make conversation.

"Kevin! The one who was spying through my window."

"Why? Was he peeping again?"

Mike broke down, falling to his knees in my grass. "He... he... That psycho murdered my dog!"

"Oh no! Not little Spunky! Uh, are you sure he was murdered and didn't just die of, like, dog stuff?"

"You didn't see! Oh, hell, I'll never get the image out of my head. You don't want to know what that freak did to my poor pooch. I mean, his tongue... Anyone who could commit such an act isn't a man. He must be, like, the Devil or something."

"The Devil?" I asked.

"You don't believe in the Devil?"

"Uh..."

God, the Devil, I never had time for those things. The way I see it, people need to be the God they think this world deserves. Or, if the world has betrayed them the way it has done to me, they could always become the Devil it needs. This world doesn't have any karma, no universal balance beams. If you want good to happen, you must live as a decent person. Conversely, if you see people who you think deserve the fiery pits of Hell and become embittered about the fact that they will never be punished for their Earthly misdeeds, you must become their Satan. The Devil moves behind the scenes, never

revealing his presence, subtly nudging events down the most sinister of timelines, all to lean back and enjoy the mayhem.

“Now that I think about it, Kevin used to tell me all the time about how he couldn’t stand your dog,” I say. “He swore he was going to ‘get him’ one day, but I never thought he meant it.”

“What!? That psycho is finished!”

Does this make me a bad person? I don’t think so. I mean, these people thrive on drama. They should be thanking me for giving their lives some excitement.

“Good luck,” I call to Mike.

Also, I fucking hate dogs. Killing one was no problem, although having to move the poop daily was a little yucky.

Oh, well. Let’s crack a beer and enjoy the show. I love Sundays.

THE END

DEVIL GAMES BY N.D. KELLER

It is my first summoning and I can't screw this up. Failure would lead to my immediate demise. The tutorial said to keep it simple at first. I scroll through the many options and pick an easy low-level request. If I impress them, they might ask me for an audience again by name. If not, it would mean having to try again and again and hope that the last person remembers my name long enough for me to get to the next. No name means no energy, and once a devil loses their name, they die.

I will not have many chances. Time is of the essence.

I answer the call of someone who wants a pair of gloves with heat resistance. I have two options: I could, A) hack the system and make a copy or B) work the market and play it safe. Hacking the system heightened the possibility of my name being banned but working the market would take longer. If I took too long they would forget our deal.

The tutorial says that duplicating a low-level item meant for beginners is not likely to be noticed. Higher level items like swords that dealt death blows on the first hit are more likely to be flagged and banned.

I take the gamble. In return I get a small stack of fish. They are barely worth a few gold coins, but so are the gloves. A female voice carries over the speaker. "Thank you Impy." I'm startled; it isn't quite my name, but it is close enough. It feels like a hot shot of power. This stranger--faceless except for the cheerful yellow avatar--gave me what I needed. It's addicting.

But even this small amount of movement is still too much. I need rest. Operating objects from the mortal world is difficult and requires a certain amount of energy. My supervisor lent us just enough to get started, after that we had to get our own energy. Even the computers we work on are cobbled together with broken discarded parts held together by a bit of magic. They could die at any moment. One of my coworkers had theirs die and within the hour they had gone up in smoke. I needed a promotion; I could get a reliable computer and maybe last a little longer than a week.

I dare not ask for it now. If the supervisor doesn't like me, they can easily take my computer away and replace me with a new born demon, desperate for a contract. Right now, the supervisor is stomping about the work area, rattling my other coworkers out of their chairs. "When I was a young demon, we actually went to our summoning. There was more energy off them, and blood. You made an impression - maybe with a little magic to

spice up the entrance on your summoning. There wasn't this stupid copy paste imp avatars and answering petty calls from teenage boys."

My summoner was female, not male, but I didn't mention that. Instead I scrolled down for another summoning. Instead I got a message. "Want to group up, Impy?"

Intrigued, I typed a reply. "Yes." I followed the cheerful yellow avatar around and found that the imp avatar had a few basic abilities. I could summon a small fireball and run assistance for the female player. As we go along, I can taste energy, magic from the contract as we play along. It is different, and I find I have more energy after our session. I scroll through and find a few more contracts and find them lacking. I respond to a few but playing the market didn't give the same energy as actual interaction. Perhaps my supervisor was on to something.

Later, I get another message. "Want to play Shoot Them and Beat Them with me?"

I of course say yes. There is the beat of energy, pulses from the messages as I quickly learn how to play and make a new avatar for this new game. I choose a new name for myself. Ignatius.

My contractor drops a lol and calls me Iggy now.

My desk mate is unimpressed. "Why are you wasting time messing about with that human? Your follower count is a total of one. I've got fifteen now." They brag but I ignore them. I only need one. Well, maybe two. After Cheerful Yellow logs off, I offer to play and level up a newbie in Shoot Them and Beat Them rather than mindlessly find more simple contracts. We play for a while before the newbie logs off and I go back to working the market.

Within a week, the market crashes. The latest update took down all of the loop holes we had been trained on.

My desk mate paces, but I simply slip on Beat Them and Shoot Them.

"How can you be so calm?" My desk-mate growls at me.

"I'm just working a different game."

"That isn't even the market. You can't gain energy without a proper contract."

I shrug and put out a party request. Miss Cheerful Yellow isn't on, but the newbie is.

"Come on Iggy," they say. We go through and shoot some aliens. I ignore the smoke and groans of my coworkers and they one by one turn to dust. My desk mate explodes with a hiss of fire, but I feel nothing. They didn't take the time to cultivate other opportunities, their contractors were temporary. It wasn't my fault.

I didn't even remember their names. Come to think of it, I don't even remember my own name before I became Ignatius.

Soon I am alone at the computers. My supervisor comes over in a foul mood that seems to change when they see me.

"You survived."

I smile. "I spread out my options." I had a follower, no two, who would play new games with me. I adapted.

"Well, I might as well train a full new block. You have potential. I'll send you up to my supervisor. He'll be pleased to get a decent devil. Maybe one day your contracts will be more than just silly games."

"Maybe." But for now, I'm happy with a promotion and a cheap new laptop.

THE END

WEEK THREE

WHAT'S IN THE CAVE?

PROMPT:

WRITE A STORY USING AN IMAGE OF A CAVE

SILENCE BY N.D. KELLER

The silence edged on. He could only hear the sound of his own breathing and smell the cold dampness of stone. It was so quiet he could hear his own pulse; a steady rhythm in the darkness. Although his flashlight was right in his hands, he kept it off. If needed, he could turn it on. He dared not let go of it. Once lost, it would be impossible to find.

Once lost, he would have no way of finding his way out of the deep cave system that ran endlessly in the lava tubes. If he was lucky, someone would come find him before he died of thirst. The tubes were popular enough, but they were a maze of endless caverns. He had stepped into a side cave just for this: to sit in the silence. He could not even hear the other groups. He was alone, truly alone, gazing into the abyss.

He listened to his pulse quicken and then slow. He counted the beats and found them endless. Time did not exist in the darkness. He nervously twisted the flashlight in his hands. He could end the darkness at any moment with the flick of a switch.

Fear shot through him. What if the battery died? He would really be lost down here. His entire life hung on those batteries and that flash light. 'Breathe' he told himself. 'Sit back and enjoy the silence.' He closed his eyes and opened them. There was no difference.

Finally, after an eternity alone in the dark he flicked the flashlight back on. Light beamed into the darkness revealing broken stones. He looked at his watch. Fifteen minutes.

THE END

NOISES BY DAVID MOORE

“How long are we going to be in here?” asked Ashley, while she held the monitor with its cables sprawled in all directions, connected to the sensors on the ground, as well as to the old car battery that powered the rig. All of this, to display a neon green needle—similar to a watch—spin in a clockwise motion revealing a single, or a pair, of dots against the black background of the screen, which then expanded in ripples to fade a few seconds later, until the needle completed another full circle and passed over the same spot once again.

“We still need to collect some more data,” said Rachel. She wore a single large headphone over her right ear, just beneath the shaved strip at the side of her head. A few weeks earlier she’d had to remove the damaged left speaker, leaving that ear free to pay attention to her surroundings, plus, it also meant less occupied space in the backpack to use for food. The rest of her hair fell in a deep purple cascade behind the ear and down in front of her shoulder, pooling gently around her large breast. It ended in golden spikes where the dye had washed away to reveal the natural color.

“I’m hungry,” said Ashley, “and all these insects here keep crawling all over my legs,” her free hand pushed a yellow beetle away from her calf. All they had eaten for the past five days of the expedition were two hundred grams of dried carrot, a hundred fifty grams of dried shiitake mushrooms, three hundred grams of stale and hard flat bread, and six liters of filtered water between the both of them. All that was left were fifty grams of mushrooms and fifty grams of dried carrot; the plastic bag which had contained the water was already squeezed dry, so they knew that they had to trek down the mountain to find a brook, or another source of water they could filter, soon. It never failed to amaze her how green the grass was all around the caves, almost as if the grass roots somehow became able to filter enough water to thrive, and at the same time serve as insulation from the ground.

“Just a little longer Ash,” said Rachel, as she maintained all her concentration on the earpiece. The last time they had seen their father, he was leading an expedition into a similar self-manifested cave along with three other meteorologists and a guide. That was eight years ago, and that was the second time she’d seen a group of humans vanish. Although it was hard to tell how accurate her information was after all communication ceased. The memory of the lamentable event was still clear in her mind, yet, Rachel couldn’t remember their dad’s face anymore, and she was afraid to ask her little sister if she remembered anything at all, since she was very young at the time and hadn’t talked about it much for the last four years, or so. “I feel it, the cave activity is very similar to what it was four years ago,” which was when Rachel’s boyfriend Zach had also ventured into

a similar cave while both sisters slept, never to be seen again. That experience changed her younger sister more than her. *What is it with men*, she wondered, *and their uncontrollable desire to enter into dark holes? Is it because they want to penetrate the Earth with the same impetus they want to fuck a new conquest?*

"I'm sorry about Zach," said Ashley and fell silent.

The unwarranted confession took Rachel aback, because it was the first time she uttered the name out loud after the event. Her sister had grown fond of him, Zach was a true protector. Where other men had tried to take advantage of women like them, who had no fathers or husbands, he made sure other men respected them. He was a couple of years her senior, and twice as big as her. Zach had been captain of the rugby team, or some kind of manly sport, and then he volunteered as a firefighter when the unexpected fires started, almost a decade ago. Now, most of the country was a wasteland after the two years of mysterious ground cracks that exhaled flames: those fires which had devoured everything in their path. It was safe to assume that the scenario was the same all over, since for about a couple of years they hadn't seen other people. Their father theorized that the government was behind it all, because according to him they dug underground tunnels to steal oil from other countries, and somehow their plan backfired, and all the tunnels caved-in. The oil that travelled beneath the earth set the whole country ablaze, and who knew where else. However, there was no way to prove the theory other than investigating the caves after the intense twenty-four months of inferno were over.

