

The Northridge Rev

# **The Northridge Review**

Northridge Rev

# Acknowledgements

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# Awards

The Northridge Review Fiction Award, given annually, recognizes excellent fiction by a CSUN student published in the Northridge Review. The Northridge Review will announce the winner of this award in the Fall of 2008.

The Rachel Sherwood Award, given annually in the memory of Rachel Sherwood, recognizes excellent poetry by a CSUN student published in the Northridge Review. The recipients of this award will be published in the Fall of 2008.

The Northridge Review is also honored to publish the winner of the Academy of American Poets Award. The recipient of this award will be acknowledged in the Fall of 2008.

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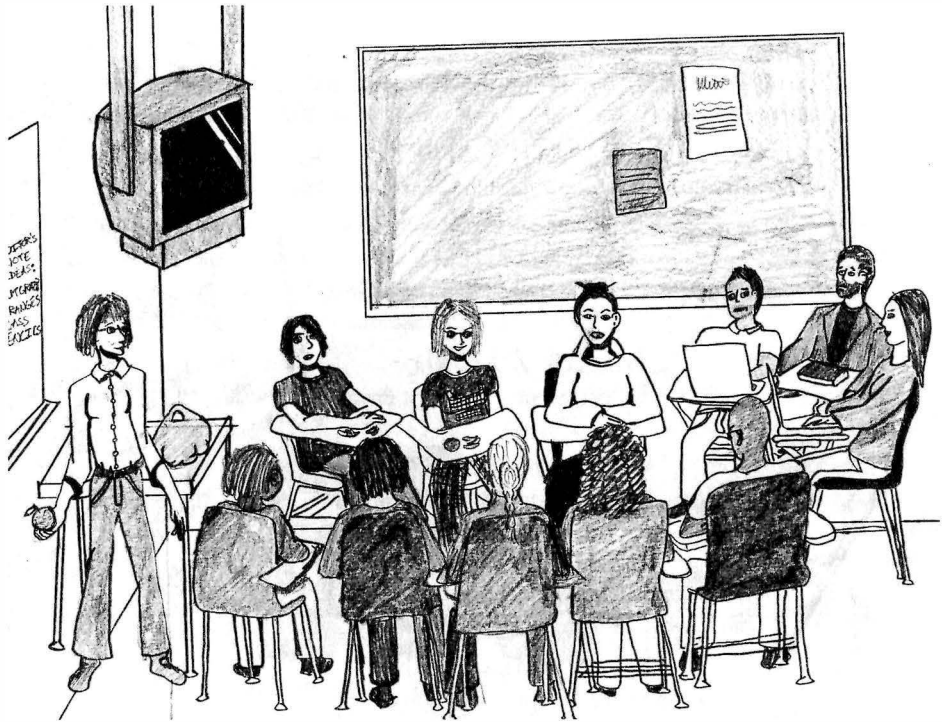
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# Editors' Note



**D**ear Northridge Review Reader,

Every chilly Wednesday night, during the fall of 2007, the people involved in this issue of the Northridge Review would sprint up the stairs to the 3rd floor of Jerome Richfield room 354, each eager to get into the fray of what it is to make a literary magazine. As the semester progressed this task became more challenging. We found the choices that had to be made were difficult as we had so many excellent submissions—so many, in fact, that we couldn't accept all that deserved publication. That said, what is most important to us now is you, the reader. Without the reader the writer would not have the most important element, the audience, the forum necessary for sharing new ideas and maybe transforming old ideas. For it is our goal that this magazine you hold in your hands pushes you to see the world through a lens slightly altered, that you join in with the poems, plays and stories and let them take you on a journey or two that you never expected to take. So please, enjoy.

—The editors.

Jessica Bergman and Paul Castillo



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Annette Ovanessian



Poet

**Poetry**

Petry



# Straphanger

Theo Johnson

Underground at Universal City Station  
a rabbi was following me around,  
I played crazy trying to pay a cop for a ticket  
with a pamphlet about Hell.  
I was young, though, and God was all up in my shit.

Basil was a sweatless Jesuit who trusted tricksters,  
no luck's fixed or exists, 'cause  
I burnt all my fingers, my jaw hurts  
and I smell like everything.  
But you know God better than anybody, man.

*I can't make out what you're saying, Theo.*

# Five

Eric Warren

I've invented for myself  
five uses for the  
name "Sam."

One will be God and how  
God is.

One will be the grocery man,  
on the corner.

One will be just  
the guy.

One your face, and one  
I will save for later.

# Open Space

Irving Figueroa

When I felt the grime of neon pushing  
Through my skin and the burn of camera lenses seething on my nape;  
When I felt the panes of high-rise windows,  
Fat gluttonous windows dressed in elegant pink  
    Flowing diamond curtains  
Pierce my skull with their glare,  
I knew I had to run.

So I mowed past the railroad stations,  
And the gas stations,  
And the empty, wheezing hospitals,  
And the bus stops,  
    And the steaming prisons,  
And the black-lung 405,  
    The Landing Strips,  
And the junkyards & cemeteries

Until

I found a tall mountain with nothing  
    Growing on it.

At last,  
I could look out.

# Wings

Eric Tuazon

When your parents came  
to visit, outside the sliding  
door window, pacing,

as if stretching  
its non-existent calves,  
was the neighbor's

chicken, walking in  
circles on red brick,  
pecking at the air

and the ground. I had  
gone out in hopes of  
catching it and escaping

from your mother's  
pessimism and your  
father's ramblings,

and, cornered against the  
wall and the rose garden,  
I thought I just

might have, but it  
had taken to flying,  
(barely) up the wall

and onto the neighbor's  
roof, as if she'd  
done it before

with wings much  
bigger and more  
human.

# Playing in the Mud

Irving Figueroa

*"Not all the dreams that blossomed have borne fruit..."*

*—Franz Kafka*

Your pupils are knots of frozen dirt  
Thawing under your eyelids.  
As I write, two pools of mud form  
In your sockets.

When you open your eyes,  
There will be two bare plots of soil,  
From which I will make lush  
Gardens.

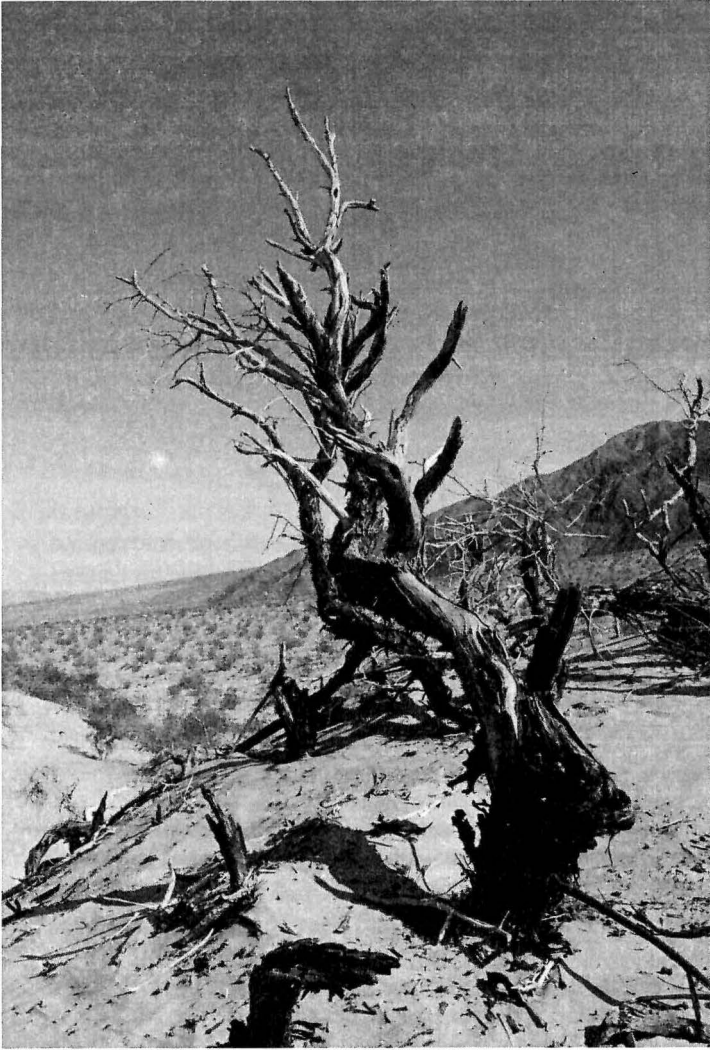
I am going to seed them with  
The heart of the moon.  
I will seed them with the veins of cities.  
I am going to seed them with  
The cold skin of windows and the  
Rattling of branches.

I will sow them with my very Seed.

And if nothing ever blossoms from your eyes—  
If the heart stays still and the moon dies in heaven,  
If the veins are never filled and the cities never sprawl,  
If the skin stays cold, the branches rattle forever, and  
The windows never shut—

Then I will know I was not gardening,  
But only digging graves.





**Windswept Tree**

Moisés Reyes

# Christmas

Kwang Ho Kim

Rudolph is a batrachian beast from the black lagoon  
where the secant of rails cuts the motionless serpentine river:  
a moonless night, distant gleams of fire, chilly bellows of  
hunger. The nauseating reek of the decaying dear  
spurs the saliva dribble. Hunched near the fire,  
throwing hot meat from one hand to the other,  
he devours.

Drowsiness tastes like a piercing thorn in the eye. In the fog of  
London, Joseph Conrad envisions the "Heart of Darkness."  
But London isn't foggy but dark in his heart: commercialism—  
the swampy terrain, bits of mosquitoes, lurkers in the dark woods.  
Now, Rudolph is flying naked in a chopper; rusty, blunt blade is the  
medic's scalpel: turn on, tune in, and dropout—purple haze and  
orange sunshine—he feels it all.

The lecherous creature captures the moment;  
red apples drip from the pug nose, melt and shape into another dear.  
Rudolph feels the joyful chills, the birth in the black lagoon;  
the changing colors of the moon and the shapeless clouds are  
portents of a formidable lover. "Come Venus! Hail Dianna! Guide  
the shadowy star and let the lusty battle begin"; the death in  
the duel is the apogee of sensuality.  
*Amor vincit omnia.*

The trees tremble, the river shouts, and birds circle  
the night sky, and the black lagoon lives on.

# Epiphany

Susanne Peeters

To my surprise

my signature shoes were too tight,  
emerald snakeskin wrapping their strangulating laces  
like coils around me.

After years of use,

with the stench of perspiration in tight quarters,  
they let go of their fanglike embrace  
like the shedding of skin.

Now the sweet-smelling dirt

beneath my free-spirited toes  
reveals a horizon that is vast  
and ready for running.

# Livonia

Theo Johnson

In the stainless steel rhythm of the century past  
mothers were handed down, hands down and patient like spatulas  
scurrying when stricken, brains clanking like dishes  
the quick breaths behind large orderless teeth  
like birds with vertigo suddenly startled.

The authority figurine, the blue peg,  
in its most embarrassing bright shade of blue,  
landed in a plastic car on cardboard on brown carpet.

Quills and scrolls lay in the dust  
like parts of the corpse that were too hard to burn.  
The bones were sawed and grated down,  
no flesh remained on the floor where I stood.

The pink peg tipped over at the chapel  
that my baby boy nibbled  
blindly thinking of breasts.

Women know their words go up in flames,  
speaking means choosing which words will die.  
The men tighten their jaws with faith  
and decide who is safe.

When I won the game of life,  
my father beat me. For every question I missed  
he hit me in the face.

Mother shucked her thighs dry,  
disappeared, and was resurrected  
as an inky ghost to the left of my pen.

# Perception

Melissa Morehouse

The sun cascades through the sky  
like a feather fall. No one notices  
small increments,  
but weeks, months, and years  
taste sour. Grasping at hairs  
and pulling out straws leads to waste.  
Life melts slowly on the tongue  
leaving yesterday's marrow.  
The world liquefies as age attacks flesh.

# Ersatz- Sprezzatura

Theo Johnson

On the 21,855<sup>th</sup> day of his life  
my father blurted out the story of his death.  
He ate from the void, he never had rhythm.  
He screamed in his sleep on Leap Night and,  
with that blessing,  
I limped out of my generation,  
remembering only the eyes of Baldassare.

# Portrait of my Father

Irving Figueroa

My father,  
Robust—  
Clothes tattered—  
Wakes the dirt from his boots  
Before entering  
The house.

Plumes of gray gather at his feet,  
As if he is gliding on a cloud.  
Home after eight hours  
Of grinding down  
Marble and polishing slabs,  
His face pale,  
Wrinkled under a sheet of dust;  
His hair is grayed silver,  
His eyes crimson, bleary,  
Smudged and tearing.

Here,  
The man, who  
Even if his eyelashes  
Were to turn inward  
And flog the meat of his eyes  
With each blink,  
Appeared to be struggling  
To contain himself.



As though his black pupils  
Had widened,  
    Inhaled,  
And understood  
The latent idiom and  
    Stuttering of wounds  
In the flesh  
    Of men  
        Who die without reason.

...And I ask, what's wrong, Luis?

—Nothing.

    He,  
    Head bowed,  
Walks in  
And stops before the mirror,  
    Where he meets himself,

        Raises his heavy eyelids and  
Exhales  
Before removing  
The flints that  
    Rove in his eyes

(And still rove in mine).