Rachel's focus fixed on some kind of faint sound, she covered her left ear with a finger and closed both eyes as she tried to recall the patterns she isolated from the previous two events that had cost her both a father and a boyfriend. She guessed that several thousand other inferno survivors probably ended up the same way. Beneath the loud *bump bump* pulse there was a much fainter buzz which sounded like a mosquito, but three octaves below in the tonal scale. This was the sound they had been hunting for. It was present once again, and in this particular cave. She opened her eyes to make sure that all the systems were recording the data on her end, and then glanced at Ashley, who understood the cue and focused on the visual monitor. Rachel closed her eyes to concentrate, but the buzzing was gone. "I'm sure I heard it," she said to herself, "did you see anything unusual?" she asked her sister.

"Yes," said Ashley, "and they're still active," she flipped the screen so that Rachel would be able to see. The three larger ripples, all in a perfect triangular arrangement, were placed in such a way that the needle activated each one after the other. However, apart from the rare triple formation, she also noticed that the center of the needle was in the

middle of the triangle. That could only mean one thing; whatever was producing the vibration on her younger sister's monitor, and the buzzing sound she heard, was close, beneath them, waiting. Her heart skipped a beat, she didn't realize her hands were clenched and sweating profusely, there had been so many underground sounds that each cave produced, the majority like oil engines or guttural groans, with the occasional *thumps* or *cracks*.

Ashley's high-pitched voice startled her, "did you hear that?" Rachel regained awareness of her feet, and the soft vibrations beneath them.

"Please help."

Both sisters stared at each other.

"Please help."

Rachel shook her head facing the cave, the voice sounded like it originated inside.

"Anybody there?" said another voice, this one had a much deeper tone than the first, probably an adult's.

The monitor lay cracked at Ashley's feet. Her eyes were wide open. All color abandoned her face, and her lips broadened as her jaw became heavier. Something warm flowed down between her thighs. "Dad?" said Ashley after a few seconds, "is it you?" Her feet pushed against the ground, she sprang forward, diving into the mouth of the cave.

"Wait!" cried out Rachel. The rope that bound them together began to unravel quickly on the fresh grass. "Don't go inside!" she insisted. But it was too late. She watched as Ashley's small body vanished into the inky darkness of the cave. The rope reached its tension limit, snapped back, and almost lashed Rachel like a whip. The tug made her lose her balance, enough to pull her down onto her knees. Her vision blurred. After all the training she'd drilled on Ashley to never get close to the cave's entrance, her sister was now gone. The earth beneath her feet began to tremble softly, and the rocky mouth closed in front of her watery eyes. Then it dawned on her: the second voice was actually her dad's. *It cannot be*, she thought, *how could he be alive after all these years? It cannot be*. The implication of that was too much. It wasn't possible. And what was more unlikely was that out of the hundreds of similar caves that appeared every day, they were at the exact one where he spoke after eight years. She made a mental note to study the recording later on. But for now, the cave was gone. Ashley was gone. Her dad was gone. Zach was

gone. And for all she knew, she was the last survivor who stood on the surface of the planet. As she sat there, her eyes landed on what was once the entrance of the cave, yet, now it was gone forever. Gradually, while she collected her thoughts, the grass began to dry up and die. She couldn't help but blame herself for giving that much rope to Ashley. While she folded what remained of it, she examined the end. It was a clean cut, none of the threads that made the rope were spreading, almost as if whatever sliced it had also cauterized the end. With a deep, and foreboding, sense of grief creeping over her shoulders, Rachel piled up all the equipment, fitted everything into both backpacks, placed one on her back and the other on her front; glanced one last time at the old car battery—which would have to do for a tombstone—and set to walk down the fucking mountain. Alone. As the realization of the day's event started to fit into her mind she cursed, "Fuck! What's in the cave?"

THE END

CAVES BY CURTIS MCINTYRE **TW**

I could feel God trying to stab me in the back with lightning as I ran through the storm. The rain was trying to catch hold of me, drag me down. The news hadn't mentioned any storm warnings this morning, yet here I was, hauling ass through a freak thunder storm down my usual jogging path in the woods.

That was when I saw it. The cave. I had never noticed it along this stretch before, although I wasn't a huge scenery guy, either. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that the cave was there just for me, the Earth opening its mouth to provide shelter from Nature's violent rampage.

Hoping the storm would pass quickly, I crawled into the belly of the beast.

I must have taken a nap, because I blinked, and the sun had returned, the mad torrents cast back to whatever Hell they had come rampaging out from.

"How was your jog?" my wife, Monica, asked as I came in the door. "I got so worried when that storm came through."

"I was fine. I, uh, yeah."

"That's good."

When I went for a jog the next day, I couldn't find the cave, although with all the rain yesterday, I wasn't completely sure where I had even seen it the first time.

The cave didn't so much as cross my mind again for months.

"I'm pregnant, honey," Monica told me.

"Holy crap! I'm going to be a father!"

We hugged and jumped for joy. As we spun with euphoria, I had the sudden sensation of a violent rain whipping across my face, wind whistling through my ears like it was Mother Nature's birthday and my brains were the candles on her cake.

A few months later, my closet door creaked open in the middle of the night. I hadn't even realized I was awake until the movement forced my senses to the forefront, leaving me

then wondering just how long I had been lying there, semi-conscious and waiting for something to happen. I stared at the open closet, squinting at layers of darkness upon darkness, the black of the closet a mere blot on an already inky landscape. All outer space could have been in the closet right then and I wouldn't know.

The door hanging lazily open reminded me of something, and it took me a minute to realize it looked like the cave from the woods, the way it had smiled open for me when I had needed it. So, by that logic, I found myself wondering, 'Should I climb into the closet, too?'

Monica was not happy to find me sleeping in the closet in the morning. She made it all about herself, as usual.

My baby was born today. I was there in the delivery room. It was the strangest thing, I couldn't shake the idea that, rather than giving birth to a human baby, my wife was pushing out a large slab of rock. As I watched the baby's head crowning her dilated cervix, I could have sworn it was a chunk of granite pushing through, the same kind that made up the cave I had taken shelter in that lone day in my past.

Then the child was out. My beautiful, gore-strewn daughter had entered existence. I realized that, like me, she had emerged from a cave. I cut the umbilical cord, freeing her from her Mother's orbit, casting her into the world.

Monica issued another cry, giving a final push. Out came the afterbirth, the placental cave that our child had grown up in now looking like a plastic shopping bag that a homeless person had used as a makeshift restroom for a week. I was so fascinated that a Doctor had to stop me from picking it up. I wasn't even aware I had reached for it.

We named our little girl Pearl, her being the gem of her mother's mollusk.

Life only goes so long. Whether you get 2,000 weeks, days, months, or words, when you're done, you're done. I feel my end impending, an avalanche roaring down on me, a cave-in I can't dig my way out of.

I was taking my daily jog when I heard a shriek come dancing through the trees towards me. I looked into the forest and, not only was my cave there, but I saw my wife standing beside it. She was holding our Pearl in her arms, staring down upon her with perturbation. The baby was screaming.

The sun was baking the path I was on, heat visibly sizzling in the air around me.

Monica nonchalantly threw Pearl into the cave.

“No!” I screamed, running towards them.

When I got there, though, there was no sign of either the ladies or the cave.

When I got home, Pearl was napping while Monica watched a trashy daytime talk show. I imagined her taking me on the show she was watching, the host sitting me down and saying, “The paternity test is in, and you are not the father.”

“What?” I yell. “Then who is?”

The host smiles, his lips parting to reveal the answer to my question, for there, lurking in the dark behind his teeth, sat the cave, laughing.

Today I noticed that Pearl’s breathing had taken on a jagged tone, like tumbling boulders. I used a flashlight to peer down her throat. I fell in, getting lost in the various tubes that led from one majestic organ interior to another, the insane cavernous maze of her insides leaving me fearing I’d never see the light of day again. Well, I was here now, so it must have worked out in the end.

A news report about a child who fell down a well. She was dead before rescuers could get her free. Monica cried when the local station ran the story. I felt an odd tug of childhood nostalgia, jealous of the girl for getting to have her adventure down the well in spite of the poor outcome, feeling sure I could have weathered the situation if I had been the one granted the gift of falling down a well.

The dentist leans over me, his bright work light assaulting my eyes.

“Open wide,” he says.

With the white smock covering his face, the lack of a visible mouth on this man disconcerts me.

I think I’m still in the cave. I mean, this looks like my bedroom, but it doesn’t *feel* like it’s mine anymore. I wonder, if I took my hammer and cracked through these plaster walls,

would I find wood beneath, or would it reveal the cold boulder slabs of the cavern hiding there?

Similarly, if I took my hammer to my wife, would I find blood and bone beneath the surface, or would my hammer merely ricochet off the thick rock concealed beneath her disguise?

Only one way to find out.

Well, you can't be right every time. Unless rocks have gotten a lot bloodier than they were when I was a child.

Or, maybe my wife was human, and it's just our child who is made of rock...

Apparently not.

I know I should be more upset that my wife and daughter are dead. But don't worry. This is all just the cave. I'm still in it, sleeping through that storm. Eventually, that madness will pass, and I will wake back up, everything in its right place. Someday, when I emerge from the cave, this will all be a bad dream tucked away in my past.

Now, what magazine or website will publish this story? I killed a kid so I'm obviously going to be famous now, so maybe TMZ would be interested.

Five years later...

I never went to jail and I'm rich now. Praise the cave!

Hello. I'm your humble narrator.

I know we had some fun today with dead babies and dead wives, but don't let that detract from the real message of this story. Next time you suspect one of your loved ones has been replaced with a rock person, there's no need to bash their brains in. I mean, you could just take a knife and slice their palm to check if they're still human. Learn from my mistakes, kids, don't take things to extremes. Not that I suffered any consequences for my actions. Just, you know, because it's not cool to do.

RIP Pearl. Daddy loves you.

Twenty years later...

"I'm telling you, I was abducted by aliens!" I yell at my agent.

“And I would never imply that I didn’t believe you, sir. It’s just...”

“That you don’t believe me?”

“Meep,” he squealed.