Girl in the Woods

Elizabeth Caffey

# Condensation of a Woman

Michelle Medaris

Sitting across the table  
she no longer contained  
the woman I had loved. But a  
shard of battered life unused.

The skin around her eyes  
sunk into their sockets—  
her smile forever  
fiction of an existence.

Shoved down once too many, with  
his words, she remains  
dead. Lost to a world, that  
would have given her anything.

# Blackout

B.Z. Niditch

When you run  
for the train  
the lights go out  
on a world without memory  
but the earth at summer,  
elm, sky, hyacinth  
want to acknowledge us  
even for a moment  
anyone who will outlive  
the random darkness  
of counting stones  
on every path,  
to remember  
the last strawberry eaten  
in a Bergman scene  
or a planted bulb  
outside your window.

# scaffold and scaffolding

Christopher Mulrooney

the English say hoarding  
when they mean this  
parade of congealed effects  
trouping along the avenue  
Place de la Concorde  
whatever

the post-and-pilings elevate  
oh be assured the man  
this is the last place  
he shall ever see  
on this earth

and this is his vista  
knickers and knockwurst

# Syzygy

Theo Johnson

Hysterically dreamt, an escharotic bird  
fluttered chapped, flashed and tapped  
the air crisp for a threnody above  
the crooked sidewalk under the ocean.

The morning bombs the night, the pitied bodies confess,  
steam lassoed, sculpting the serpentine memory,  
gleaning and greedy ophidian bodies knead  
the earth and the garden's grace.  
Shamed systolic ghosts clutter  
in the smell of a frail scroll  
Of faded equations.

# The Early Morning of the House

Jose Morales

Empty bottles rattle angrily as  
if swaying madly in their emptiness  
to the record's melancholic music.  
They too sing along, trembling dissonant  
chimes like foolish bells, toneless foolish bells.  
Settled to a standstill, stopping blameless  
in the lighted glare, the clatter echoes  
across the early morning of the house.

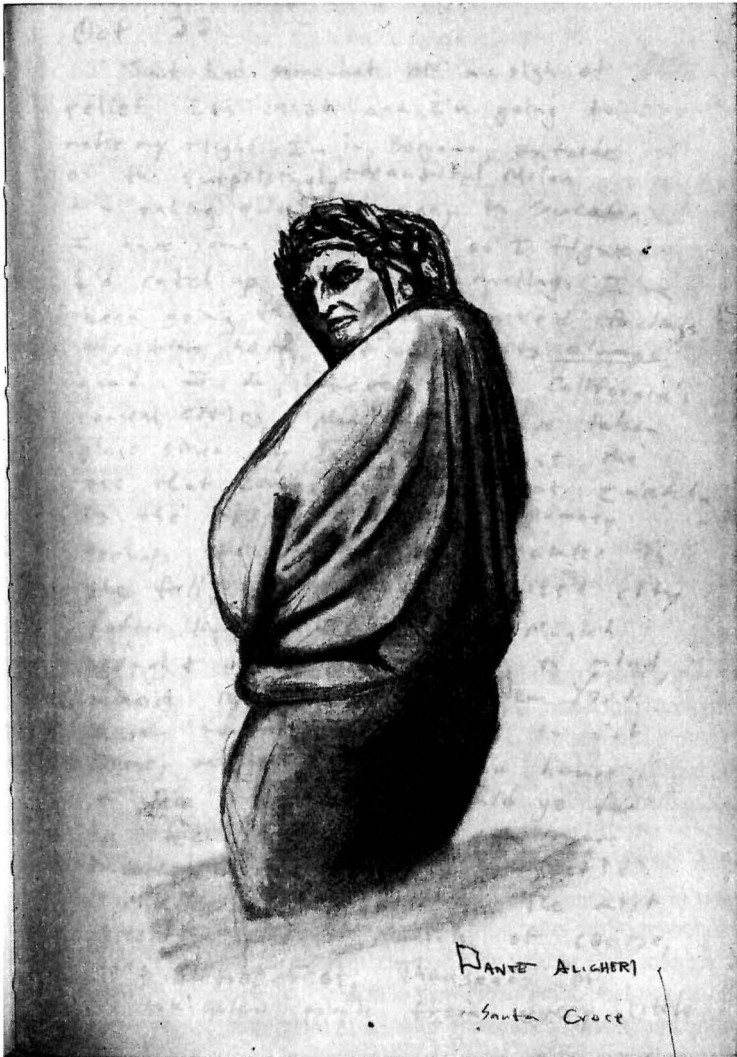
Away, the song slowly melts to stillness.  
Set adrift in quelled acidic shivers,  
every step is unkindly trampled through.  
And still, no one goes to turn the lights off.  
As if by habit, the small children keep  
lying silently, pretending to sleep.

# Deception

Melissa Morehouse

Abandoned seashells laugh  
at the starless sky  
and the serrated waves  
stab at the forsaken wind screaming revenge.  
The black sea swarms  
as the horizon blushes  
and the accosted sand retreats,  
tinkling like blades of glass grating concrete.  
Ribbons soar in the maroon sky  
and flash in the silver sun.  
My charcoal reflection seizes me,  
burning my skin.  
Words are useless here,  
they ooze from the mouth  
like honey  
and clump in the sand.





**Italian Sketchbook**

Hagop Kalaidjian

# Bygones

## Bygones

Kwang Ho Kim

From the dismal chiaroscuro of night lights, MacArthur Park,  
Agave emerges; the rattling noise of her shopping cart,  
pilled with miasmic earthly belongings,  
signals her advent.

Her head is crowned with a dried ivy wreath  
entangled with once-golden hair, her body  
adorned with tattered and stained clothing.  
She is limping, bandaged, pushing the cart  
with a protruding thyrsus and a bottle of Thunderbird;  
she is exultant.

Once a daughter of King Cadmus,  
she joins the followers of the twice born,  
infringes and frightens the authority with her Bacchus cry.  
She has earned an accolade of her belief—lust of males,  
thyrsus-pounding frenzy, and head-tossing wildness in inebriation;  
she is society's abandoned and castrated.

Now she dwells at the lake, guarded by the ten-toed frog, where a  
one-eyed golden carp rules the depths, moving slowly past  
piles of empty wallets and plastic debris; a mist of smog  
hovers the lake's surface like a cursed soul, drowned  
friend; the night sky is bereft of stars.

She says, "Look! There at the corner stands John the Baptist preaching with a loud speaker; the bearded man circling the lake with his arms at his back is Galileo himself, and my friend who drowned, Narcissus."

She smiles diligently and whispers, "You, master Orient, you don't know it, but you are the Genghis Khan who roamed the wild lands, a fellow transformant from bygone years." Sipping a cold Winchell's Donuts coffee, she leads on.

# December Blues

B.Z. Niditch

Huddled  
at a cold piano,  
its endless keys  
alluding a mourning Chopin,  
you suffer again  
the worn-out exercise  
for a half-heard recital.

Wanting to look  
for an old sweater,  
you instead burn jazz  
with your tedious fingers,  
knowing a bright sound  
can only hasten  
the rising winter sun.

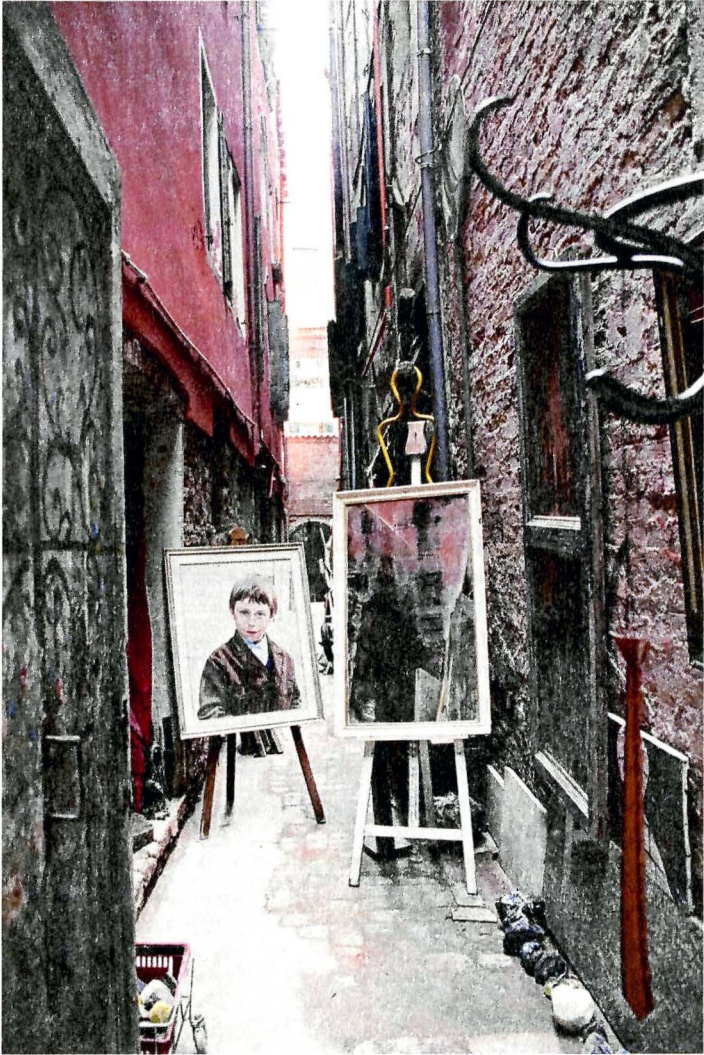
# Ode to St. Volario, The Migrant Gardener Who Was Impervious to Gravity

Evin Wolverton

He is a dandelion wrangler, although  
conditionally. He is dependent on  
the magnanimity of wind, and on the  
pulleys that Junior weaved throughout  
the yard last Winter. He is a  
dangler, and a rake wave-arounder.  
He is no stranger to the pulse  
of nature's wing.

The secrets of the earth, and of thumbs  
and beaks and blossoms, are hidden  
gently in the harbor of his  
moustache. His tears are now  
our radishes – see how he multiplies!

Sometimes, when he thinks he is  
alone, he lowers to the wood chips,  
a single toe extended, like  
Michelangelo's Adam, or a child  
testing a bath. But the gossamer of  
solitude is severed with the snip  
of Junior's camera, and his  
demeanor of near-helplessness  
restored.



Venetian Thoroughfare

Richard Hernandez

Short story

**Short Story**

Short Story





# Conditions for Momentum

Evin Wolverton

## THE LAUNDRY

**M**rs. Calderon did not understand why her son was so upset over a change in the color of his running shorts. "It will not make you any slower," she reminded him, but the stonewalling persisted. She casually returned to unloading the truck as Jorge fumed from his perch in the fig tree. The shorts had been carefully dotted with stain remover and spun on low with the other whites, as always. Only this time, the baby's Christmas socks snuck in as well, which sullied the whole lot into a soft, pinkish hue. Jorge swore, earlier, that she would pay somehow. "Why should today be unlike any other day?" she asked, sliding the fertilizer bag over her shoulder and suplexing it onto the lawn. Off came the gardening gloves, and the glasses, and out came the wallet. She dangled a twenty toward Jorge, which he accepted in his barefooted sprint down the driveway. Soon he had rounded the corner at the end of the street, and his mother was able to exert herself in peace once more.

## THE RACES

Torrents of dust blew over the ridge and across Jorge's scalp. He brushed the grains through his stubble and off of his shoulders, squinting into a pair of plastic binoculars at the valley below. It looked like a hundred armies ready for war. It looked like kaleidoscope vision. It looked like his grandmother's quilts; thousands of single file lines jogging through the wildfire haze, forming accidental geometries amongst the yellows of their shirts, the browns of their socks, the blacks of their necks. And the starter pistols shooting off like clockwork, each taking turns between the seven starting lines. Jorge climbed the hill more for the solitude than the spectacle, but he enjoyed both. Walking through the

crowd down there had felt like fighting through the State Street parade. If he'd brought his trumpet or a few confetti eggs, he might have fit in. But instead, Jorge stood proud and still in the tides of dust that swirled about the cornice on Mount San Antonio, stopwatch in hand, scanning the valley for the boys in great white.

#### THE WEIGH-IN

In the clothes room behind the gymnasium, the prospect of a physical exam loomed ominously. Aguilar, Azuro, and Benson had been called long ago—now they were trailing out, awkward smiles on their faces, patting Jorge on the back with a certain air of sympathy as he neared the front of the line. He entered the room with his sweatshirt hood pulled tightly over his skull and down to his nose. “Jorge Calderon?” He hopped onto the scale with a bang, swatted hopelessly at his toes, and hoola-hooped the tape measurer around his swollen, naked waist with a total disregard for the obvious: “Poquito gordo,” the nurse chirped playfully from behind her clipboard. His cheekbones put parentheses around an attempted smile; it was true, he was fat. But more significantly, he was a fat Mexican. For, what use is a regular, fit Mexican than to be speedy? An aid recited the measurements to himself, rummaging through stacks of uniforms in the closet before presenting Jorge with an appropriate set. The nurse made her marks and gave a coy glance through her thick glasses. Jorge recognized the glance as the same that his Tía would give him while scooping extra helpings onto his dinner plate. He left her without saying goodbye.