“I’m telling you, I was out in my backyard, smoking a joint and drinking a beer beside the pool, enjoying the summer night. I was staring up at the sky, marveling at the majesty of it all, the vastness of reality, when the stars... parted. A great darkness swam into view, blotting out the stars, some twisted abyss yawning itself into existence across the universe. Almost like our whole planet was getting sucked into a...”

That’s when it hits me. My agent is right, I wasn’t abducted by aliens.

“A what, sir?” he implores me.

“A cave. Oh, God, I wasn’t in a UFO. I was back in the cave!”

I always thought I fell asleep that day in the cave. Sometimes, the human brain blocks out memories that it wasn’t built to comprehend, cauterizing a wound that would otherwise infect the entire organ. It actually does this every second of every day in a desperate bid to save our sanity from the truth of our surroundings.

We are *all* in the cave, reality just the shadows cast by our tiny fires as they dance across the walls. But now that I am aware that I am in the cave, I think I can finally do something about it.

Let’s see... This is going to be like trying to move a limb I never even knew I had, never could have guessed existed. I’m mentally reaching for some kind of psychic leg to stand on out there in the expanse that lurks behind us all.

And.

Oh, hello.

THE END

WEEK FOUR

...AND THEN HE DIED.

PROMPT:

WRITE A STORY THAT ENDS WITH THE ABOVE WORDS

ALLEYS BY CURTIS MCINTYRE

Anyone who has opened their third eye can tell you, 'death is just the beginning.' As a being who was everywhere in his personal timeline at once, Ash's death had occurred too many times to count.

Come, take a walk with him through the hallways of ourselves. Here, in the hidden trails between memories, you can really see the forest through the trees, noting where each event falls in relation to the grander scheme of things, making connections you never would have otherwise picked up on, each instance from your past just a small weave in a grand, lush tapestry. Your memories build you, the same way your atoms do.

Watch Ash, feeble in the retirement home. His children stopped visiting ages ago. For all they know, he has already died.

Now, humble reader, watch as Ash steps through time from the retirement home back to the day his first child was born. Look on as Ash tells his beautiful wife that this is the happiest day of his life.

Watch as fifteen years pass in a flash. Ash's wife is now fat and filled with spite as she kicks him out of their home. Try not to stare as he breaks down in tears. Don't feel too bad for Ash, dear reader. He has earned his fate.

He blinks, ten years younger now. He is a dedicated police officer with the NYPD.

"I saw him go down that alley," Ash tells his partner, Mack.

"We should wait for backup," Mack says.

"To hell with that," says Ash, barreling forward.

As Ash enters the alley, he almost turns back when he sees the ethereal blue light pulsing from the rear.

Ash blinks to find himself back in the retirement home. A nurse feeds him blended meats through a straw. He spits some up, pink slime dripping down his chin. Don't cringe from these sights, my friends. This is your future. Or, for the more unfortunate out there, it is your present.

Ash begins bouncing between senility and infancy, caught between a multitude of moments where others had to feed him and change his diapers, his life a skipping record. Finally, he breaks free of the loop, falling somewhere in his mid-thirties. A safe area between his marriage and the madness that came after the alley incident. He wishes he could stay here forever. He blinks. And then he...

"I want to die," said Jake.

"I can help," said the friendly receptionist. "My name is Maria, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'll be assisting with your suicide today."

"Uh, nice to meet you, too," Jake mumbled.

"So, were you thinking quick and painless, or something a little funner?"

"Funner?"

"Oh, we got loads of kids coming in here with the most goofy, elaborate requests," said Maria. "They usually bring a friend along to film the whole endeavor, hoping they can go posthumously viral."

"I'll take quick and painless, please," said Jake.

"If you'll come along with me, it won't take but a moment," she said, guiding Jake down a white hallway.

Jake felt like he had to jog to keep up, despite Maria appearing to be walking at a normal pace.

"How will you do it?" Jake asked.

"Oh, we'll just give you a nice needle to put you to sleep. Once you're under, a second shot will stop your heart. You won't feel a thing."

"Sounds good," said Jake.

The hall they were in seemed to be on some kind of axis, as if they were walking the lip of a wheel in a perpetual circle. Jake tried to peek inside a room they were walking past when a glowing blue light caught his eye through its window. Rather than finding a

doctor's office behind the door, he found himself looking out upon an alleyway. The blue light that had initially caught his eye was emanating from something outside his field of vision, coming in pulses, beckoning him to come outside and seek it out. Jake jumped when a police officer suddenly walked past the window, not having expected to see any people outside at this hour.

Maria gently placed a hand on Jake's shoulder. "You don't belong out there," she said. "Come, come."

Ash inched down the alley, weapon drawn. He could see the suspect dead ahead, standing with his back to Ash. Whatever was causing the blue light was directly in front of the man, blocking it from Ash's sight.

"Hands in the air!" Ash shouted.

The man raised his hands.

"Now turn around," Ash ordered.

The man turned around and then. Then.

Ash had made the mistake of thinking the suspect and the blue light were two separate entities. As Ash looked upon his suspect, his mind was instantly fried under the scrutiny of the man's shining sapphire third eye.

"Am I a cop?" Jake asked Maria.

"No, no," said Maria.

"Don't they say that two negatives make a positive?" asked Jake.

"Sounds like a dumb saying to me," said Maria. "You were never a cop, although you might have had a run-in with one."

"Uh, is there any chance I can make a final phone call before we go through with this?"

"We both know that can't happen."

“I really hate the color blue,” said Jake. “I have a bad memory of this strong, flashing blue light. Or, I think I do.”

“I understand.”

After the incident in the alley, Ash took some mandatory time off work. He spent his down-time painting his house azure.

“Are you ready for your first shot?” Maria asked Jake.

“I’m going to be shot?” Jake asked.

“An injection. We talked about this earlier.”

“Oh, that,” said Jake. “I feel like you gave it to me already.”

Ash blinked and was back in the retirement home. He cast his gaze upon his fellow patients. Or inmates. Nobody looked back, at least not with their first two eyes. Every forehead in the room, however, was gaping at him.

Maria injected Jake with a veritable ocean of the cobalt poison.

Jake and Ash finally saw each other, something in the air clicking as their eyes locked.

“Suicide by cop isn’t the worst way to go,” said Maria.

Ash pulled the trigger of his sidearm, giving Jake a third eye in the center of his forehead. Blue blood exploded forth to swallow Ash whole.

And then he died.

THE END

DEATH SOLO BY N.D. KELLER

Glass shattered across the dashboard.

The road simply stopped. One moment he was driving along the grey pavement, guided by yellow lines and then the next, there was simply nothing.

He had to get home! His little girl was upset. The storm scared her. She was terribly afraid something bad was going to happen. He promised her. He promised his wife that he'd be home soon, and that he would be careful on the roads.

Reaching with a hand, he searched for his phone. He found the steering wheel too close. His phone's light reached him from the darkness of the floor. His lock screen stared up at him, with his daughter's smiling face. It was his favorite picture, one they had taken in the park right after her ballet class. She had been dancing with her bear in the park. She loved that tutu and wore it all day until he finally put her in bed. Even then he had to compromise, the tights came off, the PJs went on and the tutu stayed. He read her a book and waited up with her until she was dancing in her dreams.

His hand was wet. He looked down. When had he started bleeding? The glass had landed in his lap. He reached down to his seatbelt and took it off. He had to get out. Maybe another car could get him home. No, that wouldn't work. The bridge was gone. He had no way to get across the river.

The river was inside his truck, water now seeping up into his shoes. He tried to stand up but couldn't. The steering wheel was pressed tight against his chest, and the dashboard was in his lap. Panic crept through him. He had to get out. He tried to get the door open only to find it stuck. He could pull the handle, but it did nothing.

The water rose as he struggled. He pressed at the steering wheel. It wouldn't budge. He pressed at the door. Nothing worked. "No, please. I have to get home." he tried to whisper. His voice cracked and only came in short gasps. No one knew he was down here. It was late and there were few people out on the roads.

His wife would be worried. How long till she realized he was missing, he wondered. The trip home wasn't a long one, but he still had work to do. She trusted him. They had been together for years now. They attempted to buy their own home and managed the crisis together when it fell through. She had been swift in building a financial plan and getting

them lined up with a new rental while he dealt with the headache of trying to deal with the banks. They avoided bankruptcy, but he now worked two jobs to get them through.

Today though, his daughter wouldn't be soothed. He should have taken a little more time on the roads. The heavy rain filling the low-lying parking lots should have been his first clue. His daughter's upset should have been the first clue. She was uncanny in how perceptive she was at times. She knew before he did that his sister was pregnant. She insisted on being able to play with her cousin as soon as possible. Of course, she was only able to see the baby now. Her cousin wasn't old enough to play yet. Did she know he was here?

The water was past his chest now. He could feel the buoyancy in his body. His phone floated towards him, taunting him with its black screen. No help was coming. He accepted it now. He would not get to speak with his daughter again.

What would she grow up to be? While she loved ballet, he doubted that she would stick with it. Perhaps she would be like her mother, a veterinarian's assistant. Or maybe she would become senator or even president. She had a fondness for trying to lead her ballet classes and explain to the newer girls how to do things. Maybe she would lead humanity to the stars.

He couldn't see them. Even if the water weren't swirling around him the clouds were heavy, still full of rain that pounded down. In his mind's eye he could see her dancing playfully amongst the stars. "Look daddy, there's the bear constellation." And the stars looked like her smile. They looked like the picture of her dancing with the bear.

He tried to spit the water out of his mouth, fighting for every second. He was cold, numb to the pain. He stopped shaking. It was too close, too overwhelming. Uselessly, he pushed himself up while still pinned by the steering wheel but remained in his seat. And then he died.

THE END

OBLIVIOUS BY DAVID MOORE

Bullet shots whistled near my ears as they passed by.

The night started with fireworks and loud bangs for the celebration of one of the Gods or something. As usual in this region of the world, people use heavy sounds and loud noises—which, for some might be considered music—as well as a plethora of drums, and even car horns. There are over thirty thousand Gods. Albeit, less than a hundred of them have passionate followers.

“Did we lose them?” asked Bravo Five.

“I think so,” I replied, still panting after the run. “That gulley connects to the entrance for the underground station.” I pointed, we had been in the country for only thirty-three hours, yet during the flight I had more than enough time to familiarize myself with the layout of the city in virtual reality. The only difference was the lack of light in the real.

We both darted through the gulley. Adrenaline surged through my veins and muscles. As a reflex I used my left hand to make sure there were no blood patches on my vitals while still running in the darkness.

Bravo Five was behind me, just a few paces. When we arrived at the street corner that separated the gulley and the entrance, I halted and lowered my body, then took my phone out of my pocket, switched on the camera and used it as a makeshift periscope to get a view without exposing myself to anybody who might have come this way to ambush us.

I changed the settings in the camera to increase the brightness and confirmed that the side of the street was clear. Most people were on the parallel street, dancing and enjoying the festival. Finding the reason why only main roads had lights but the gulleys remained dark crossed my mind for the hundredth time.

Fist held near my shoulder. I counted one, spreading my thumb. Two, pointing my index. Three, open palm waving forward. We ran.

I could hear Bravo Five’s breath growing heavier, but kept my eyes forward, to make sure we wouldn’t encounter any unexpected surprise in the underground. It wasn’t likely, but my training made most of the decisions in high risk situations.

We landed at the platform as the tube was still loading. “*Yah Palas Lein ke lie ek uttar kee or tren hai. Daravaaje band ho rahe hain.* This is a northbound train to Palace Lane. Watch the doors, doors are closing,” said the male operator.

As I looked around, I noticed that the platform was almost empty, and the carriage was transporting only people who didn’t celebrate or had to get somewhere else despite the religious holiday. It had been a good call to blend with the locals; however, an old man kept looking at me, probably noticing our exertion. I made a mental note to keep an eye on him, just in case, since it was a possibility that he would want to be a hero by reporting us.

I turned around to find that Bravo Five was shot above the right kidney. Then I knew what that geezer was looking at, so I glanced in his direction and saw him reach for the alarm as his mouth mumbled some sort of prayer for some God, any God, with the devastating realization that they chose to remain oblivious. The gun still had the silencer on the barrel. Three consecutive shots. His eyes widen to reveal the empty white color of surrender.

Before I could collate my thoughts into a coherent train, Bravo Five killed the rest of the passengers with clean bullets through their foreheads. I eyed the old man, felt his hatred and confusion lash at my face, and then he died.

THE END

THE COMEDIAN'S GIFT BY PAUL METAXAS

"He's out in the courtyard with that damned bucket again." Fatima said, staring at her father-in-law through the kitchen window. He was talking to himself as the bucket overflowed with water from the hose. Once in a while he'd put his finger over the nozzle and spray a bug out of the air, cackling to himself. "That's the way the cookie crumbles!" he shouted.

"This happens every day." Charles said. "He has an excuse to repeat himself, what's yours?"

Fatima glared at Charles, moved to the laptop he was hunched over and fell into his lap, lightly karate chopping the back of his neck.

"*Logomachy!*?" Charles yelled, ignoring Fatima. "Who the hell would ever even use these words!? 26 points!? First *spavined*, then *instauration*, now this! He has to be googling these!"

"If only my husband would be as passionate for me as he is for losing at Scrabble..." she said, giving her best Scarlett O'Hara impression. Charles slammed the lid shut to his laptop and picked Fatima up, spinning her around and dipping down for a kiss. She closed her eyes in anticipation, and at the last moment, he pulled back, dumping her on the couch.

"How many points is the word *divorce*?" She asked face down on the couch.

"*Divorced*, add the extra 'D' newbie. It's worth half the points your husband has, plus whatever happiness points he attains in the future in perpetuity." Charles said.

"A life insurance policy sounds more enticing." she responded.

Charles started to lift her skirt, "Speaking of adding the 'D', if we see about bumping uglies, in nine months you can get way more points out of me. Fatima gave an earnest look and said, "It's go time." She took his hand, making way towards their bedroom when Stan came in from the courtyard, surprised to see them both.

Stan's demeanor changed, a welcoming grin appearing. "Hey there folks! Did I tell you about the time I went to the psychiatrist? He asked me if I'd take something called a

Rorschach test. I said, sure why not? All he did was show me a bunch of pictures of my parents fighting. It was miserable!”

Fatima shook her head. Charles said, “Hey come on that one was kind of funny. Dad, you aren't on a cruise ship. Let's get you some dinner, okay?”

Stan looked back and forth at Fatima and his son confused, “Dinner? Okay I'm hungry.” “You want some pimento cheese?” Charles asked as his phone began to ring.

“Yes,” Stan said, still dazed and looking like he might cry. Fatima took a deep breath, moving towards Stan, putting her hands on his shoulders.

“Would you tell me about the time you performed in front of President Reagan?” she asked as she led him towards the living room while Charles answered his phone.

Stan lit up, “I got to shake his hand! I asked him what it was like to be the most famous Ronald outside a clown suit, He got a big laugh out of that one. He told me he had McDonald's earlier that day. My wife was so proud of me. Judy! Come tell her.” Stan shifted his gaze around the living room as if he was seeing it for the first time. “Where is Judy?”

Fatima heard Charles raise his voice in the kitchen, an argument from the phone call. “Judy isn't here Stan,” Fatima said, “you aren't together anymore, I'm sorry. You're here with your son Charles, though. And me, his wife, Fatima.”

“Little Charlie? I have a gift for him, and Luke too.”

“You always oversimplify things! Did you call just to bust my balls?” Charles shouted.

“I'm not always out to get you Charles,” Luke said through the phone, “I'm trying to help you! It's time he went to a home, it's been three years. You say he keeps going through his old comedy routines, can't even remember who you are most of the time.”

“Yeah but he is harmless, he isn't like he used to be. Wouldn't hurt a fly. Well he sprays flies with the hose, but still.” Charles said.

“He fills a fucking bucket with water every day for Christ's sake! What's he gonna do? Kick it? This is severe, Charles. How does Fatima feel about all this? You ever think about how hard this is on her”

“You ever hear about the cannibal that passed his brother in the jungle?” Stan asked. Fatima laughed, helping Stan sit in his favorite chair.

“How about that pimento cheese?” Fatima asked.

“I don't want pimento cheese!” Stan leaned forward and knocked a picture from the coffee table, its frame shattering on the hardwood floor. He rocked back and forth mumbling, “sick of buffet food”.

Fatima gasped staring at Stan. From the kitchen Charles's voice still boomed. She began picking up the pieces of glass, recovering the picture under the table. Marred from impact, it was of the night Charles proposed to her, the two of them buzzed on champagne. She remembered how their clothes smelled of the campfire the next day, and how she wanted to keep that sweater hidden away to preserve the moment forever.

“Did you know your son and I want to have a baby? That'll make you a grandpa.”

“Grandpa...” Stan repeated.

“He doesn't even deserve this. He may be floating in some fairy tale now, but he'll always be the drunk who beat the shit out of mom. And us – in case you forgot.” Luke said.

“Maybe this isn't just for him, you ever think of *that*? Maybe I need this.” Charles said.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Luke asked.

“As screwed up as it is, these are the best moments I'll ever have with him. He's the only dad we'll ever get.”

“Give me a break, you were always his favorite anyway. Little Charlie. You didn't get it half as bad as I did.”

“Yeah one black eye is so much better than two.”

“Do you know he never even knew my birthday? I asked him once, couldn't come up with anything.”

“Look why do you even care? It's my money, my house. I'm not asking you for any help.”

“When was the last time you saw mom? She need another black eye before you'll visit?”

“Fuck you Luke. He stays here.” Charles hung up.

“Hey Dad, here's your pimento cheese.” Charles entered the living room, noticing Fatima with a frame in hand.

“My favorite! That reminds me, what's red and invisible?”

“No tomatoes...” Charles and Fatima said in unison.

“No tomatoes!” Stan exclaimed.

“What's up with the frame?” Charles asked. Fatima glanced at Stan, halfway done with his sandwich.

“Oh... I bumped it off the table helping Stan sit down.” Fatima replied. “I take it your brother is doing well?”

“Yeah. Great talk. As usual. Ready for bed old man?”

“That's all folks! Grandpa coming through!” Stan cheered as Charles helped him to his bedroom, then made his way upstairs to join Fatima in theirs.

“Do you think we should move him to a home?” Charles asked after a long silence. Fatima was sitting on the edge of the bed, her back turned as she focused on something.

“I think... this is a chance that won't come back around.” She turned to face Charles, placing her hand on his chest. “You always talked about wishing your past could be different. This is something you can control, in the now.”

“Is that what you want?”

“...Do you remember this sweater?”

“Uh, I think so - isn't that from the camping trip when I proposed?”

“Yes. Remember how drunk we got after? And you kept singing “Just the two of us” over and over. I don't think you knew more than the chorus.”

Charles laughed. “You kept burning our marshmallows, got them all in your hair.”

"I couldn't get them out for a week. Oh! And there was that bird you got excited about, what was it?"

"Oh, yeah! When we woke up, a blue jay was perched on the stones right next to us. Luke was obsessed with those when we were kids."

"Mmm... The sweater doesn't smell like that night anymore..." Fatima said.

"Pretty sure we could go start a campfire in the neighbor's yard with the shitty dog." Charles said.

"Better yet, we could turn Stan loose on him. He's got enough material to get us through another camping trip."

"Deal."

"You know he mentioned having a gift for you and Luke earlier. He was thinking about you two."

"Lucky us... What was that about being a grandpa? You planting seeds?"

"Wait, you hear that?"

"No... What?"

"It's my biological clock, it needs winding."

"It's go time."

"Those onions aren't going to chop themselves. I don't even like them." Charles said.

"Do not speak to me of the tear orbs, knave." Fatima said.

"Apologies malady, I've been uncouth." Charles said.

"How many points for that one?"

"It doesn't work like that. Just let it go."

Fatima started chopping the onions, making pitiful noises as she sliced. Charles was peeling potatoes, watching Stan out the window.

“He's at it earlier than usual today. Ever wonder what he's thinking about out there?”

“I think the bucket is his biggest fan.”

Charles moved the potatoes over to the dining table for more room.

“Shit, I forgot to thaw the shrimp.” he remembered.

“What a failure. I suppose I'll have to abandon these onions to rescue the meal. In the garage freezer, right?”

“Yep. So heroic.”

Charles could hear his father wandering in through the patio door, muttering to himself as Fatima went for the garage.

“Hey Dad, lunch will be ready in about an hour.”

Charles felt a punch in his back, between his shoulder and spinal column.

“Get out of my house, you crook! I'll call the police! Judy, where are you? Get the kids.” Stan yelled.

“What the hell?” Charles said turning to look at his father. His back felt wet, he heard Fatima scream.

“What happened?? Oh my god Charles, don't move.” She ran for her phone and rushed back over to Charles.

“I think Dad hit me?” His back was throbbing, a strange pain overtook him. “I feel dizzy.”