#### THE PACIFIC

The week previous, Jorge's head was being forcefully held beneath the surface of the Pacific Ocean by a big, white, leathery hand. “Earn it,” the hand reminded, playfully thrusting his forehead into the muddy swirls of the wash. Had Jorge opened his eyes, he'd have seen the thousands of sand particles rushing through the shallows where he lay, one for each thought that was siphoned through his sinuses and blasted out his nostrils. Thoughts like *What if I die here?* and *If I were taller I'd punch him in the balls.* But Jorge did neither; the hand let loose as his stocky, brown body came tumbling upward through the surf. Through earfuls of water, he heard the team cheering in circles around him, slapping at each other and splashing with the heels of their shoes. Captain told him he'd done well, holding up two bony thumbs as evidence. “Two minutes, six seconds. Who's next?” Jorge felt his thin, drooping moustache at the tip of his lips as he spit out the salt that had gathered in his throat. He thanked the Pacific then and there, silently, for not killing him.

#### THE ODD TUESDAYS

Jorge only went to Papa's house on Sundays and odd Tuesdays. He lived in a guest-house on the windier, more overgrown end of town. The front end of the house was a

remodeling project seven years underway; the back of the house was a tin can shoot-em-up gallery where Jorge's older brother Omar spent his afternoons taking frequent breaks from an envelope-stuffing gig he'd landed in high school. Omar lived in the converted garage untampered-with and totally rent free. He and Papa stayed tucked away there, swelling with eccentricities. Sundays were easy—the game was on, the previous nights' partying having drawn a fog of stupor—but the odd Tuesdays were odd because there was nothing to do. Jorge could practice driving the truck through the weed-ridden lot of the Presbyterian Church, but it did not fill an evening. Omar played video games, slept, or spent quiet time with a girl who fed him lots of marijuana. Jorge would fall asleep early in front of the television to the sound of Lucille Ball or the evening news.

### THE FINISH

Had Jorge not heard the pack rounding the cornice, their sudden, feverish arrival would have felt like the passing of an unexpected freight train. He jabbed at the stopwatch for every white uniform he saw in the fray—seven in the first minute. They were running like frightened deer; wide whites of eyes, hair matted by the sweat and wind, stumbling and bounding about each other as though a predator were close behind. The finish line lay just at the bottom of the hill. Some looked to attack it, others just to fall into its arms. Jorge threw his cup of water into the rush. The splash was split between so many bodies that none of it hit the ground.

### THE CAPTAIN

The bells jingled as Jorge entered the corner store on Winston & Main. Twenty in hand, he scuffled toward the meat counter, swiping up a small bundle of tortillas along the way. The counter was empty. The cashier bellowed something toward the storage room as he slid a row of liquor bottles onto the shelf. Out came Captain, tying his apron behind his neck. Jorge said nothing at first. "Coming to practice on Monday?" Captain asked with a blank, unjudging face. Jorge squirmed, crossed his legs and turned his head in embarrassment, explaining that a family birthday had kept him away. "I understand. Family's more important." Jorge placed his order, and Captain rummaged about between the pots and the cupboards to meet it. With his back turned, Captain's blondness and blueness was slighter—and his apron masked his slender torso. Jorge asked himself how long Captain had been working here, what his family was like, if he'd been handsome all his life. Captain had a precision and intensity to him that confronted Jorge, a certain mystery that was almost vulnerable now without the rest of the team around to idolize him. Under the fluorescent lights of that corner store, he looked very tired. But he never stopped moving.

## THE EVEN TUESDAYS

Mrs. Calderon was not home on any given Tuesday night. She would go out to dinner and a late movie with her new fiancé, leaving Jorge to care for the baby when he was not at Papa's. There was a time when a lullaby from Jorge's guitar could calm the baby's fits, but they had both outgrown that connection. Now Jorge had come to understand that there was a threshold to his infant sister's tears; if he ignored her long enough, she would fall asleep either out of exhaustion or willful surrender. It was then, in the quiet of the evening in that empty house, that he would browse his mother's diary. She kept it in the back of her lingerie drawer with the rest of her secrets. Although it rarely mentioned him, it gave Jorge a little insight as why his mother's newfound romance had eclipsed her maternal duties. He never let on about any of it.

## THE TRIALS

The recruits ran circuits through the soft sand of the ice plant dunes. They hopped through miles of truck tires, hurdled hundreds of broken easels, did pull-ups on the gutters of the Ag barn until their faces were blue and spiteful, and then they did some more. All the while, Captain dangling just in front of them, running in place as if he was light as whipped cream—so carefree as to smile at the sight of their tears, vomit, and bloody noses. He encouraged it, clearly, but Jorge was determined not to spill himself in any of those ways. They climbed Pikes Peak over and over again in the midday sun, when the meaning of time and heat were lost in the agony of the overload of both. Some of the other boys pissed their pants, or simply dropped out (no one was allowed to stop). When it finally got dark, they crowded round the back of Captain's big, white pickup truck, where he helped them into the bed and told them they'd done well. He looked at Jorge when he said it.

## THE BUS RIDE

The bus that drove the team to the Mount San Antonio races was not particularly spacious, but given the modest size of the team it fit them well. Each bench seat accommodated a member of the team and his duffel, and provided the boy behind it with a place to rest his feet. The air was thick with the aroma of disintegrating rubber and sweaty polyester. Cheap walkman tape players were popular amongst the team—and for those not privy to one (as Jorge was not), the rhymes of Tupac clashed softly with mariachi polkas in the quiet spaces of the freeway drive. Everyone around him knew Spanish, but no one spoke it. There was a boy from Guatemala, twins from Spain itself, and a whole parade of Mexican migrants' children, but most everyone kept to themselves. It was a pre-race tradition, which would someday change. In the meantime, Jorge basked in the idea of these boys as newfound brothers. So, Jorge thought, covering the pinkness of his shorts with an open magazine. *This is what it's like.*

# Cacophony

Nareen Manoukian

I can't decide if the floor is wood or something synthetic. It looks really good, but it doesn't make that woody sound when I walk on it. I guess it was worth all the construction—the place looks a lot classier now. No more fluorescent lights, even though they really do save energy. Everything that was once industrial has been replaced with something soft and homey. The counters of produce have been replaced with large wood and wicker baskets. They want to make it look like the bushels of apples have just been picked and brought here only minutes ago. Just another marketing tactic, I guess. I hope it's all worth it—it must have cost a lot of money to construct. No one really pardons your dust, even if you ask nicely.

One hour to closing. My manager takes a bruised apple from the floor and adds it to the top of the pyramid. He turns to look at me and straightens his black tie—its removal is several hours overdue.

“Working hard or hardly working?” he asks.

Why is it that it's always people with authority asking this stale question? You never hear the little guys saying this to each other, even as a joke. That's one of the things that drives me crazy about this place. All I can think about over here is Situationist graffiti. “We refuse the role assigned to us: We will not be trained as police dogs.” I'd kill myself before I'd become a watchdog of capitalism and start sneaking around behind people to see if they were “working hard or hardly working,” and then running to the back room to rub my hands together like a fly and count money. I'd rather be a useless proletarian.

“I haven't heard that one before, thanks. There's no one around. What am I supposed to scan when there's no one around?”

“When there's nothing to do, you're not looking hard enough for something to do. Go restock shelves.”

I hate this job, but this is what it means to be an artist. Debasing yourself for your passion. Or maybe there is a contrapuntal relationship that I'm not aware of. With a job that makes me work from the neck down, I'm free to think whatever I want. They can control me physically—scan this, stock this, wipe this, mop that—but they have no idea what's playing in my head. In a “creative” job—marketing, for example—they'd control me physically and own my mental output. I'm composing a violin concerto in my head while I restock the Ruffles, and it's mine.

I wonder why we stay open until midnight. If people can't find a suitable time to buy groceries from 6 a.m. to 12 p.m., there is something seriously wrong with their lifestyles.

In grade school, she taught us an Armenian folk song which she undoubtedly learned as a child while her once-sovereign nation lived in fear under communist rule. She played the melody on her three octave mini-keyboard and kept the tempo with her left hand by banging on the desk. Each time she brought her hand down, her plain, very yellow wedding band would chime on impact. *1...2...3..4.... Bang...bang...bang...bang....* We thought this was very funny. She did not. How could we, at eight years old, understand the ascetic nature of the old generation Soviets?

And how could we understand music meant to instill in the youth a firm reverence and respect toward authority? She taught it to us with a seriousness reserved for Masonic rites. The song is a poem written from a student's perspective, put to music. *Dearest teacher, I saw you once again. I knew it was you by your hair, which is now white, maybe because of me....* We sang along with her commanding hand, our premature, off-key voices resonating in the classroom. We couldn't understand at the time that while she was teaching us this song, she was anticipating the day that we would sing it back to her—the day that she would stop dyeing her hair and start dying.

She was the first person to tell me that I was worthless. She wouldn't be the last. I considered the irony of her hope that I would one day sing praises to her when she was the person least deserving of them. But that was the Soviet way. She didn't like little girls who didn't have nightingale voices. It was obvious to her that I wouldn't grow up to be an internationally known coloratura soprano. But she probably never read “The Ugly Duckling,” a symbol of Western optimism, either. Even if she had, she would, typical of her totalitarian pessimism, point out that ugly ducklings don't grow up to be beautiful swans. They become ugly ducks.

She thought I couldn't understand music because I clapped on the off-beat during rhythm exercises. She commanded, and the class clapped *1...2..3...4....* I couldn't tell her that I did it because I liked eighth notes better than quarter. *1-and, 2-and, 3-and, 4-and.*

*Dearest teacher....* The song still comes to mind sometimes. When I am folding laundry, or shampooing my hair, the words will reel through my head. Or if I am writing a piece of music, that folkish melody may somehow manifest itself in the depths and folds of the pages like the specter of Father Stalin himself, appearing before me. I hear the slow progression of a major second and a minor second, and then a minor third down. Except

it moves with chords now.... It's all grown up.

I wonder how she knew that I would remember this song for years and years. More significantly, I wonder how she knew that our paths would cross again. How did she know that one day when I am older and she is old, I will see her moving slowly through the aisles with a basket of eggs and grapefruits? She must have foreseen that I would follow her through the produce and down the canned goods aisle, and prophesied that she would reach for the baby corn on the top shelf and be just inches too small to seize it, even on her tiptoes. How could she have possibly known that I would approach her and hand a can to her with ease. And see something familiar in her face, hear something familiar in my head, and then understand who she is?

She must have known that she would be too old to remember me, and so she would equip me with a musical offering of worship to place at her feet—something which she *could* remember and would strike a match in her memory, if I ever sang it to her.

She looks older and smaller. Her body now resembles a matryoshka doll's, and her hair is completely white. She smiles and her eyes crinkle as she searches my face for a clue. She can't decide if I look Armenian enough for her to thank me.

"Tenkyoo," she gives in and mumbles in a language foreign to her.

I look at the baby corn in her basket and she shuffles away.

*Dearest teacher, I have so much to tell you...*

*In your ignorance, you thought that sopranos are the only show-stoppers.*

*But I have a clear alto voice now and have discovered that sopranos are a dime a dozen.*

*I'll sing to you now, midrange, unashamed.*

*I could even arrange it for four voices and instruments.*

*I can do it right here in the canned goods aisle if you'll stay—*

*the soprano line mimicking the melody you once played, alto and tenor sounding a minor third and fifth below, bass singing the first degree of the chord and orchestration....*

*No parallel fifths, no unresolved tritones, just the way you would want it and of course—your incessant tempo regulation.*

*Where would we be without your metronomic jewelry to guide us? There, done! Now listen... Do you hear it? Just listen, they're applauding you.*

*Dearest teacher, face the audience and take a bow. Hurry, before they drop the Curtain.*

# Up In The Santa Monica Mountains

Rich Anderson

**U**p in the Santa Monica Mountains: that's his favorite place. He'll drive you there, if you let him. He'll take your car. It'll be all right.

He'll open the passenger door for you and shut it after you get in. He'll be polite, and you'll thank him for opening the door after he gets in the driver's seat and buckles up. No problem, he'll say, thanks for letting me drive your car.

You'll both be in the car, and it'll be dark outside, dark in the car. He'll take your keys out of his pocket and grin, out the side of his mouth, and he'll think you didn't see it. He'll put the key in, turn it, the engine will howl, and he'll ask, where's the head light switch?

You'll point, there. The lights will beam forward, the console will burn a dim green and he'll shove the car in gear with his firm right hand. You're gonna like this, he'll say, it's my favorite place. The car will jolt forward, your head'll jet back, and you'll buckle your seat belt.

You'll have just moved into the apartment, after answering the ad in the paper. ROOMMATE WANTED—call for price: CHEAP CHEAP!!!! You'll have called the number and met Lyndon, heard his voice. Sounding like a teenager, his voice'll have cracked deep, then squealed high. Two hundred a month, we share the bathroom, he'll have said. That sounds great, I'd like to stop by, you'll have said, knowing it's the only place you can afford. And when you'll have showed up, there he was, Lyndon, the embodiment of the voice on the phone, awkward, tall, 6'5", acne, but in his late twenties, and wearing a white T-shirt and torn jeans. He'll have had full beard stubble, not like a teenager, and his skin, his arms, face, neck, will have been worn, like ashen driftwood. His eyes, a sunken blue, will've darted back and forth, unable to make contact with any one object for longer than two seconds, and they'll have sparkled, jumping in and out of the July sun.