Fatima was talking with someone on the phone, helping Charles sit on the couch.

“Don't lean back Charles.” she said.

“Is Charlie okay?” Stan asked.

“You stay the fuck away from him!” Fatima yelled.

Stan grabbed his chest, breathing hard. Charles was trying to reach the knife in his back but couldn't make good use of his right arm. He was looking pale to Fatima.

“Charlie's hurt?” Stan fell to the ground face first, chest heaving. He was facing out the patio doors.

Charles could hear Fatima let the paramedics in, but he couldn't take his eyes off his father. All he could hear was his father's breathing.

“Fatima, we've got to help Dad.” Charles could barely speak.

“Luke! Little Charlie... Come here! It's... it's your gift!” Stan was shouting from the ground. Charles began to cry, the paramedics tending to his wound. Fatima was hysterical, pacing around Charles.

“You've got to help my father! What is it Dad?” Charles yelled, struggling with the paramedics.

“It's Luke's birthday gift... Charlie. It... It finally came.” his breathing labored, drawn in ragged gasps. “A gift... for... for you both.”

Stan could see the blue jay that landed to drink from the bucket, and then he died.

THE END

WEEK FIVE

CALLING ALL SUPERHEROES!

PROMPT:

CREATE A SUPERHERO WITH AN AWESOME SUPERPOWER

REAPER BY SINANJU

They didn't exactly explain the situation to me, but then again, they never did. Back to back tests followed by a brief resting period and concluding with a mission in the field which they treated like a more serious test. That's been my life for a while now. Of course, I called them, "they," a lot but that's because I had no clue who, "they," were. I never thought to question it until now.

"Focus," I thought. I tended to let my mind wander and get caught up in things that didn't really matter. I'd been standing on the landing skids of a helicopter, waiting for the squad captain to give me the order to jump. It was a dark night with just enough moonlight to see, and we'd been circling the perimeter of an old decommissioned military base, hidden deep within a tree covered mountain valley.

"Is that kid really gonna jump," I heard one of the soldiers in the helicopter ask in a hushed voice.

"Just stay out of his way when it's our turn to go in rookie," the captain answered.

The wind was howling as it blew against the outside of the helicopter and it made my shoulder length white hair whip into a wild frenzy. I'd have cut it if not for repeated lab tests back at the base coming to the conclusion that it would do it's best to maintain shoulder length. No one could figure out why though and we wound up deciding it was best to not let my body waste energy by rapidly growing hair every day.

"Reaper, state your mission," the captain ordered.

"Infiltrate the base. Engage the enemy to provide cover for the ground teams. Capture the target. Eliminate the target only as a last resort," he was well aware that I knew what my mission was, but I've come to figure that this was just how he checked to see if my head was clear before missions. Not that he'd be able to tell. I'd grown adept at hiding my thoughts.

That said, my head wasn't just on the mission. The briefing I'd received back at base said that we were here to recover an escaped test subject, but my instincts were telling me that that was a lie. Not many men had been mobilized for this operation and several other details of the mission seemed inconsistent with other missions I'd taken part in of this category.

“Go,” the captain ordered while patting me on the back, and without a second’s hesitation I leapt from the helicopter.

The black body armor I was wearing was fairly thin and sleeveless, covering only my torso. It wasn’t going to do much to keep the cold wind from freezing me, but if I froze it’d be my own fault since I specifically requested this form of body armor to make more efficient use of my abilities. Below the waist, I was covered to the toe wearing black combat pants and boots so at least half of me was warm.

Still, even as I was falling I couldn’t help but wonder why this mission felt so different. One possible reason was that I wasn’t as foolish now as I was seven years ago when I was ten. “They” don’t want me leaving the facility I’m housed in and they watch my movements closely to make sure I don’t wind up as another escaped test subject. It didn’t take a superior intellect to know that I was a prisoner for the most part and that they don’t want me escaping. That’s also why I only get dropped with a team accompanying me on missions but for some reason my team wasn’t dropping in with me this time.

“Focus,” I thought again as the base came within sight, along with several patrolling guards. This wasn’t a stealth mission, not for me, so going in quiet wasn’t necessary, and I planned to take full advantage of that detail. That in mind, I sharpened the bones in my body in several locations so that they could create incisions to escape as they grew. I remembered a younger, unconditioned me crying at and dreading the thought of using my abilities. That boy no longer existed. I felt the all too familiar burning, throbbing and stinging pains from each of the incisions as the bones burst forth from them. I had the quickly growing bones take on a liquid form so that they could spread across my skin faster. Once I was fully covered I hardened the outer layers of the liquid bone, encasing myself from head to toe in a shell.

I had already picked which guard I was going to take down first. I landed right on top of him, causing a loud *thumping* sound, probably killing him, judging by the blood everywhere. I couldn’t dwell on that now though. The others had already seen me and sounded the alarm. Now, all I had to do was keep them distracted.

I didn’t escape the landing scot-free and I could feel my body working to repair the damage I had taken from the fall. The liquid bone beneath the hardened bone absorbed the shock from the fall better than I had initially thought it would but that was never the main reason I developed the technique. As a storm of bullets came my way, I used the liquid bone on one of my forearms and the back of my neck to create shields that could protect me while I finished recovering.

I took the moment to better examine my surroundings from the ground view. The structure that served as an entrance to the base was directly ahead of me, with two small guard towers on either side of a barely noticeable dirt road. A guard in each tower, five guards on the edge of the tree line around me, and two on the dirt road near me, not counting the one I killed of course. There may have been more outside the base, but I could only hear the gunfire from nine rifles.

Then I heard only eight rifles firing and I moved on sheer instinct. I broke off the bones connecting me to the shields and used the liquid bone on my forearm to make three sharp, knife-like bones. I leapt out from behind the shields, turning to face the direction of the now silent rifle and threw the bone knives as I turned with as much force as I could muster. One missed, one buried itself into the guard's chest, and the last in his head.

Two more rifles went silent. I didn't know if it was from shock or if they needed to reload. It didn't matter. This was a good opening and I intended to capitalize on it.

I cut back towards the guard towers, sprinting while hardening the bone armor in front of me and reducing the density of the bone armor covering my rear. Take out the guard towers and then head straight into the base. That was my plan.

The bullets impacting against the bone head-on hurt a little but none of them did any major damage. It was tiring work, having to constantly replace the damaged portions of the armor, but stopping for a rest wasn't an option. Once I reached the base of one of the towers I stopped maintaining the armor and let it shatter, focusing instead on reducing the density of the bones inside my body. The second I was light enough I leapt straight up to the platform, grabbing the guard by the neck and sending a sharpened bone spike from my palm through his throat.

Still holding the guard by the neck, I used his body as cover to protect me from his comrade in the other guard tower. I quickly made two knives. I threw one into the head of the guard in the other tower and forced the second through the skull of the guard who was choking on his own blood in my hand. Both fell dead.

I kept my body light as I leapt down from the tower and moved on to the base, running at full speed. I could feel the pain all across my body as my bones broke and healed themselves continuously as I ran. When I was at the right distance from the base's metal front door, I leapt towards it, reforming the bone armor and raising its density.

My momentum carried my weight and the door gave way to me on impact, flying back a few feet in fact. To my surprise, the target was waiting for me inside and didn't hesitate to deliver a forceful blow to my head which sent me flying into a wall. Luckily, I detected him fast enough to reinforce the armor on my head but despite that it still shattered. Had he gotten a clean hit, I doubt I would've lived. I could survive many things, but head decapitation wasn't one of them.

The target was tall and extremely muscular with a mesomorph body type. He wore body armor with a make similar to my own but designed to accommodate the shortcomings of a Gamma series test subject. The Gamma series of test subjects were made to push the limits of physical strength and it was apparent to me that the target's raw physical strength far exceeded my own. Unlike an Alpha series like me, the Gammas had neither regenerative nor defensive abilities, so they relied on wearing heavily plated armor.

That was another thing which baffled me. Escaped test subjects don't usually break into the armory to get heavy body armor and alert security to their escape. Yet there the target was wearing it. Never mind. It's wasn't important.

What was important was the error he'd made by trying to take my head off. He'd put distance between us and gave me the time to find every vulnerability in his armor. Restraining him without severely injuring him wasn't an option and I didn't want to kill him unless I had to.

Without a doubt, I knew he'd try to charge at me before I fully recovered and when he did, when he was close enough, I'd use liquid bone to seep into his leg armor behind the plating. Then I'd harden and sharpen it to skewer his legs. It'd be risky since I'd be sent flying shortly after he made contact and I could only manipulate bones that were still connected to my spine. Even so, there wasn't time to think of a better plan or refine the current one.

That was my plan and it played out exactly as I predicted. He sent me flying through the wall and at the same time I rendered him immobile. I wound up with my back against a dented tree half unconscious in agony, but at least the hard part was done.

By the time I had fully recovered, the ground teams had cleared the base and secured the target. A team met me on my way back and escorted me back to the base. Still, something felt off so I applied and maintained a layer of bone armor.

My suspicions were somewhat correct, but the truth was far more surprising than the theories that had been forming on the edges of my thoughts. Inside the base, dead soldiers wearing similar uniforms and gear as us were everywhere. We also seemed to have more allies. It didn't register with me at first, but I quickly caught on. This wasn't a recovery mission. It was a coup.

"Judging by that surprised look on your face, I take it you know the situation," the captain said to me as he approached. "Well?"

I would've been speechless if not for a single word that came into my mind. I wasn't sure if I had said it in that moment or thought it.

"Freedom."

THE END

LADY HEALER BY JAKE ROSE

The door to their apartment was falling apart; complete with rotting wood and chipped paint. Cigarette butts littered the floor of the hallway leading toward it. Par for the course with my clients, I supposed. A plaque that read '2456 B' had many crossed-out names underneath it. They mentioned that they were going to be kicked out soon; I could only assume that I had the very last of their money.

I knocked and small pieces of wood broke apart from the door. The sound of rushed footsteps followed by hushed excitement echoed from inside—the door swung open.

“Lady Healer?” Mrs. Aaron asked with a tinge of hope in her voice.

“My name is Jezre Simmons,” I corrected her bluntly. *Lady Healer* was a title I was given after working with military veterans; my manager took full advantage of the press and used it for marketing. Now I can't go two steps without someone mentioning it to me; I'll be damned if I encourage that kind of tacky nomenclature myself though.

“Oh, oh, thank god,” she was very excited, “please, come in.”

The inside of their apartment wasn't any better. Paperwork basically acted as carpet, the floorboards creaked with every step, and the smell—like someone was dying.

And there was.

“Ms. Simmons,” Mrs. Aaron called gently, “this is John Aaron.”

It was like staring at a corpse. He was alive—as in breathing, blinking eyes, and sweat dripping down his hair—but he was unmoving. Just sat in a dusty chair, pupils locked forward—he didn't even look up to me when I walked toward him—and he was deathly pale.

“Hey,” I snap at Mrs. Aaron, “what the hell is going on here?”

“W-what?” She was taken aback.

“You said this was just another case of depression—I can deal with that,” I took another look at poor John Aaron and saw that he wasn't reacting to any of this dialogue, “but he's fucking destitute. He's broken. I can't fix this.”

“Young lady!” She yelled.

I bit my lip.

“I heard you were only twenty-two years old but given your reputation I assumed you would be more professional than this,” the look in her eyes had changed. From hopeful to complete determination.

“The urban legends you’ve heard about me have been greatly exaggerated,” I always hated that. I’ve been hyped up to be a superhero but I’m just a kid with a gig. I don’t wear a costume, just my hoodie and sweatpants; I don’t fight for justice or America, just my paycheck. Yes, I was given a gift, but I was also given crippling debt. I don’t have time to be a friendly neighborhood lady healer. I had to take care of Rose.

“It’s pointless, old lady,” I shrugged my shoulders, “I’m not a miracle worker—well I am—but even I can’t bring the dead back to life.”

“He’s not dead!”

“He might as well be,” I added with my back turned as I started to walk out of the apartment. Then, in my peripherals, I saw something zoom past me, followed by the sound of breaking glass. I gasped, to my own embarrassment. I looked back and saw the old man’s arm protruded forward. Interesting. Fucking old man had some life left in him after all.

I looked toward Mrs. Aaron and smirked.

“You’ll do it?”

“I can promise a twenty percent success rate,” I rolled up my sleeves.

I placed my right thumb on John Aaron’s forehead and tilted his head backwards. I touched his chest with my left palm—his heart rate seemed healthy, albeit a little slow. It was probably just my imagination, but I swore, I kind of saw a slight change in his eyes.

“Are you going in?” Mrs. Aaron asked impatiently.

“Put those headphones on,” I gestured towards them, “I can communicate with you using that from the inside.”

The moment she picked up the device is the moment I jumped in.

I found myself in an abyss of darkness—it was worse than I thought. Usually people’s mind realms are representative of their entire life; a king would take the form of a castle, a general would have a battlefield, but a dead person? Well, it seemed that a dead person would have nothing. It felt like I was floating—no, swimming—and no matter where I looked there was nothing to be found except for very distant lights. I guess I knew where to start.

“Hello?” Mrs. Aaron’s voice echoed in the realm.

“Yes?” I responded with annoyance in my voice.

“Is everything alright?” She sounded sincere.

“Oh yeah,” I said sarcastically, “top percenta—”

Something slammed against my stomach and blood gushed out of my throat. I flew miles into the darkness until I got over the shock from the pain and stopped myself. I looked around and found nothing except for blood dripping from my mouth and floating midair. *What the hell was that?*

“Lady healer?” Mrs. Aaron cried out, “Lady Healer!”

“Be quiet,” I hushed.

“What?”

“Something hit me, I’m trying to figure it out,” I clutched my stomach. There were claw marks. It hurt like hell.

“Something hit you? What does that mean? Your body is still here! You must be safe inside, there right?”

“You die in the game, you die in real life.”

“What?”

I turned off the device. I couldn't afford being distracted. I desperately looked around and still found nothing; it wasn't the first time I've encountered something like this in someone else's realm but that thing... I've never been hit by something that powerful before.

My heart skipped a beat. Two floating red lights rose up from underneath me. I couldn't figure out what it was, until I noticed it was the monster's eyes. It was the only thing I could make out. The rest of the monsters being camouflaged into the total darkness. Fucking fantastic.

I swam as fast as I could toward the nearest light. I felt something akin to an arm graze my back and flew to the side—but I didn't stop. There was no way I could fight something like that. If that fucking old lady had just been honest with the severity of this old man's condition I could have brought some of my tools, but right now I'm practically naked.

The light was getting nearer. Another hit to my back made more blood rush out of my mouth. Luckily, my bones can't be broken down here. I refused to look back, I couldn't afford to panic, and I knew that I would if I had another look at that fucking monster. The light was getting nearer. A final hit blasted my legs and sent me flying forward—into the light.

I land on wooden floorboards. It seemed that this place had gravity. I try to push myself up with my arms, but the force made myself throw up blood again. There were claw wounds all over my body. Blurred voices were talking in the distance. I couldn't make the words out, but I recognized one of them to be Mrs. Aaron's—a much younger Mrs. Aaron.

I shook my head to try and find my footing. It took a while, but I found the strength to stand. It wasn't looking good though, if I lost more blood I would have been stuck inside here forever. And I couldn't afford to end my run here. Rose was still waiting for me.

"What is the matter with you?" A young Mrs. Aaron yelled in frustration towards what I could only assume was a young John Aaron.

The room was in tatters. John Aaron was angrily breaking things left and right.

"Stop," Mrs. Aaron silently pleaded.

This place was of no help to me. This was obviously after things went wrong. I made my way to the door and stepped outside—I found myself atop a cliff. The door vanished behind me.

Mr. and Mrs. Aaron were sitting underneath a tree, lovingly holding each other. They were much younger here, twenty years younger at least. Neither of them said anything, but it wasn't the same kind of deathly silence out in the real world; it was peace. The wind blew the flowers into the air and the clouds moved past the sun. It was a beautiful day.

Nearby was a wolf with red eyes. It was small, like a baby fresh from the womb, and it was curled up into a ball, peacefully. It almost looked adorable. I approached it slowly and recognized the eyes for what it was.

I turned the communication device back on.

"Lady Healer!" The real Mrs. Aaron called out.

"Listen closely," I say gently, "I can fix him."

"Oh! That's wonderf—"

"I said listen," I interrupted, "do you remember the time when you and John Aaron were holding each other atop a cliff?"

"Oh," she exclaimed happily, "yes, I do! That was our honeymoon."

"I can fix him," I reiterated, "but all of his memories after that day will be lost," she fell silent. "He will wake up an old man despite feeling like he was just in his prime yesterday, all the time you spent with him in your marriage will only exist in your head; he will be healthy, but I cannot guarantee that he will be happy. Being robbed twenty years of your life is not an easy thing to accept."

She wasn't responding.

"Mrs. Aaron," I prodded her.

"Do it."

I snapped the wolf's neck.

THE END

THE THIRD EYE BY PAUL METAXAS

Only I can see the relentless images, secret windows I cannot be rid of. I meet people twice. Once from the niceties of normal social interaction. Overpowering those trivial exchanges are their deepest memories on display behind their heads. My own solitary flux, a language never taught that I alone fight to comprehend. As if it were judgment day and I, Saint Peter. I am no saint, however, and that day remains obscured through the infinite.

“Miranda! Break’s over. It’s insane out here!” Gabriela says poking her head into the storage room.

I shut my journal. I write in ink for its permanence. The world shifts around me, trails of emotions sprawling behind the skulls of the living.

“It’s cool Miranda, this is fun for me. This is what I wake up to do for fun.” Gabriela insists.

“Sorry! Coming!” I tie my apron, returning to the counter, overlooking thousands of people bustling along the Vegas strip. Their holographic cones blur into the persons swirling round them, countenances awash with excited imagery. For the next few hours, I brew coffee and clean espresso machines, doing my best to ignore the overload of neon lights and spectral memories flickering across my field of view.

“Are you bummed we can’t go to the nanite launch? I hear Droplet Industries actually planned it to rain, showing off how the nanites can change the color of water. Warning people to bring umbrellas and shit.” Gabriela says amidst my shuffling several forms of liquid caffeine to her as she delivers them to the onslaught of customers.

“I haven’t really thought about it. Not sure I’d go anyway.”

“I guess that’s the downside of this gig, always scheduled during the lit stuff. This year’s Technologies Showcase is turning out in spades! Between that and spring break I think we’re gonna run out of beans.”

“Can you shut that kid up?” A disgruntled customer says what everyone else in his line is thinking. The mother struggles to pacify her baby. I see pure light emitting from the back of the child’s head, depicting him reaching arms out as his mother tries to save him from a fall. I can’t tell where he fell from or why. The image keeps replaying that short event, its edges fading into air.

I concentrate on the moment when his arms are closest to his mother's hand, forcing my vision out of focus as I visualize the aberrant forms of their arms meld together. I'm afraid of messing this up, but I want the practice. I hold my intent on the connection as the images replay a few times. After I feel certain the bridging has solidified, I bring my vision back into focus.

"What the hell, Miranda? Daren calls out again and you've gotta be on some kind of downers." Gabriela says.

"Says the queen of hangovers..." I respond.

"Dayummm, touché chica. Seriously though if you have some pills cut me in. I could be a queen. Where's that caramel frap??"

The baby stopped crying, and the images behind its head change. So have most of the people's surrounding it, now that the emotional trigger ceased. Babies are the safest way for me to practice altering memories, as they haven't formed much of their persona yet. The ramifications that must happen gnaw at my insides. It's just... the feeling I get when touching those memories... it's unlike anything else. An unnatural and orgasmic rush of endorphins.

I hear a collective cheer rolling down the strip. The roar is coupled with thousands of memory flashes making erratic changes.

"That's gotta be those nanites! Man, I wish I could see them. Startin' to rain!" Gabriela says. Our would-be customers mass exodus towards Las Vegas Boulevard, eager to witness the action.

"Ain't that some shit? Guess that mocha wasn't so important, huh?" Gabriela says.

I can't pull my eyes away from the masses. I've never seen anything like it, so much jubilation in one place, luminescing in a sea of holographs and casino lights. A temporary heaven, and I, it's sole beholder.

"It's beautiful..." I say.

"*It's beautiful...*" Gabriela mimics nasally, sidling up to me, "You gotta get laid, for real though. You fine, four beers I might hit that. It's pills right? Lemme get those pills."

The rain glows, a myriad of pastels painted by the nanites. As the droplets of water pass through the subconscious films, I feel an empathic array of connections to each individual. My peripherals catch one anomaly, though.

For the first time in my life, I see another human whose memory projection is hidden from me. I take off my apron and shove it towards Gabriela.

“Girl, I didn’t mean right now! Put a leash on that!” she says.

Droves of people surround me, I try to keep my bearing based on the signage and apertures between casinos. I make my way to where I last saw the person, but all I can see are backs and shoulders and colorful rain. Everyone’s enraptured with the Bellagio fountains showcasing the technological fanfare.