The car will thunder as he accelerates, pressing his foot against the gas pedal. Easy,



it's an old car. Don't worry about it, let me do the driving. And he'll turn his head to you, and those eyes'll fix right on yours. For two seconds. Then they'll bounce, looking at your forehead, neck, then he'll snap his head back and his eyes will be to the road. And you'll wonder, as you turn your head to the passenger window, looking out and up as the hazy orange streetlights pass, the tires scratching against the asphalt, who the fuck is this guy?

But wondering will be useless. He'll be driving your car, destination: mountains, away from the city and all of its pale lights. So you'll try not to think about Lyndon and who the fuck he may or may not be. But it'll be hard with him right there, being able to look at his arms, smooth and straining, gripping the wheel, his face tinted moss green. You'll only look out the corner of your left eye, and you'll see his left knee hopping up and down. Would there be a way to grab the steering wheel, veer the car into that tree, only hurting him? What about when we stop at that stop sign? I could roll out of this fucking car. But he won't stop long enough for you to realize he locked the doors without you noticing. It'll be much too late, and you'll be twisting through the mountains, on a two lane road, the stars will be bright, and the smell of wet woodchips will seep through the A/C.

There are usually a lot of opossums on this road, you'll see, he'll say. They're always out in the middle of the lane, just standing there, like fucking morons, and he'll turn the wheel, hugging a curve around a bend and that'll sway your body towards him in your seat. Sometimes I'll see a whole family of them, and they'll always be standing there in size, biggest to smallest. Fucking biggest to smallest, man, can you believe that shit? And you'll want to ask if he purposely tries to hit them, the entire opossum family, pulling the car around to make multiple passes. Or perhaps he just drives through them, nipping the biggest one, the mother, and the smallest, the baby of babies: the bookends. Or maybe he stops the car, gets out, runs them down, and catches the slowest one (the pregnant mother or the baby of babies), and strikes them with his oak hard fist, and throws them in the air, swinging them by their prickly tails, to high kick them off a cliff somewhere. But you won't want to know, really. We're almost to the turnoff.

So, you'll ask, Lyndon, what are we doing out here? He'll tilt his head, but his eyes'll be staring straight ahead. Like I said, it's a surprise. You'll like it though—here's the turnoff. The car will brake, slowly, he'll put on the right blinker, and he'll turn the wheel, and the car'll drop off the even asphalt and land on harsh gravel. The wheels will pop against the small stones and, ahead of you, you'll see nothing but massive bushes crowding a narrow, vacant road. Biggest to smallest, those big ones always leading the way. I love those fuckin' opossums.

And it'll seem like he drove forever, cracking through the gravel.

Here it is man, and he'll turn off the lights, while still driving, tar black inside and out, and he'll put the car in neutral and turn off the engine. Here are your keys. You'll feel the keys drop in your lap. The car will coast and thump against the ground, and you won't be on gravel, but earth. You gotta do this, otherwise you'll scare 'em before you get your hands on 'em. Now, I'm gonna stop the car very slowly, I want you to unlock your door

and step out at the same time as me—leave the door open. Lyndon'll look at you, his eyes will fix. Don't make a noise, man. And you'll pop up the door lock, Lyndon's eyes'll crunch together: do it quieter. Lyndon will pop the door lock up, without a sound, and pull the door handle. The door will crack open, silently, and you'll follow his lead. You'll touch your feet to the ground after you open the door and you'll look to the left and see Lyndon there, standing, grinning, the moon's reflection bouncing off his teeth and blue irises. And Lyndon will remember how, the night after he finished the Crucible, he went to the woods outside Jacksonville, North Carolina and breathed the humid summer night air, and felt ready. He'll whisper are you ready, man? Take in a breath, do it quiet. You'll breathe in the cool mountain air; you'll taste the sage chaparral in your mouth, on your tongue, mossy on your teeth. When I turn on the lights, do as I do. And you'll look at Lyndon, just as he says that, and see his grin turn to a smile, then to a muscle tearing beam – and the lights, the highs, will flip. In front of you will be rabbits frozen still, the bright lights pinning them to the ground, stunned. There'll be scores of them: dusty brown, black eyed, and nose twitching. He'll run, out around the door, through the brush, to the open field, and snag, two at a time, by their ears, the rabbits. His long arms'll fly, lifting up to the sky, the stars, his shadow dancing across the mountains far behind him, four rabbits caught. He'll run back to the car and yell what are you waiting for? Once you catch one, put it in the back of the car, man, and he'll be back on the rabbits, lifeless in the light.

Not a one, man, you didn't catch a fucking one. I can't believe that shit.

You'll only have one thought in your mind as Lyndon drives you, in your car, with over twenty rabbits in the back seat and floor, scratching their paws, nails, into the grey upholstery, and hopping.

You wouldn't last a second overseas acting like that. I mean, first off, you have to do what you're told, man. When I say get the fuckin' rabbits, you get the fucking rabbits. I was in the Marines, man, I did what I was fuckin' told.

And it'll make sense to you. The rabbits, that is.

Lyndon won't have to tell you what he saw, or what he didn't see. Lyndon won't tell you that he specialized in Nighthawk maintenance on the USS Boxer and that he never really saw action, never set foot in a war zone—only serviced it and got his GI Bill—the emergence of his thyroid eye disease kept him from combat. Lyndon will assume you'll assume he saw his friends die, Pvt. BestFriend and Pvt. EveryoneIGrewUpWith, beside him, in Iraq and Afghanistan, with their guts squishing through bullet holes like cherry Jello. Or, maybe, he'll think you'll think his friends were kidnapped while on patrol in Baghdad, taken to Al-Zaquari, bound with duct tape, and sawed through the neck with a serrated bowie knife, screams gurgling out after the trachea was pierced, all on film, sent to Al-Jazeera, then later downloaded by Lyndon's captain, which he showed to his platoon for a little more HOORAH, a little more battlefield zeal.

He'll think you think he's going to kill the rabbits, as they scratch against the back of your seat. You'll hear the rabbits squeak and whisper to each other as he drives your car

out of the mountains into the city. I bet we'll see some opossums this time down the mountains. Then Lyndon will turn his head to you, his eyes, with intent, will meet yours, and he'll ask, what do you think I'm gonna do if I see some opossums? Tell me, what do you think I'll do? Say something, man. You'll turn your head away, but he won't stop looking at you. But you won't know that. You'll want to get out of your car, but it'll be going too fast, winding with the black road, and anyways, your door, you'll see, has been locked. You'll close your eyes. The rabbits'll smell of sage. He'll slow the car to the side of the road and you'll be able to see the fuzzy yellow glow of the city, the individual houses and buildings. Let's let them go here, and he'll pull the car over in the dirt. This is my favorite part.



Girl With the Striped Tights

Elizabeth Caffey

# Still

Angeleena Zacho

**I**t seemed inevitable that I would sleep with someone that night, and sure enough, after dinner, Danny and I did. The sweat having cooled, I shivered in post-coital repose.

“Here,” he said, drawing a quilt up over my shoulders.

I disliked Danny’s quilt—a scratchy kind of fleece—because it reminded me of the ones used by moving companies; blankets made from recycled scraps of other fabrics for the protection of tables and chair legs in transit. I had seen enough of them as a kid, watching our furniture wheeled back and forth, my chin resting on the dashboard of every U-Haul truck we rented. My impression of those trucks—each one bearing a different illustration of a state—was that you were supposed to collect all fifty. I got Oregon, California, New Mexico, and Minnesota before my mother finally brought us to a halt in Texas. It was a mistake to trust men, she explained, rolling down her window on the shoulder of Interstate 75 to eject a wad of Nicorette gum from her mouth.

She and I relinquished our cross-country travels, but orbited that Midwestern town which smelled of oil with its brown grass and brick mansions, moving from crummy apartment to slightly less crummy apartment as my mother rebuilt her credit. The first two were roach-infested, but the second had a small balcony and the third, an actual bedroom. The fourth and most spacious apartment was a clean-carpeted affair on the ground floor, and it was under the surrounding oak trees of that grassy complex that I first experienced love—sweaty-palmed, twelve-year-old love with the round-faced boy from upstairs. His initials were J.M., and we carved them and mine, sometimes with the addition of a heart, into pliant surfaces all summer. Those leafy green days and awkwardly-timed kisses, wet and fleeting, stuck sweetly in my memory like hard candy in a molar. We were filling a backpack with canned food and matches—preparing, half-seriously, to run away together in the event of my mother’s probable restlessness—wanting to pre-empt her disastrous

apitude for providing me with father figures.

In the end, it was he who moved with his family to a new town and school district in fall, after which we fell out of contact for the remainder of our school days, but the last time I saw Joel was two years ago in an airport when he stood before the security check-point and sobbed relentlessly into my shoulder. I let him lean into it, but his breaking down like that was, admittedly, a little pathetic. People who cry in airports always are.

I ran a hand over Danny's body, which felt warm and firm under the quilt. He had skin like a catcher's mitt; tanned and oiled, and he was watching ESPN with one hand resting drunkenly on my ass.

"What's your last name?" I decided to ask.

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At dawn, I extricated myself from the tangle of blankets and limbs and began to dress silently. It took several minutes to locate every article of clothing, each sock and earring, for we had thrown them off carelessly in our efforts to get to know one another the night before. I remembered the excitement with which, as a kid, I would unpack my belongings in each new apartment, ripping the tape from boxes as if expecting them to always contain new things. Now, clutching car keys and aching hamstrings, I stepped into the weak light of morning, realizing through the throb of my hangover that I had yet again landed myself in an unfamiliar neighborhood. There was nothing to do for it but drive around, hoping to recognize a street name. It was early enough still that the streets had not yet begun to stir. But, I reflected, it was Saturday. People would soon be waking up and doing normal Saturday things—getting married, watching football. Moving.

It was on such a gray Saturday at a state football game that Joel and I had met. This was during senior year of college, before our termination at the terminal, before I'd flown west for an internship and started screwing every guy who smiled at me in Fernando's Restaurant & Cocktail Bar. Joel had grown unexpectedly solid and good-looking in nine years, the roundness in his face turned to firm jaw, although he was still slightly shorter than me. We exchanged our remarks of pleasant surprise, arranged to have dinner sometime, and six months later fought over why we couldn't commit to moving in together. He was ready, he'd said, and willing, if I'd only trust us and stop vacillating.

"Who says I'm vacillating?" I demanded, snatching the sheets from the bed and draping them around myself like a toga.

"You've been sleeping here for months. I don't know why you even pay rent at your place anymore," he said, suddenly cold and exposed, but adamant.

"I can't just make this kind of decision lightly—"

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes," I lied.

"Then let's do it."

On moving day, I had my things sent to the airport instead of the new apartment as was planned. Joel perceived my decision at the last minute and tracked me to my gate, pleading ridiculously. As my shoes and purse were sent through the x-ray on a conveyor

belt, I cradled his head in my arms and sighed. He was making an awful scene, but couldn't do a thing to stop me leaving. We parted awkwardly and without ceremony, much like the first time. I was surprised to have to wipe a tear away aboard my flight.

Now for some unexplainable reason, I found myself sobbing in my car. I had happened upon one of the main thoroughfares of town and from there was able to locate a freeway onramp, the signs for which had been difficult to read through blurry eyes, but whether or not it was the interstate east or west, north or south, I hurtled down the empty lanes with every hope that they would lead me home—for I did in fact have a home, other than in the beds of men and the apartments shared with my mother. I would go there, crawl under the blankets and not move for the rest of the day, the rest of my life, if it could be helped.

# Lonnie

Darryl White

**W**ith his older brother Junior gone, playing wasn't fun no more. So after chores, Lonnie raced barefoot in the tall Arkansas grass beside his older brother Chester. They headed for the grove where red mulberry trees grew high to see if any spring-ripe fruit was left to steal. Chester was ahead, as usual, so Lonnie stretched his short legs to catch up.

"Cain't catch me you little Shrimp-boat," Chester sang.

As the fresh grass slid across Lonnie's shins, he whooped back accepting the challenge. Another two strides and the soft green became jagged, catching Lonnie's feet wrong. He fell, gut down with arms flying like wind-tossed leaves, and hit the soft green with a sliding bounce, crushing itchy stalks beneath his bony frame. Choking dust, Lonnie lay for a spell before twisting to his hip to see what got him.

Something shiny sparked in the sun—a rusted axe blade chip curved like the Devil's fingernail jutted out of the dirt. Lonnie rolled his weight onto one butt cheek, leaned down, and pulled his foot close to his nose for a better look. Thick red ran from a gash in the middle towards his heel. Lonnie didn't wince. It was still too early for the hurt, but he knew it'd come. Just as he knew it was too early for Chester to notice he'd fallen. Lonnie swiveled his neck to see how far Chester'd gone and to his surprise, Chester had stopped. Chester wasn't looking back at Lonnie. In fact, Chester's bare molasses back stood stiff—pointed at a dead man's silhouette hanging from an old twisted tree in the distance. Lonnie would've cried if he was cotton. Lonnie would've cried if his tears hadn't dried up when Papa's shotgun echoed in his ear. Instead Lonnie turned away from the swaying dead and considered the extra chores, the funeral, and the telling to Mama Rose. As wind shoveled rot and murder up Lonnie's nose, his mind peeled back to when Junior was still around.

The fog of living things growing, eating, and crapping all over stewed until the morning



sun came up and boiled it away, leaving the dirt and dry grass chicken farm barren of everything except the smell. The dozen or so chickens were fed and all of the brothers' chores, except chopping firewood, were finished. Lonnie stared at Junior and Chester. Both his taller-than-a-broom brothers strutted like king roosters. Only they never did it when Papa was looking. And right now, Papa was shut up in the cabin, smoking away until Mama Rose got back from work.