The memory-less person is much closer, right under my elevated walkway. I rush down, pressing between the tides of people. He’s right in front of me now. As we stare at each other, I realize I have no idea what to say. He looks oafish. Is this what it’s like to meet someone for real? I decide to go for it.

“What’s wrong with your memory?” I ask.

He looks at me shocked. Glancing around, he lays on his back yelling for help. A memory snaps into existence behind him. A crowd of children laugh at him in his youth. Bewildered look adorning his face, several people nearby rush to assist.

Combined gasps emanate from the masses, the glow of the nanites fizzling to nothingness and casino lights going dark. Sophia Titus appears across hundreds of screens lining the strip. She is renowned CEO of Rorotech, a company whose power grew with complex proprietary software integrations for other corporations.

“Salutations ladies and gentlemen!” Titus says through the screens, “I apologize for the interruption. I’ll be brief - in the last minute, approximately 47 people died from cancer throughout the world. That’s around 25 million a year. You may be surprised - as I was - to know that a cure for cancer was developed 31 years ago.”

Several angered cries rise throughout the crowd. “Rorotech and I have created some nanites of our own. They hold hyper cancer cells already being disseminated into your bloodstreams. You’ve got an hour or two. But who cares about a few million in Vegas,

right? I'm here to pose a question to the healthcare empire. Will you use that cure, or is your cost too high?"

Panic erupts as people scream, unsure of where to go for safety. I am pummeled by the scattering mobs and notice someone standing still as his memory images flicker out. I rush toward him, finding it isn't the same man from before. Recognition is in his face.

"Two people missing memories in one night... seems a bit much for coincidence. Especially with this eco-terrorist attack going down." I say, doing my best to sound confident.

"How did you know? What attack?" the man responds.

I consider my options for a moment. "I can see the subconscious memories behind everyone's emotions all the time. Like a hologram behind your head. Only you don't have any."

"You ever hear of the Snatcher?" he asked.

"That super hero who died jumping in and out of people's bodies?"

"Yeah, I'm his son. JayJay."

"Holy shit. So that's what you're doing?"

"Yeah."

"Then you've got to jump into Sophia Titus and stop the nanite attack!"

"What?"

"You didn't hear her speech? We're all infected with some kind of hyper cancer, only a few hours to live. Trying to make some political statement."

"If she is here, she probably has a way to reverse it. She'd be immune. It isn't that simple though, I don't retain the person's memories."

"Yeah, I know, that's how I found you. If you can bring her to me I might be able to change her behavior, augment her current emotional memory. It's likely it will be tied to this event. Let's just hope she's somewhere nearby. I'll wait in front of the Bellagio fountains."

“Alright - just make sure when I leave this body the person is safe. They’re going to be confused, maybe angry.”

“What? Fine...”

The man’s memory projection flashes on, I am still holding his hand. He starts breathing heavily.

“Sir, you blacked out for a moment. If you have friends or loved ones here with you, try going back to your hotel. It isn’t safe out here.”

I sprint toward the fountains, most people cleared out of the area. There are a few stragglers rummaging through dropped purses and devices, either ignorant, indifferent, or both.

Ten minutes pass. From what I can see of people’s memories as they flee, it’s terrifying. I feel sick. The rain mixes with the fountains, spraying quietly in the darkness.

Five more minutes. I consider leaving, looking for Gabriela. A car busts through the blockade on the strip from the Bellagio parking garage, engine roaring as it drives straight for me. It swerves, and a disheveled Sophia Titus tumbles out.

“How the hell do you do heels?” JayJay says through Sophia.

“Life is pain.” I say.

“You do not want to know how I got here.” Sophia shudders, “Help me tie her down in the back with the seatbelts.” I try to calm myself down.

“You ready for this?” JayJay asks, “Once I leave her I can’t help. She’s unarmed.”

I nod.

Sophia comes back into her body, eyes wide. I see a memory flash with what must be her father beating her as a child. Fear painting her face, I pity her.

I have to get her to focus on the attack.

“It’s been two days, your nanites have failed.” I say. She thrashes in the belts, threatening me. Her memory flares to a moment with her mother. Sophia appears older, standing

above her. Her mother looks weak, sitting at a kitchen table. She mouths “I love you” to Sophia.

I focus my whole being on her mother’s lip movements, willing them to change. Sophia’s face transforms from rage to fearful comprehension.

“Untie me, I’ve got to stop them!” Sophia urges.

I free one of her arms, handing her the phone from the passenger seat. I hear her tell someone to reverse the process. I feel drained, leaning back on the concrete in front of the fountains. I fade in and out, a man appears in front of me. His memories are unlike any I’ve seen, multiple scenes unfurling at once.

“JayJay? So, this is the real you?” I ask.

“The one and only. Looks like you did it.” he replies, smiling.

“I... I killed someone, once. On accident, when I was young,” I say, “I just wanted to help him, he looked so sad. We were at the bus stop, waiting - my mother and me. I could see a teddy bear with an arm ripped off, in his memory image. I fixed the arm, I thought it’d make him happy. He started crying and walked in front of a truck. I still don’t know why... never told anyone.”

“It wasn’t on purpose...” he says.

“Does that matter...”

“What’s your name?”

“Miranda Dristi.”

“It’s time to let that go, Miranda.”

I look at Sophia, she is staring into the fountains.

“I think I’ve got an official Superhero name for you.” he says.

“What’s that?”

“The Third Eye.”

“That’s garbage.” I say.

He laughs. “I bet it grows on you. What’d you do to her?”

“I connected deeper with her. Actually, understood her. Her mother died of cancer a long time ago. I just changed her mother’s last words.”

“To what?”

“Make it better.”

THE END

THE SNATCHER BY DAVID MOORE

I know what you're thinking, all this business with Super-heroes is overrated and they exist solely in fantasy scenarios in the head of a fat old dude living in the basement of his mother's house. Well, let me tell you something, *'you're wrong'*, and please allow me to elaborate before you conclude I'm a dick.

I go by many names, some people call me Jackie at school, because that's the name I've used to introduce myself when we moved into town. Please understand that I was twelve when I chose my name. Which kinda makes sense, because my given name is Jack. Sure, Jack is more masculine than Jackie or Jacky—as *those asshole bullies used to call me, with as much a high pitch as humanly possible*—but that's beside the point.

Another of my names I use a lot, particularly online—*because we all have our online identities*—is James, which is my last name. So yes, I am the Jackie James, only son of John James, which I'm sure you remember from the news a few years back. You can see where the name ending comes from as well. Not literally. The reason is that my dad was my own Superhero. This is no poor comparison just because I'm his son. He was actually a Super-hero back in the day. And one of his lessons was to never mix both identities, particularly with our unique power, but we'll get to that soon.

Okay, I'll cut the suspense and tell you what my father was capable of, and it is up to you to believe me or not.

My dad's Super-power was the ability to take his consciousness from his own body and enter into the body of anyone he desired. The only thing he needed was a photograph of the person whose body he wanted to control. Creepy? Not really, since he saved countless crimes not after the fact or before they were committed, but while they were in action. Probably most of the crimes where the convicted prisoners pleaded no memory of the events and in which they surrendered to the local authorities were result of his intervention.

This brings me back to the reason why we had to move from NYC in the first place. Because when I turned twelve, unknowingly I entered into his body. He recognized the experience and at first, he was freaking out that some special agent had hacked his mind, or some terrorist cell were targeting our house and had planted some kind of device to make him lose control of his body.

You see, when someone with this ability enters into our body, we can tell, because we somehow are able to remain conscious of what's going on, nonetheless, we cannot control our actions. This was something we discovered with practice later on. The experience differs from that of other people, because when we enter and dominate their bodies, they don't remember what we did. Regardless, we cannot access their memories—*which has lots of setbacks, if you think about it.*

By now you're asking yourself where's my mother. Fair enough. She died at childbirth. One of those medical complications that have no other explanation.

By now you should have guessed who my father is. He was known as the Snatcher, and he is dead. His last mission taking the body of a terrorist before the plane crashed into a building went wrong when a want-to-be hero aboard the pilot cabin who killed the terrorist when my dad was snatching his body, and as a result, his original body here also died.

After the event I didn't want anything to do with the rest of Super-heroes or any government agency for that matter, so I came to Las Vegas, where I work as the youngest security operative for Platinum Security. The work has its perks. I get a steady income and my pass card allows me to move freely from hotel to hotel, from establishment to establishment.

Andre is part of my team, he is the geek who sends me still images of the people in trouble directly to my handheld device, alongside a note describing if the target is in trouble or creating the trouble. But I wouldn't go as far as to call him my sidekick, regardless of him saying that: 'every psychic needs a sidekick'.

Today I'm at the presidential suite in the Mandarin Oriental hotel. The people who are paying for this suite are gambling somewhere below and will not come back till tomorrow after five, at least. I like this place because it is high enough above most of the buildings, has a piano, and is central to the Technologies Showcase Convention that's responsible for the extra few thousand people to monitor. Besides this event, it's spring break, so you can imagine how many people are here.

The convention's purpose is to launch of some kind of nano thingies and the third-party security is intense, which explains why Andre is working with a team of four Punjabi guys who're scary to look at. By the way, it is best if you hear it from me now, Andre is the one who came up with my Super-hero nick name. He likes to high five people—*who does this nowadays?*—and used to say "high five Jack" to me and decided that it would be fun to

raise his hand and call me Hijack, because I hijack people's bodies. I know, I didn't laugh either.

I have to admit that I'm very lucky that my power allows me to wear other people as my costume, their skin feels tighter than lycra, yet, it doesn't look cheesy. Plus, whatever they wear is good for each mission, because it helps me blend in, while my body is safely unconscious at the hotel.

My phone vibrates.

Okay, it is time for the action.

I see the photo, and have that same reaction, then read the tag "drowning at the pool", so I breathe deeply maintaining my focus on her eyes, close mine and jump in.

People are screaming. My nose feels rough. My eyes are blurry. Where's up? Water is everywhere. I'm drowning. I've got this, I look around and see the lights beneath the pool, I find down and move my arms to make way toward the surface. There's a man near me, I continue to swim to the side of the pool and climb out.

"Honey, you're okay?" says another man, probably in his twenties.

"Just a moment," I say, trying to buy me some time to leave this body, because I don't want him to kiss me. Already had an episode like this a few days back and it was awkward. I come down to the floor. People still gathering around, so I touch my thumb and pinky finger, and I'm back at the presidential suite.

I know she won't remember what happened, or how she got out of the water. My phone is blinking a blue LED notification. My heart is still beating fast, similar to waking up from a nightmare. I look at the new message from Andre. Another photo, this time a man, the tag has the simple instruction, "counting cards, lose the game and walk away to the lobby", so I do as bid.

Air fills my lungs. I exhale and relax my pulse. Now I'm at the casino looking at the cards on the table. I wish I had paid more attention when my ex-girlfriend explained the game to me, I have no idea how to win, let alone lose on purpose.

Everyone at the table is waiting for me to say something. There are chips of different colors.

“What’s the matter Vladimir?” asks a man across from me.

I feel the table green felt under my hand. ‘Where’s the life or death risk in here?’ I wonder. This is just a game.

“*Dorogoi*, you can do this,” says a woman behind me.

“Hit,” I say, with the hope it is the right word to use. The Dealer places a new card on the table. I can feel people’s glances burn my skin.

“The House wins,” announces the Dealer. Everyone around me grunt displeased at me for losing the game. I excuse myself and walk toward the lobby. There’s a man following me, the one who called me Vladimir. I get the feeling that he isn’t the friendly type.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he says.

“Nothing,” I reply.

“That was my money you lost in there.”

I realize that Vladimir was probably using this thug’s money to pay back some larger debt. Now I needed to choose if to abandon his body at the lobby, or if to remain a bit longer with him and take him to safety. After all, if Andre sent me his photo, it meant that someone wanted him alive.

I darted toward the staircase, trying to remember the hidden pathway. The larger man was slower and didn’t anticipate that I would run. Probably used to Vladimir trying to get out of problems by asking for more money and promising a larger return.

My fingers found the crevice and I pushed lightly, the wall opened, and I entered, closing it behind me. From here I could hear the large man as he entered the staircase and stopped, then his footsteps sounded louder as he walked. Gradually the sound dimmed until I was sure he was gone.

I came back again into the lobby and made my way out toward the main strip.

Shit, I forgot that today particularly the strip was so packed with people. So, I made my way among the mass and headed toward the Bellagio fountains. Then it started to rain,

yet, the rainwater was changing colors in a way that displayed holographs. Not the habitual colors of the regular lighting system.

I'm sure that I could drop Vladimir's body around here, with all these people there's more chance that he'll be safe. So, I look at the opposite side of the strip and walk there. I need to find an open space near the wall to bang my—*Vladimir's*—head against it, strong enough that he will not question how he got there.

My thumb and pinky fingers are ready for the jump back, so I prepare to bang the head to the wall and a female approaches me, asking something about the memories in my head. I can tell for her voice that she isn't the same woman who spoke at the casino, however, I don't have time to talk so I hit the wall with a flat thud and press the fingers.

Heart pumping, my skin is soaked in sweat, goosebumps run along my arms. I can still see her face and try to remember what she said about the memory. The phone isn't blinking with a new message, so I press one and dial to talk to Andre.

"What's up?" he asks over the phone.

"Did you follow me on camera?" I ask, ignoring his question.

"Yeah, you know I always do."

"Get me the closest person to the woman who was in front of my host before the jump." I tell him.

"Okay, is everything alright?" He asks.

"That's what I need to find out."

"Well, I'll do you this favor, and you owe me a beer."

I cut the call and try to relax fast, so that I can jump into another person soon to figure this out. My phone vibrates once again, and I look at the photo with the tag, 'you better get me a cold one tonight' in caps. I focus on his eyes and close mine. When I open my eyes in the new host, people start running in all directions, and she grabs my hand to tell me what's happening.

THE END

MIRACLE CHILD BY N.D. KELLER

The Wave Rider jumped in first. She looked spectacular taking her surfboard and then slipping into the water in a graceful dive that elegantly swooped into the water and then came out with her riding on top. She surfed to the perimeter, calming the ocean waves as best she could in this raging storm. Her power was actually to make waves, but in a situation like today's she could also tame them.

Clara watched entranced for a moment. She made it look so easy, like a superhero. Of course, she was, but there was style to it. One Clara was nowhere near mastering. They called her Miracle Water. The news had become very interested in her when she was younger. There were stories of her traversing oceans, saving millions, being the daughter of Moses.

None of them were true.

On the best days she was lucky she could split open a small pond. Sure, it was incredibly useful for saving kids and finding bodies, but over all, it wasn't what Clara would consider superpower material. She wasn't a miracle. She instead took on a much less presumptuous name, Seafoam.

She could not split apart oceans contrary to popular belief. She could not pass her skills on to others. And walking on moving water was a lot more difficult than people realized. Oceans sucked. They moved and wobbled and made it hard to stand upright.

They had been called to go rescue a few fishermen on a ship rapidly taking on water. She was sent down to the capsized boat because she wouldn't sink. If worse came to worse, she could make a good life raft.

She hated doing that. It involved lying down and letting people cling to her. People were a lot heavier than they realized and water-logged victims tended to flail. They couldn't pull her under, but she could just as easily die of water inhalation if she wasn't careful.

A young voice called to her as she handed out the life jackets to the drifting fishermen. Seafoam turned and caught a head poking up and then falling harshly against the boat. This could hurt. Seafoam decided to risk it anyways. She trudged across the water making sure to keep her knees bend and her weight low. The waves, tamed as they were by the Wave Rider, still shifted and slouched at sudden awkward angles. She still hadn't gotten

used to ocean walking, but this was better than previous attempts. She had to be better; she had a job to do.

The call came from a young boy. He couldn't be more than about ten. What was a kid doing on a fishing boat? Learning the trade, she answered herself. Everyone had to start from somewhere, even her. He tried to cling to the boat, but the waves were too rough. He would have been better off away. At least this kid had a lifejacket.

"Help me!" he sputtered and slapped his hand awkwardly against the waves. One arm tried to cling to the boat.

Seafoam came to a decision. He, unlike some of the other fishermen looked small enough. She plucked him up out of the water and tried to maneuver tangled limbs towards her back. One arm snaked around her throat in a death grip and a foot caught her thigh. "Woah kid, like this." She adjusted the arm to give her a little air and then pulled his legs up to rest on her hips, above her belt and equipment. One of the buckles dug into her hip but she ignored it for now. She could deal with discomfort.

"The boat turned over. The boat turned over." He whispered rapidly into her ear, repeating the phrase a few more times. Swollen fingers tightened around her hair and she wished she had listened and pulled it back. Superheroes didn't complain about tugged hair.

"It's ok. I've got you now." She put on her best most reassuring smile. She had practiced that as many times as she had practiced getting the straps on the harnesses tightened. It was equally important to calm and reassure the victims as it was do her job. In some ways kids were easier. They trusted adults. Her new backpack buddy settled into the occasional snuffle interrupted by an occasional cough.

She took him to the basket first. The waved rocked and her backpack did not want to let go. "I don't want to go back in!" he squealed.

"It's ok. I got you. You are just going to a little ride up." She wished The Waverider could come over and help soothe the kid. No, she had her own task. She would do this herself. Seafoam turned around and dumped the kids a little unceremoniously into the basket by sitting on the edge and leaning back. Wind whipped her hair around and jammed it into her eyes, but she pulled it out. "You'll be ok."

He clutched at her arm, and she patted his hand. He was shaking. They would have blankets in the chopper. "Head on up. We'll get some hot chocolate later ok?"

Finally, the kid agreed to go.

The others were a bit calmer about getting into the basket. She was able to help them leg up and secure it as they climb in and were pulled into the helicopter one by one. It was a simple procedure but was made harder by the rising waves. Even the Wave rider struggled against the winds as she rode her surfboard.

Suddenly there was a shout from above. One of her coworkers was signaling out towards the east. Seafoam took a page out of the wave rider's book and walked up a wave as it came towards her scanning across the water.

She spotted another head, well away from her. The seas were getting more and more unmanageable and he was drifting across the line. Seafoam glanced around the area, seeing no one else. That was the last fishermen. She could only hope she got to him in time.

She started across the water, the copter hovering above. They could see the man, but the winds were starting to pull the helicopter around. She wondered if it could maintain position long enough to pull them up. The wave rider would be fine, she would simply surf to shore. Maybe she should have taken the Waverider's advice and brought a surfboard. Climbing these mountains of water was exhausting. She might not be anywhere near as skilled on one, but it might save time. Clinging to a surfboard might be better than having people clinging to her but she didn't want to be Waverider 2.0. That was her superhero gimmick and she would never be able to stand on her own two superhero feet by copying other people. That thought line was before she found herself hiking growing mountains of waves, trying to get to one person who she was starting to see less and less of.

The water crashed on her and sent her tumbling. Even if she floated, the water was heavy when on top of her and some got into her mouth despite her attempts to avoid it. She coughed and realized some got down her waterproof suit. A cold shock hit her chest making it hard to breathe normally. She paused coughing out some water and forcing herself to breath. She had to think. She had to get to that person. If she didn't soon, life jacket or not they would go under or simply freeze to death.

Another wave cam and instinctively she put her hands together and pulled the wave, creating a small wake in the middle. It rolled passed her on either side.

Eyes wide she realized she still had her other power. She didn't need to split the water all the way to the bottom; she just needed to make it easier to get to her destination. She

could make a path. She turned searching for the bobbing head and found them. Then she split the water between them and ran... downhill towards him. The waves still crashed over her path but if she waited for a crest and then split she could move in short bursts. It was much faster than trying to hike upwards.

Finally, she reached the fisherman, who was shaking and didn't speak to her. She waved at the helicopter, and they circled. Every time they almost got lined up, the winds would take them off course again. She stared up and was at a loss. The waves tossed them, and she rolled with the waves, doing her best to make sure that the fisherman kept his head above the water. She needed to get him out. The helicopter disappeared.

The seas calmed, and the Waverider sailed over a crest and down towards them. She scooped the fisherman up first and then came around, so Seafoam could step on the board.

"I'm sorry, I failed." Clara, no longer feeling like a superhero hung her head.

"There is nothing wrong with accepting a little help Clara. We've got him. He'll be fine." The wave rider surfed them towards calmer waters, where the helicopter had an easier time lining up and getting them up into the interior where there were blankets and trained personal.

The boy from earlier launched himself at the last victim. "Dad!" they were both shivering cold, but Clara had to smile.

"Have we got everyone?" asked the Waverider?

One of the other fishermen, presumably the captain nodded. "He's the last one. We have everyone thanks to you and your team."

Clara let out a sigh of relief. At least she hadn't failed.

The Waverider put a hand on her shoulder. "You did good today. I saw that neat new trick. We'll work on it."

"Thanks mom."

THE END

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