"Don't be struttin'," Lonnie said.

"Papa's a sonuvabitch!" Junior replied.

Lonnie didn't understand why Junior spent so much time worrying over Papa. Papa was Papa; he showed them how to do stuff like fish and hunt, sometimes he brought home pigs' feet and grits and even strummed the guitar when company came by. Papa provided. He rose before sunup and walked ten miles to Pine Bluff to deliver his best birds and, if he could, Papa'd peddle extra work at the docks and stay gone until nightfall. Unfortunately, today like yesterday, Papa was back too soon. Lonnie eyed Junior crooked and didn't understand at all.

Lonnie's headshaking sent sweat dribbling over his lips. The sweat was salty and grubby like he imagined the Devil's toes would taste. Lonnie grimaced and looked sideways at Junior. He always felt the Devil near when Junior fussed.

Born first, Junior was long, lanky, and a loose-tongued thirteen. He was coated with that good color city-people liked, a smooth cream that yellowed in the summer and fetched compliments as the 'clean boy'. Only Junior wasn't no cleaner than Lonnie or Chester. In fact, Junior's body had been smelly, stiff, and jerky since they woke. And since Papa got back, Junior'd been fixing his grubby hate on their small weather-worn cabin. Lonnie watched as Junior deadeyed their home, spit in the dirt, wiped dirty hands on his old frayed mud-brown shirt, and angrily dragged another cracked piece of timber to the cutting stump for Chester to axe down.

Naked from the waist up, Chester bled salt water while he worked under the hot sun. Chester was the middle child, dark as the sweetest molasses, arms thick as a fence post and a year younger than Junior, but older than Lonnie by three. Chester's axe came down with a hard shuck, the steady rhythm slicing timber into two neat pieces. Chester ignored the direction of Junior's spiteful gaze. He was like that. He always acted like he didn't see what he saw until it got bad. Then he would always try to make it better.

Lonnie watched the split timber fall and waited for Chester to move back before gathering them one at a time. Lonnie dreamed of the day when he'd be big enough to swing the axe or carry the giant timber. He hoped to be big by tomorrow or at least the day after. Until then, his job as the youngest was to pile the cut pieces in the cart attached to their carrot-brained mule, Homer. Once they had a full load, the three brothers would take Homer's reins and walk to neighboring farms. If they were lucky they'd be able to trade the fresh cut firewood for salt pork, fruit, or a few pennies.

"Papa's a sonuvabitch," Junior repeated as if no one heard him the first time. "His lazy ass sittin' in the house while we have to work in the hot. All he does is smoke and

make Mama squeal.”

Lonnie knew Junior was going to keep talking until Papa overheard and chased him with a strap. Junior always ran headstrong into Papa’s foul moods. It was as if the Devil had a pitchfork in Junior’s back and roasted him over Papa’s heat. It happened more often as Lonnie got older. Especially on days like today when Mama Rose was gone cleaning houses for the white folk. But that’s not what bothered Lonnie. Lonnie hated how only Junior could call Mama Rose ‘Mama’ without getting the black slapped off. “If Papa hear you, he’ll choke you like a chicken.”

Junior held idle for a second and Chester stopped swinging.

“Nobody want to hear ‘bout that, Shrimp-boat,” Chester said.

Lonnie dropped his eyes at the guilty sound in Chester’s words. They all knew it was true. They all feared the possibility. Papa had done it before.

It happened two summers ago, the brothers had been playing chicken-sticks—throwing half-hand sized twigs into the pens to see who could make the most chickens scatter.

Junior, as usual, was winning.

Grit, sweat, and old blood stained Papa’s blue coveralls as he came in from the fields carrying rope and his toolbox. He had been out fixing the fence section Homer broke during a kicking fit. Papa didn’t know Chester and mostly Junior had caused the fit by teasing Homer with sharp rocks. Papa, as usual, had to ruin their fun by barking at them to leave the chickens alone.

Papa asked Junior, “You tie up that mule?”

“No,” Junior said with his back stiff as a broomstick.

Papa chucked the rope at Junior’s chest. Junior shielded himself with crossed arms and the heavy cord bounced off, landing in the dirt at his feet. Junior took notice of rope-shaped red welts rising on his forearms and scowled. Lonnie met Chester’s eyes—they both knew the Devil when they saw defiance come over Junior’s face.

“Do it yo’ goddamn self!” Junior spat.

Lonnie became afraid to move, even to take in some air, and everything grew quiet like at night when all he heard were the crickets and the stove fire crackling to keep the cabin warm. Then Papa’s toolbox hit the turf and quicker than Lonnie could blink, Junior was down in the dirt with one of Papa’s large bronze hands clamped over his throat while the other took up the rope. Papa dragged Junior, kicking and choking, to the porch. With one toss, Papa got the rope over a roof post and tied the other end around Junior’s neck. With barely a grunt of effort, Papa tugged, making Junior go up.

“So you think you a man now,” Papa said low and hot, “you think you can talk t’me like you a man in my house?”

Junior’s eyes bugged blood red while legs kicked and white froth bubbled on cracked, stretched lips. Papa didn’t seem to notice as he glared with the deadeye he saved for beheading chickens.

Chester ran up the porch, past Papa, and into the safety of the cabin. Lonnie started crying. He knew what dead was. He’d been black his whole life. He’d heard the stories

about the white hoods who rounded up all the bad black boys and lynched them from trees. Nothing had made Lonnie's stomach so empty-cold as the thought of white hooded Klan men coming in the dead of night. Nothing, until he saw what Papa was doing to Junior.

Caught up by the chilling sight, Lonnie was only dimly aware of Mama Rose running out of the house and hitting Papa upside the head with a oil-dirty deep skillet. Papa tottered and let the rope go. Junior came crashing down in a heap of arms, legs, and gagging sobs. Mama Rose scooped Junior in her arms and hugged her oldest back to breathing. Chester peeked half his face from the doorway. He'd fetched Mama Rose.

"He was a man a minute ago," Papa muttered as if it explained the whole world. With a red matted trail growing over his left ear, Papa staggered towards Homer and his bronze, proud, upright shoulders sagged with each zigzagging step.

Lonnie shivered at the memory. He was happy he was older now. He was almost nine. If Papa ever try and lynch me, Lonnie thought, I'd do just like Mama Rose and pop him over the head good. Lonnie shivered again trying to shake away the feelings that Junior's hanging brought up. Being big hadn't helped Junior. Just as being big never helped Papa around the white folk. But being big was the only answer Lonnie had.

A rock whistled by Lonnie's ear and bounced off the cart. Junior had recovered from Lonnie's jibe. "Just get those droppings and load 'em 'fore I pop you," Junior screamed, "Do it right you little black Shrimp-boat!"

Lonnie scowled. He was tired of being the smallest. Tired of being called Shrimp-boat. Tired of always doing the loading. Tired of Junior and Chester hogging all the fun and winning all the games. Suddenly Lonnie knew what made Junior so mad. He knew why the Devil was at Junior because now the Devil poked him too. "Do it yourself, you sonuvabitch."

Junior's nostrils flared like a wild attack dog and his eyes glinted dead like Papa's. For a second, Lonnie forgot he stared at his oldest brother as he watched Junior snatch the axe from Chester's bewildered hands, and then turn on him.

"So you think you a man now?" Junior spat.

Lonnie didn't know what to do, but the fear in the back of his brain provided the simple answer. Lonnie ran.

Fast.

Junior was after him, readying for a swing, when Chester grabbed the axe haft. Lonnie turned around to see Junior and Chester yelling and struggling. Chester was stronger but Junior, being older and snakier, kneed Chester in the stomach while pulling at the axe with all his might. The axe came away with more force than Junior expected, its weight tearing loose from his grip. Flying end over end with devilish accuracy, the axe glided until yielding a sickening thump of splintered bone and tendons, followed by a surprised hee-haw that frightened blackbirds from their nests. Homer kicked out on three good legs and then stumbled as the fourth buckled. The reins broke; the cart overturned, crushing it's axle, and wood spilled like a busted jar of ants.

Papa slammed the front door, his wide, scathing eyes on the yard while a penny cigarette quivered from an anvil scowl. He took in the broken cart, overturned wood, the mule—whose eyes swelled in pain and confusion—and finally the empty axe haft held by his oldest son. Papa squeezed his cigarette dead with a thumb and forefinger and disappeared back into the cabin. The brothers exchanged confused looks, never had they seen Papa retreat from trouble. The confusion was short lived, however, as Papa returned.

Carrying his shotgun.

The much greater Papa-fear smothered Lonnie's run-fear. They all felt it. Brown, terror-struck legs became rooted as the shotgun's double barrels accused, convicted, and hated them, like the angry blue eyes of white-hooded men come for a lynching.

Junior seemed to sense Papa's itching to kill one of them, because he glanced at Lonnie and Chester and swelled his chest protectively. "I did it Papa," Junior's voice was gruff, a sound Lonnie had never heard before. "Shrimp-boat and Chester aint did nothin'."

Something cool flitted through Papa's eyes as if the Devil's pitchfork lifted for a second. Then the gun barked and bucked in Papa's arms and the chickens scattered wild, looking to outrun fresh death filling the air. A bloodied body slumped to feel the soil for the last time. Lonnie stared at the spilled brains and the iron buckshot glinting inside gray matter and bone.

Homer was dead.

Papa ejected the spent shells, pulled fresh ones from a pocket, and fed them to the blood hungry shotgun. He cradled the monstrous tool like his only obedient son.

"Don't produce," Papa said eyeing them, "you gotta go."

Lonnie never forgot the deadeye or the words. Papa's eyes had been so different from the lynch-hollow eyes he stared at now. A lump rose in Lonnie's throat as he realized Papa was Papa—a poor farmer who worked until his hands bled so he could keep his family out of the noose; a man whose life never taught him how to be gentle, only how to forge steel men from the cotton babies who tumbled from Mama Rose's stomach.

Watching Papa's dead legs sway while he hung from the old twisted tree reminded Lonnie he hadn't thought of the Devil since Junior left. Papa's beatings had got too much for Junior. He took off and nobody ever saw Junior again. Nobody ever found his body.

In Lonnie's mind, Junior became a big man. He imagined his oldest brother strutting like the king rooster with clean hands and a clean, new, blue suit. He imagined Junior worked a good job, like in a steel mill or a slaughterhouse. Lonnie wanted to imagine more, but the running red pain in his foot finally came and killed it all.

"Get on up Lonnie," Chester said. His voice was gruff like Junior's had been on that shotgun day.

Lonnie looked up to see Chester's reaching hand, a dark bronze hand like Papa's. Chester was the biggest now. Too big for chicken sticks. Too big for racing in the tall grass. Too big for mulberries. Lonnie would get the fun of the tree climbing and rope cutting. Both would carry their dead Papa home. Lonnie grimaced at the task. The weight would've been easier to lug with Junior around, but Lonnie had no answer for that.



**Spanish Sketchbook**

Hagop Kalaidjian

# Me and Henry

Paul Russel Laverack

I remember the Christmas my older brother left home. As I watched him drive off into the mountains, I knew I was losing someone special, someone who'd taught me so much. I was only five, and that same morning I was sitting on the back porch practicing my letters, he called to me from atop the house.

"Get up here." Nervously, I climbed the ladder he'd propped against the eaves, then inched my way onto the green copper roof. I saw him, laying on his belly against the copper, poking his head above the peak of the roof, looking across the street. In his hands he had the air-rifle he'd won a few days before, playing a game of nutgrab with the toughest kid in the neighborhood. That other kid just squeezed and squeezed—two-handed, even—but Henry just laughed it off. For his part, he'd been growing out his fingernails for two weeks to prepare, and when he dug those dirt-encrusted talons into the other kid's squishy sack, it was all over. Henry walked away with the gun, which didn't seem fair to me, since I knew Henry lost all feeling in his testicles that day I helped him demonstrate self-hypnosis with a ball-peen hammer. When I complained to Henry about his unfair nutgrab advantage, he put an arm around my shoulder and explained the idea of asymmetrical warfare. That was my brother. He could take the most normal thing and make a life lesson out of it.

Pumping up the bb gun, Henry watched over the rooftop. Then he turned to me, "Shhhh..."

I scrambled up the seamed sheets of copper roofing, and raised my head to spot his target. I saw, across the street in the church parking lot, sweet, pudgy, old Sister Mulligan bringing in food for the the annual Christmas dinner for the homeless. She was going back and forth like one of those tin ducks at Coney Island.

"Are you really gonna shoot Sister Mulligan?"

He counted out loud as he worked the lever up and down—ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred. I'd never counted that high before.

"Gee whiz, are you tryin' to kill her?"

Henry gave me the stink-eye and said only two words: "Jumper cables." I knew what that meant—sometimes he'd pretend he was the Soviet interrogator and I was the Afghan freedom fighter. I didn't like that game, so I got quiet fast.

He wiped the sweat out of his eyes, sighting in across the driveway. I was nervous and itchy and wanted to go inside—it troubled me to think of Henry unleashing, on my favorite nun, the most powerful bb shot ever—I didn't want her to die, but I also didn't want to miss it...so I poked my head back up to watch. Henry calmly lay the air-rifle against the copper peak, putting his cheek against the blue-black steel of the barrel. Perfect sniper position. He slowly let out his breath, curled his finger around the trigger, and squeezed.

Choo! The air-rifle jumped in his hands. Not a quarter second later I saw, across the street, the right lens of Sister Mulligan's eyeglasses shatter in a cascade of dusty shards, raining toward the ground and catching sparkles of sunlight as they fell. A half second more, and the sound finally reached us—glass breaking, along with a second sound—soft and wet, like a marble dropping into a bowl of cream.

Her head rolled back on her flabby neck. I noticed a splash of water spreading out across her puffy cheek, like all her eye-juice was squirting out, arcing across the air as she fell backwards, launching her tray of strawberry cupcakes and slamming into the hood of her Oldsmobile 88—she left a little dent in the steel when she slid off, crumpling into the mix of gravel and vanilla icing. It was...beautiful. And the screaming—I never expected a noise like that could come out of such a sweet old lady. You really see a different side of someone when you shoot her in the eye socket.

We watched her a few moments writhing in the dirt, howling, clutching at her face, when I mentioned to Henry, "She's not dead."

I hadn't wanted her to die, though I could see how my feelings might change if she didn't stop screaming soon. My brother tousled my hair, then looked me square in the face.

"She lives only because I allow it. That's real power."

Then we hustled down the roof, to put the ladder away in the garage. We watched as the paramedics came and took Sister Mulligan out from under her Oldsmobile 88, where she'd lodged herself, I guess in fear that someone was gonna shoot her again. Henry laughed, "Stupid cunt. What are the odds of that happening twice in the same day?"

When the wailing siren receded in the distance, he hurried in the house with me at his heels. Mom was upstairs putting candles in the windows to decorate for Christmas, and she'd left the turkey thawing in the kitchen sink. Our aunt and uncle and cousins were coming over to spend the night, so for Christmas dinner Mom and Dad bought an enormous turkey—almost as big as me. At age eleven, my brother was much larger than me, but still the bird loomed, enormous in the sink in front of him. Undaunted, Henry clutched the turkey's skin-tight plastic bag in both hands and yanked it up into his arms, rushing out the back door.

I scampered after him, across the backyard and into Farmer Jenkins' meadow. The

cows looked up from their grazing as we found a spot at the edge of the forest. Henry dropped the bird on the ground and fished in his pocket for a jackknife, which he used to cut the pasty white headless carcass out of its plastic bag.

“What are you gonna do with the Christmas turkey?”

The knife still in his teeth, he grunted, “Monster-bait.” He snapped the blade shut, “And you are gonna be my lookout.”

“So I’m looking for the monster, and the monster is looking for the bait?”

“Yeah, whatever.” He hoisted the turkey up on a tree stump, laying it breast-down, legs sticking up in the air.

“Are you sure the turkey will work?”

“Chicken’s too small,” he said, narrowing his eyes toward the cows, who’d gone back to their chewing and paid us no mind. “You don’t wanna use one of them, because they’ll kick you. Now start your lookout.”

I cupped my hands to my eyes like pretend binoculars, scanning the horizon for monsters. I didn’t know what they looked like, but I was careful not to take my eyes off the distant treeline, since I wanted Henry to see what a good listener I was.

“Here, put these on your head, like a great desert explorer.” I saw his shorts land in the grass in front of me. I put them on, like he said.

“But Henry, the belt buckle hangs down in front of my eyes.”

“Perfect. Now crawl out in the field. The buckle will catch the sunlight, and that’ll attract the monster.”

“What are you gonna do?” I glanced back. He’d cut open the giblets bag from inside the turkey, and was smearing the slimy turkey-heart all over his shirtless belly. He stopped, and looked up at me.

“Camouflage my scent.”

“Oh. Good idea.” I crawled out into the grass and stayed there quite a while, but the longer I had his shorts on my head, the less fun it became. Suddenly, the silence was broken by choked, angry groaning in the distance. The monster had come! Heart pounding, I inched back across the grass. Then I saw one of the turkey wings, rudely severed, laying in the grass in front of me. Shaking now, I parted the tall blades of grass and saw the bird’s remains scattered everywhere, legs ripped off, ribcage split open, hunks of meat strewn about. Oh my God, the monster ate Henry! I jumped up, dropping Henry’s shorts off my head, and raced home across the field, tears flying off my cheeks. I heard footsteps behind me in the grass—the monster! I turned to see. I had to see what the monster looked like—but I stumbled, hit the ground hard, tackled by the beast. I opened my eyes to face my final moment—but it was only Henry, wearing his underpants and clutching a cigarette in his teeth.

As I sucked air, calming myself, he took a long drag, giggling as smoke poured from his nose and mouth, his lazy eye drifting off to one side. “You become a man the second you realize you’re gonna die. Welcome to manhood.”

Then he jumped up and strode off toward the house. I trailed after him, “But what



happened to the turkey?"

He answered without turning back, "Bitch had it comin'."

From the meadow's edge, we saw a sheriff's car parked outside our house. Mom was talking through the screen with Trooper George as a deputy walked back to the prowl car, holding Henry's bb gun wrapped inside a rag. Henry turned to me and whispered, "Def-Con One."

Things had never gone to Def-Con One before. He ducked low, running along the farmer's fence toward our back door. I chased after as fast as I could on my stubby legs. I followed him inside, then Henry slammed the door shut and bolted it. We were in the kitchen, and he opened the cupboard where we kept the Fruit Loops, reaching back past where he hid all that medication he pretended to take. Henry pulled out the emergency pipe wrench he'd put there, in case things ever went to Def-Con One. He raced toward the front hall, and with one giant swing cracked Mom a good one on the back of her head. She hit the linoleum, hard. Henry stepped over her to bolt the front door shut. Trooper George raced off the porch, shouting, "He has a hostage! He has a hostage!"

The S.W.A.T. van pulled up just as Dad got home from off-track betting. Henry yelled out the window to the hostage negotiator to let Dad come in the house so they could talk, and when he came in, Henry cold-cocked him with the wrench, then dragged him down to the basement—not easy to do, because Dad was a fatty. But that was the great thing about Henry, he never gave up. He tied Pop to the hot water heater, alongside Mom. Then he ran upstairs and splashed kerosene all over the drapes and furniture and struck a match. The S.W.A.T. team smashed the front windows and rammied against the storm door as flames engulfed the house. I followed Henry up to his bedroom. He opened the window and climbed halfway out. He turned to me, reached into his underpants, and fished out the jackknife. He tossed it to me, saying, "Go cut Mom loose. Family is important."

He slid out to the edge of the roof.

"What about Dad?"

"That's up to you—I'd fry the fucker." Then he dropped over the side. I watched him pipe-wrench Trooper George, then hotwire the unguarded S.W.A.T. van, roaring off down the driveway, heading for the mountains in the distance.

I ran down to the cellar to cut my parents free. We got out just as the floor above caved in. Coughing and crying from the smoke, we sat on the grass and watched our house burn, the firelight dancing on the smoke-streaked faces of Mom and Dad, and the faces of our horrified relatives who arrived to celebrate Christmas. As the family home collapsed in a raging inferno, I wished Henry was still there. I looked off at the mountains where he'd disappeared, where the long line of screaming sirens now pursued him. I was grateful for all Henry had given me, and I felt he'd be proud of his little brother—I'd put his wisdom to use. Dad only survived because I wanted him to, and you know, Henry was right. That was real power.

Excerpts from: **The Land  
South of the Clouds**

Genaro Ky Ly Smith

August 15, 1979

Friday

**I**t's a rare treat to leave our neighborhood of Asia Minor and drive half an hour into the valley, an area of Los Angeles County where whites live. Going to the valley to watch a movie is like visiting another country because the mountains are closer, and everyone stares at us like we've wandered too far from home, lost.

Dad wants to get a good view of the screen, so we arrive at the Van Nuys Drive-in Theater early enough to get a parking space in the center of the lot. After paying admission, we file into a single line and slowly drive past the tall white movie screen made silent by the sun. Although there are many people who have already arrived, I still feel foolish for being here so early. I stare at the screen in front of us. The sun is too high, and I don't think it will fall in time to begin the movie, but Dad doesn't want to take any chances. He learned his lesson from the previous times we came late and watched the movies from the far left or right side of the lot. The actors were too tall and thin from those angles and my eyes hurt just from watching them stretch their mouths to let out small words.

As soon as Dad turns off the ignition, Mother uncovers the brown shopping bag beneath the pillows and blankets, pulls lids off Tupperware bowls, and fixes each of us a plate of egg rolls, shrimp fried rice, and mushroom, broccoli and Chinese snow peas stir-fried in oyster sauce. The scent of oil, rice, vegetables, and oyster sauce fill the car. Mother and Dad roll the windows down to let in fresh air. She sets the Tupperware atop the dashboard.

We eat slowly knowing it will be some time before the movie begins. Dad has talked

about *Apocalypse Now* for weeks. "It's about the war," he said when I asked what we were going to see.

"And it also has Marlon Brando," he added. When I didn't respond he said, "You know, Superman's father."

Dad and Mother eat with their eyes on their food. When they wipe their mouths or take a sip of Coke, they stare out the window on their own side or look ahead at the screen. People arrive in droves. The sun's rays glare off the hoods and windshields of cars as they make their way from aisle to aisle searching for the space they want, or for a speaker that works.

People let down the tailgates of their trucks or station wagons and sit on them as they fix cold cut sandwiches, precooked hot dogs and hamburgers. Some make their way to the playground area below the screen to cook their food in brick barbecue pits while children climb up ladders and slide down chutes, or they try to outdo each other on the swings. Their feet come out from under them as they kick out for height. And still the cars come, and I feel less foolish.

People who brought nothing walk to the concession stands. They dig into the pockets of their bell-bottom blue jeans and corduroy pants for crumpled bills and loose change. Young couples wander about the lot looking for others they may know, or they just walk to wear down the sun. Mother wipes her mouth and puts away her plate.

"Do you want some more, Long-Vanh?" Mother asks.

"No."

"Here," she reaches behind her and I hand her my plate. Mother sits forward and from off the dashboard, she scoops rice onto my plate. As she takes up the spoon for the vegetables she says, "You don't eat enough. That's why you're so skinny. You need to eat."

She hands back my plate.

"Is there another Coke?" Dad asks.

"It's in the bag." She picks up the brown bag and sets it between them on the seat.

They continue staring out the windows. A car pulls up to our left—a teenage boy and girl—and before he turns off the ignition, the boy wearing a baseball cap leans forward in his seat to look past his girlfriend, who slightly turns her head to our side so she can look out of the corners of her eyes. He keeps his hand on the gear as he glances out of the rearview mirror before scanning the lot in front of him and to the sides. But the cars keep coming, and the spaces are filling up. He turns off the engine, and they sit there talking, their eyes barely meeting each other. The teenage girl moves her hands freely while she talks, and at times the boy gives a faint smile. He sits leaning against the door away from her with his elbow resting on the sill.

The sun is behind the apartments and townhouses across the street. The eucalyptus trees, which border the drive-in, are tall enough to keep tenants and homeowners from standing out on their balconies and roofs. The wide white screen looks bigger as the day grows darker. People are still walking around; fathers make their way back from the concession stands with carry-out trays filled with popcorn, hot dogs wrapped in tin foil, and

drinks. Men wander around in groups with Bud and Schlitz in hands. From across the lot they wave at those they know and yell with the promise of meeting up with them later.

Still, the children swing higher and higher, and my parents sit facing the screen, waiting for night.

\*

I don't know when I fell asleep. A whirling sound fills the car. It fades in and out, in and out, and then Indian music. I open my eyes and it is dark and there is a dull glare coming into the car. Still the whirling continues—in and out, in and out—and it sounds like someone swinging a bamboo shoot. I sit up and stare at the palm groves on the screen.

“Did I miss anything?” I ask.

“No,” Dad says. “It just started.” He clears his throat.

A man parts the blinds in the hotel room and looks out over the city's business district—women wearing ao dais walk by and it's like I'm seeing Mother by the masses walking about on the screen. Pedicabs and mopeds swarm the main square.

“Saigon,” the man says under his breath. “Shit!”

“That is not Saigon,” Mother shakes her head.

“I know Vu-An, but what do you expect? You think they can just walk in and shoot a film in Vietnam?”

As the movie progresses, Mother picks out things that are out of place: the Viet-Cong's uniforms, the shape of the sun hats the villagers wear, even the rough waters of the Mekong Delta is too treacherous. Its green color is too dull, too light. Dad only slumps in his seat and sighs every time Mother opens her mouth to point out inconsistencies, and at one point he raises his voice: “Will you just watch the damn movie? I want to watch the movie.” It is the first time Dad has turned to Mother all evening.

I keep quiet and watch the screen. For someone who has to find a deserter and kill him, the film is taking too long. The company comes across one incident after another. An orchestra bombards our car, and helicopters fly against the backdrop of early morning. One of the helicopters carries a boat attached by cable, and like dragonflies, they swarm the coastal village. Bombs drop and fire blooms from the ground and rises above tree lines. A spray of bullets shoots sand and water and they rise like geysers. Mother covers her face with one hand. The more shootings and bombings and screaming there are the more Mother slumps in her seat. She covers her eyes and shakes her head from side to side.

“Let's go,” Mother says.

“What?” Dad snaps his head at Mother.

“I said let's go,” she repeats.

“We can't go now, we're not even halfway through the film,” he says, pointing at the screen.

The airborne commander in sunglasses and a neckerchief struts the coast of the small village and urges several of his men to strip down to their shorts and surf. While villagers scramble from burning huts and bombs flower into tall columns of fire, the commander

praises the waves and how they break.

The teenage boy and girl in the car next to us are kissing. The windows are nearly fogged up, but I can see them holding each other, lips mashed together. One of his hands is on her breast. And I stare at his hand squeezing, see the shape of her breast change, imagine the softness giving in to his hunger.

"Long-Vanh, stop looking," Mother says.

Dad turns to look over at the couple, then gazes at me in the rearview mirror. I stare straight ahead. At times I turn away, pretend I'm rubbing my nose, or yawning off to the side so I can watch the couple. I think of Mia in the laundry room or in the back bedroom with a boy, any boy, and their hands always held the weight of her breasts. The couple keeps at it. The boy pushes her back onto the seat and they are out of view.

Mother looks off to the side with her head down. The helicopters continue to swarm above the village as they shoot anyone running.

"I need to use the bathroom," Mother says and gets out.

Dad keeps his eyes on the screen. She slams the door and I watch her heading for the bathrooms near the concession stands.

"Is she all right?" I ask.

"Yeah, she'll be fine." He says without looking back.

After some time I ask, "Was this how it was?"

Dad breathes in and lets it out slowly. The air hisses from his nostrils.

"I was just a cook," he finally says. "I just cooked. That's all."

They had been fighting again at four in the morning: she demanded to know her name and he denied everything until he told her to shut up so he could fall asleep. And Mother threatened to find out so she could kill whoever kept him out late at night.

"Start with your imagination," Dad told her. "That's where you'll find her, there in your head."

The crew continues the journey up the Mekong. Faint drum beats come from the dim light in the night and it grows louder as they approach. The men get off the P2 boat and join other soldiers in the middle of nowhere for entertainment, and I am glad Mother is not here because three women, one dressed as an Indian, the others as cowgirls in short shorts and tied tops get off the helicopter and dance to Dale Hawkins's "Susie Q."

They dance around the platform to the cheers and roars of men cursing.

"Close your eyes," Dad says.

I look at him in the rearview mirror and say, "They're just dancing Dad."

He exchanges glances between me and the three women strutting in front of the soldiers. The men suddenly jump over the barriers and storm the platform; the helicopters take off with the women inside, and men hang onto the landing rail of the chopper before falling into the river.

Mother gets back inside the car, and we still haven't seen Marlon Brando. Just pictures that Willard, the main character, goes through. I want to ask Mother if she is OK, but that might make Dad huff and stare me down in the rearview mirror. She sits quietly. Her

hands go to her temples and she moves her head in a rhythm so that her hand doesn't have to move.

The crew in the P2 boat comes across a junk and stop it. Chef, a New Orleans cook with a handlebar mustache, is ordered to go on the junk, check identification papers while shoving the two men and a woman around. Chef walks along the length of the boat, opening sacks, lifting lids off pots and barrels, and spilling over baskets of fruits and vegetables, and suddenly the young woman shrieks and runs at Chef, and the American soldiers shoot up the boat and everyone on it. Smoke comes off the machine guns. Chef uncovers the lid to a straw basket and pulls out a white puppy with black spots. He holds it by its neck and shows everyone what she was running for. The woman is face down and moaning, and Chef checks on her. The commander of the P2 boat calls for a medic, but Willard takes his pistol and shoots the woman dead. Chef leans against the sacks of rice, crying and pulling his helmet over his head.

"I told you not to stop the boat," Willard says to the commander. "Now let's go."

"Let's go."

Mother has her head in her lap, her hands over her head. Dad and I look at each other and wonder at what point did she go down. Suddenly I can't hear the movie. Mother is gasping for air as she covers her face and cries. Dad unhooks the speaker from the window, replaces it on the pole's cradle, and starts the car. He backs out of the slot and makes his way down the aisle. Gravel pops under our tires, and clouds of dirt rise. Although there is no sound, I continue to watch the movie.

The P2 boat makes its way up the river. The water is calmer as it becomes narrower and narrower; the wall of trees and bushes and tall grass grows thicker along the banks. The trees along the banks are smoking; bodies drape over tree limbs or float in the water. A tree's branches and vines hold a charred helicopter above the water.

We leave the packed drive-in theater surrounded by eucalyptus trees and head down Roscoe Boulevard for the freeway. I turn around in my seat and watch the screen between the trees. There is a clearing along the river's bank. The P2 boat passes this clearing where a small house stands among fallen banyan trees. An old man steps out of his home and watches the boat pass, watches us head home as Mother cries into her hands.



**Apara**

David Blumenkrantz

# Lisette Zane Strikes Out: A Butterfly's Nightmare

Anthony Garavente

*"Once Chuang Chou dreamt that he was a butterfly...content to hover from flower to flower. Suddenly he woke and found to his astonishment that he was Chuang Chou. But it was hard to be sure whether he really was Chou and had only dreamt that he was a butterfly, or was really a butterfly, and was only dreaming that he was Chou."*

*Chuang Tzu, Chapter 2*

**L**isette Zane of Quakestate City, This Great Nation (TGN) was arrested in the autumn of 2019; she was caught red-handed in violation of Public Statute XYZ/94 (failing to spend at least \$1.99 in a period of seventy-two hours). It was Ms. Zane's third offense; she faced serious consequences.

This statute resulted from a bi-partisan political effort at stimulating economic activity in TGN's free enterprise system and was aimed at reaching those indolent people who stubbornly disregarded their shopping obligation. However, in the spirit of letting the punishment fit the crime, a first offense was counted an *oversight*, satisfied by the payment of a fine of seventy-two dollars (one dollar for each hour a person "forgot" to spend money). The second offense was considered *neglect* and cost seventy-two days in jail (one day for each hour one "failed" to buy anything). The third offense was judged a *refusal* to comply with THE LAW and the "Refusedniks" (as they were termed by the media) faced public flogging. The punishment was an ordeal of seventy-two seconds (as many blows as could be struck in that time span) and took place on the broad front steps of City Hall at



the noon hour the day after the verdict was reached.

The case would be heard in the so-called Real Courtroom, the new chamber constructed in compliance with Quakestate City's renewed spirit of respect for THE LAW, in which the judicial bench had been elevated to a height that had the head of the presiding judge almost touching the ceiling and who was garbed in the new courtroom regalia: powdered wig, white silk mantle trimmed with red piping and a blue tri-cornered hat topped with a long white feather. (The only concern expressed about this awesome display of judicial authority came from the ultra-radical environmentalists who vigorously objected to the use of a feather plucked from a rare bird on the endangered species list.) The Real Courtroom was the domain of the Honorable Lamar L. Laidlaw, one-time mayoral candidate of the less-conservative Demlican Party who had switched his allegiance to the less-liberal Republocrats because of their less-ambiguous stand on upholding THE LAW.

The case would be prosecuted by Barney B. "Spike" Bloodworth, a ten-year resident of Quakestate City after an unsuccessful gubernatorial candidacy in his native state, where he had advocated the employment of the guillotine as the method of capital punishment, including an anti-abortionist volunteer at every execution who would weave the condemned person's name in a rug meant to lie in the National Legislature. Spike Bloodworth had rapidly established himself in Quakestate City as a no-nonsense prosecutor firmly committed to upholding THE LAW, even appearing in the Real Courtroom with a gallows logo sewn onto the breast pocket of his snow-white blazer. Needless to say, such a zealous prosecutor was considered presidential timber, especially by the less-liberal Republocrats.

Lissette Zane's defense would be in the capable hands of modestly-ambitious, moderately less-conservative Demlican senatorial hopeful Aurore (after feminist writer "George Sand") Belle (for "social bandit" Belle Starr) Magliocchio/Durenberger (her beloved progressive parents)-Wentworth (her esteemed liberated spouse). Although she would answer to "Abby" (from the initials of Aurore Belle), a vestige of her successful stint as a Little League shortstop, the defense counsel insisted on the inclusion of all three surnames when she was formally addressed, with the slightly longer pause (she smilingly instructed) for the hyphen than for the slash.

The prosecution would partially rely on the scientifically authoritative testimony of a highly respected expert drawn from that pool of ever-capable specialists in the Private Sector; while the defense, having the more difficult assignment, would set its case on an intensively-balanced, psycho-sociological in-depth analysis of generally-prevailing tendencies in the broader civic community. In that same renewed spirit of respect of THE LAW, the conduct of a trial in the Real Courtroom allowed for the broader and more creative participation of a concerned jury, one that would help move the trial along as quickly and as cheaply as was compatible with THE LAW (i.e., its members could shout down defense witnesses and lawyers alike). Nevertheless, the "Trial of Ms. Refusednik" (as billed in the media) promised to be a hotly-contested affair that would attract the eyes of the entire nation.

After the recitation of the revised version of TGN's Pledge of Allegiance (which now included the words "and to THE LAW" immediately after "flag"), Spike Bloodworth called his expert witness, His Managerial Excellence (HME) Walter W. Wellworth, chief executive officer (CEO) of the ubiquitous Ummm...Boy! Department Store, and set out to establish his authority as a community-spirited, rampant-consumerist, as well as a deeply-perceptive analyst of the broader scientifically-managed though essentially *laissez-faire* national economy.

To maintain the confident bearing of a man of his standing in the Private Sector, HME Wellworth always appeared in public wearing a broad necktie (made from the fur of a 1,000 pound Bengal tiger he had personally killed with his own helicopter-mounted mini-howitzer) that clearly identified the CEO of Quakestate City's most popular department store.

"Our great institution prides itself," the beaming CEO announced in a loud voice, "in stocking over one thousand items, not one of which has any practical value!"

When Spike Bloodworth seemed perplexed by this statement, HME Wellworth explained: "any fool can sell a broom or a vacuum cleaner! The true entrepreneurs, the men who made TGN what it is today, sell totally useless products and," he was careful to emphasize, "in greater and greater quantities!"

The jury applauded enthusiastically; some of its members even whistled loudly.

Having established the credentials of his expert witness, the prosecutor got right to the question of Ms. Refusednik's transgression of THE LAW.

"During the entire seventy-two hour period in question," continued HME Wellworth, "the accused person was under the surveillance of the observation cameras mounted in all our display windows."

"And?" prompted the prosecutor.

"Not only did she refuse to enter the brightest store in the grandest consumer mall..."

"*Happy Shoppers' Excellent Sufficiency Plaza, at the corner of Liberty Boulevard and Freedom Avenue,*" the jury crooned the popular advertising jingle.

"...in the entire Quakestate," continued HME Wellworth over the crooning jury, "but she adamantly and repeatedly turned her back on all of Ummm...Boy!'s Smilers!"

"Smilers?" inquired Bloodworth.

"These young people are our specially-trained psycho-motivators!" the CEO snapped impatiently, obviously disappointed that the prosecutor did not know about them. "They are chosen for their large teeth, loose lips and sweet-smelling breath from the ranks of both genders and every race, nationality and religion known to humankind. Ummm...Boy! being an equal opportunity employer."

The jury members all nodded their heads vigorously in recognition of these famous social engineers.

"They are dispatched into the mall's parking areas as a part of our great store's policy of going directly to the people," exclaimed HME Wellworth. Then, proceeding in a much lower tone of voice, he said, "The Smilers gently encourage folks to relieve their feelings

of depression (an accursed affliction these days) by purchasing something from our well-stocked shelves.”

Again, the jury burst into applause.

“Many a psychologist has recommended a shopping excursion to Ummm...Boy! as the best remedy for prolonged mental distress,” beamed the expert witness. “Indeed,” he added, “we have received humanitarian awards for the good feelings we have brought to the community.”

After HME Wellworth was excused from the witness stand, Spike Bloodworth planted himself firmly before the jury and shouted at the top of his voice: “LISSETTE ZANE DOESN'T WATCH TELEVISION!”

The response from the jury was immediate and raucous, the unfortunate defendant being roundly booed and generally cursed as deeply disrespectful of TGN's basic principles, with the loud outburst building up to the chant: “THREE STRIKES, YOU'RE OUT! THREE STRIKES, YOU'RE OUT!”

Then, after order was restored, the prosecutor lowered his voice almost to a whisper when he sadly asked the jury: “Doesn't it always begin in the home?”

“Yes! Yes!” agreed all twelve jurors, still vigorously nodding their heads up and down long after Spike Bloodworth had rested his case.

When the defense attorney rose to call her only witness, Lissette Zane, testifying on her own behalf, both women were met with the hostile glares of the jurors, some of whom were even hissing.

“Ms. Zane,” began Abby Magliocchio/Durenberger-Wentworth carefully, “how much money do you earn in an average workweek as an adjunct employee?”

“Between 250 and 300 dollars,” replied the defendant, “depending on the needs of my seven employers.”

“You have *seven* employers?” the defense counsel cleverly guided her witness.

“Yes!” sighed Ms. Zane, “One for each day of the week.”

“Objection!” cried the prosecutor. “In her scurrilous reference to Public Statute XYZ/94, the witness is being unpatriotically sarcastic!”

When Judge Laidlaw supported Bloodworth's objection, the defense attorney hastened to ask: “Ms. Zane, why didn't you spend any money in the seventy-two hours in question?”

“I just naturally save money, I guess,” she apologized. “Employment being so uncertain nowadays.”

“Objection!” the prosecutor intervened again. “Witness just testified to holding seven jobs!”

“Sustained,” agreed Judge Laidlaw. “Witness needs to be more explicit.”

“Well, your honor,” Lissette Zane continued, “I've been saving my money to pay for a decent health plan.”

Judge Laidlaw slowly nodded his head in recognition, causing the long white feather on his tri-corner to wave back and forth. The expression on his face indicated a faint recollection of a time (now long gone) when it was considered a virtue to save money for

some worthwhile expenditure.

The jury was suddenly silent.

Spike Bloodworth was staring apprehensively at Judge Laidlaw.

The defense counsel spotted her opportunity, quickly dismissed her witness and proceeded directly to the courtroom's message board where she squeakily scrawled her not-guilty summation: Poverty + Consumerism = Crime.

There was a loud gasp emitted in perfect unison from the twelve throats of the outraged jurors. Judge Laidlaw snapped to attention so furiously that the white feather shot into the air-conditioning vent just above his head. Spike Bloodworth went catatonic, his eyes rolled back behind fluttering eyelids, his teeth tightly clenched, and saliva oozed from both sides of his mouth.

Then, pandemonium swept the courtroom. The jurors heavily stomped their feet and seemed to be whistling and booing simultaneously. When the prosecutor came out of his catatonic trance, he could be heard screaming at the defense counsel: "How dare you make such a scandalous charge?" and more words to that effect.

Judge Laidlaw was able to restore order only after he ruled the defense attorney in contempt of court, though he did allow the trial to proceed.

Despite the reaction from prosecutor, judge and jury, the wily defense counsel was pleased with herself. Her daring use of a long-forgotten sociological slogan had obviously struck a sensitive spot in her opposition's armor. Though Spike Bloodworth vehemently denounced her equation as an unfair "guerrilla tactic," she felt sure that the judge would inflict the lighter sentence on her client. That feeling was strengthened when the jurors did not decide their verdict, as was customary in the Real Courtroom, within the jury box, but actually adjourned to the seldom-used jury room where it still took them twenty-two minutes to reach a unanimous decision.

And she was right!

Of course, the jury found Lissette Zane guilty (after all, she had been caught red-handed by Ummm...Boy!'s state-of-the-art surveillance equipment and she voluntarily confessed that she had refused to spend money in an entire seventy-two-hour period). However, just as the clever defense counsel expected, her client would only be "swatted through cover," the punishment preferred by the Demlicans, not "lashed in the raw," the one favored by the Republicrats.

With the jurors informally arranged in an orderly semi-circle around the "victorious" lawyer and with Spike Bloodworth weeping silently in the background, Abby Magliocchio/Durenberger-Wentworth made her statement to the media: "The sentence Judge Laidlaw was compelled to hand down in the light of the evidence presented in court, not only proves that the legal system is functioning properly, but also demonstrates the salutary effect of our two-party system of government!"

The jury offered polite applause.

Lissette Zane shivered in her chair nearby.

TGN's leaders prided themselves on their management of an "open society;" that attitude prevailed as well in Quakestate City. Therefore, in the punishment of law-breakers, there would be none of that deviousness so apparent in those authoritarian-controlled "closed societies," where the similarly condemned were beaten unmercifully far from public scrutiny. Statute XYZ/94 stipulated that floggings were to be viewed openly by the general population and the media had demanded that such events be brought to a wider audience than those people who would descend on City Hall.

It was partly because the less-conservative Demlicans realized that television would expose a flogging to those who might experience some puerile satisfaction from such an event that they advocated the less brutal and more dignified "swatting through cover." These proponents of the lighter sentence were not only concerned about the scarring of buttocks, they were also bothered by the obvious indignity of exposing cleavage; therefore, they insisted that the condemned be allowed to wear dark underpants during the ordeal. The victim had the choice of wearing the forest green of Saddleback Undergarments, Inc. or the navy blue of Cornucopia, LTD (there had been a fairly conducted, international bidding for these rights), both companies famous for the unisex features of their respective products and both willing to guarantee the coverage of any size posterior, with the cleavage completely hidden from view.

Since it was a TGN tradition to precede all public functions with a performance of the rousingly-patriotic tune, "Homage to Fort McHenry," and since it had been noted that the flogging victims loudly pleaded for mercy before and cried with agony during the seventy-two second ordeal, the less-liberal Republocrats turned to the ever-available Private Sector to resolve this difficulty.

HME Hamilton H. Hollyberry, CEO of the city's famous theme park and a major contributor to the less-liberal Republocrats, was equal to meeting this civic duty ("placating the 'bleeding hearts'," as his less-moderate associates complained) by arranging, at no *direct* cost to the taxpayer, to have his fifty-piece brass ensemble play a very loud, upbeat rendition of that popular tune from the moment the condemned person was dragged to the "pillory," through the seventy-two second ordeal, to the time he/she was expeditiously removed from public view. Not so much as a peep was heard by the television audience!

Channel Foxyfare would provide standard coverage: ten minutes for reporter grooming (cardigan sweaters and the wind-blown look were *de rigueur* at floggings), five minutes of commercials (no tobacco or liquor advertising) and the thirty-second news bite. The station's senior reporter, Ted Ratherbroke, would ask the "perceptive" question of Ms. Zane while his junior partner, Angelica Fawn Mulligan/Honda-Hassenfeffer, would pose the "human interest" query.

As the Demlican flogger, Little Annie Dragon loosened up her swatting arm, much like the on-deck batter in a baseball game would, by slowly swinging five steel rulers from side to side, the unfortunate Lissette Zane was marched to the carpenter's sawhorse that served as the pillory. Just before she was draped across it, the junior reporter asked: "Ms. Zane, did you choose Saddleback's forest green underpants for some sentimental reason

or is that your favorite color?"

Trying hard to keep from stammering, the terrified Refusednik answered: "It was Saddleback's double-protection reputation that influenced my decision."

"A practical choice," cheered the junior reporter as she turned to the television audience, "considering what you are now facing!"

As the senior reporter was positioning himself for his best camera angle, Lissette Zane realized that Little Annie Dragon was ready to begin the flogging. She could hear the *swish-swish* sound of a single ruler ripping through the air as the diminutive flogger was demonstrating to the assembled crowd the speed of her rapid-fire arm action. Today, for sure, it would be *twenty* swats!

Finally, Ratherbroke was ready to face the camera, by which time the condemned had already been placed on the sawhorse. Despite the awkward positioning of interviewer to interviewee, the experienced reporter was able to ask in that famous voice so deeply trusted by his television audience: "Ms. Zane, what have you learned from this solemn encounter with THE LAW?"

With her head dangling just above the ground and the sawhorse crossbar cutting off her breathing, it was difficult for the poor Refusednik to answer Ratherbroke's inspiration-probing question. Grateful that she would not be lashed in the raw by Republicrat flogger, Big Ram Ramsgate, the condemned woman could only recall her wise lawyer's courtroom statement.

"Thank God," she cried hoarsely, "for the two-party political system!"

# Claire Talks in Her Sleep

Craig Watkinson

**B**uddy was lying in his bed when he heard his wife Claire say something in her sleep. "I'm going to cut my husband's balls off on Thursday the 12th," she said.

Buddy kind of giggled, thinking, "What a weird thing for my wife to say in her sleep! Hee hee!" He soon fell asleep.

It was Tuesday the 3rd.

Two nights later, Buddy woke up at around 2:30 in the morning. He was a little hungry, so he microwaved a chocolate Pop-Tart for about fifteen seconds and then ate it, standing in the kitchen. A little of the chocolate stayed on his lower lip when he was finished. He went into the bathroom and looked at it in the mirror. "I am the monster with a chocolate stain on his face!" he said and began making scary noises, twisting his face up into all sorts of different contortions. (Buddy was a real fucking idiot.) Then he wiped it clean with a wet piece of toilet paper from inside the bowl and climbed back into bed.

Just as he was almost inside of a dream, he again heard his wife's voice. "On Tuesday the 12th I will very calculatedly slice off my husband's balls." It struck Buddy as odd just how well she enunciated the word "calculatedly" for someone who was mumbling from within the depths of sleep. But he wasn't sure if "calculatedly" was even a real word, so he figured she had to be dead asleep.

It was Thursday the 5th.

On Friday and Saturday night, Buddy heard her say roughly the same exact thing, only she changed the wording from "my husband's balls" to "*your* balls." And while she was saying it, she poked Buddy with her finger.

Sunday evening they were watching a “Wonderful World of Disney” movie about a young boy on a farm whose father dies in an avalanche but is then reincarnated as a pig. The young boy later cooks the pig up and eats him as bacon. Then the father begins speaking to the boy as an acidic pork shit the boy took in the toilet. The boy gets really freaked out and hangs himself with a leather belt. Buddy couldn’t believe that Disney had made this film.

Anyway, Claire fell asleep during the film. At one point, she said, “Five more days ‘til your balls come off.” In one of her sleeping hands, she held a calendar with dark red X’s through all the days of the month that had already gone by. Buddy turned the sound up on the TV. “FIVE MORE DAYS YOU FUCK!” she kind of screamed.

Startled by that, Buddy immediately turned to her. For a second, he could swear she was looking right at him but then quickly closed her eyes. Buddy wondered what she could be eating that might be giving her such horrible nightmares.

Monday night, Buddy was jolted awake by the loud crashing of several pots and pans onto the floor in the kitchen. A few moments later, Claire entered the bedroom, her eyes almost completely open, holding a very long carving knife. She placed it on her night table and slipped under the sheets. “That’s the tool for the job,” she said.

Buddy didn’t know what that was supposed to mean.

Tuesday afternoon, Buddy was looking through the mail addressed to him at his office. There was one typewritten letter that was not signed.

It read, “*GUESS WHO WON’T HAVE TESTICLES FRIDAY MORNING?*”

Taped to the middle of the page was a photograph of Buddy that looked a lot like a picture his wife had taken on one of their trips to the islands, but obviously must have been a different one.

Wednesday night (the 11th) at about a quarter to four, Buddy woke up to take a pee. He noticed his wife, a cup of steaming coffee in one hand, standing at an easel in the corner of the bedroom wearing a smock. On an enormous canvas, she was painting what looked like a woman slicing off a man’s scrotum while he lay in bed sleeping. Buddy was too tired to really get a good look at it though. That night he had a dream he could fly.

Thursday night (the 12th), Buddy’s wife Claire cut his balls off. Before he could even react, she ran out of the room with them.

Buddy called 9-1-1. Thankfully, the paramedics came in less than ten minutes. Still, Claire wouldn’t reveal where she had hidden the testicles, so there was no hope for re-attachment. One of the paramedics couldn’t stop staring at the enormous painting of what was obviously Claire slicing off a screaming Buddy’s nuts, wondering what the fuck kind of a house he had walked into.



Buddy lived, but he was never the same. He became bitter. And it wasn't just the long, drawn-out divorce, the loss of his gonads, or the sexual dysfunction he suffered until the day he died. What upset him the most was the fact that he had always lived his life being kind and good to others, and it just simply wasn't fair that something this horrible should happen to him. And completely without warning, at that.

# Sam's Noisy Nipples

Craig Watkinson

Sam wondered why his nipples were always making noise. One day, he decided to ask his doctor.

"Why are my nipples always making noise?" Sam asked his doctor.

"Because they're happy," was the doctor's simple explanation.

Sam went home from the doctor's office. He felt unsatisfied by the doctor's answer.

He went back.

"Are you a real doctor?" he asked the doctor.

"...No," the doctor answered, a little sad.

Sam went for a drive. Every time Sam made a turn, both of his nipples kind of went, ">Roing!<" One time, the car in front of Sam's came to a sudden, abrupt stop, and Sam had to jam on the brakes. One of his nipples then went, ">Zooool!<"

Sam grabbed a small meal in a Burger King. When he finished, he started crying. An old man sat next to him.

"Hey," the old man said.

Sam looked up, teary-eyed.

"Hey," the old man said again. "Why you crying?"

Sam tried to compose himself, wiping some snot away from his nose with a Burger King napkin. (The Burger King napkin already had some ketchup on it, though, and Sam ended up looking a little like he had a bloody nose. The old man didn't say anything, but I don't understand why.) "You ever have something where, you really need an answer to something, but no one can give it to you?"

"Well, then, you're in luck—" the old man said in a kind of a whisper. He looked from side to side, conspiratorially. Then he looked back at Sam and his ketchup-y, snotty nose. "Because I have all the answers."

“REALLY?!” Sam said, suddenly smiling like the Easter Bunny after letting go of an enormous shit. He clapped a bit and even pissed himself, but just a little.

“Yeah,” the old man confirmed, patting Sam’s shoulder. “What’s your question?”

Sam then started to feel a little self-conscious. He looked around. “Can we...go somewhere?”

“Sure,” said the old man.

They both got up and then sat down at the next table.

“Wait, I forgot my soda,” Sam said.

He reached over a bit and got his soda. He took a little sip.

“What kind of soda is that?” the old man asked.

Sam thought. “Well, if you have all the answers, you tell me.”

The old man looked at Sam, smiling. “Doctor Pepper,” he said.

“You’re...wrong,” Sam said, a little curious.

“Don’t test me, boy!” the old man said menacingly. He took a tiny little roll of skin on Sam’s forearm and pinched it as hard as a human being could for about three seconds.

Sam screamed a little, then began rubbing the spot. But Sam realized it was his own fault. (But why??) “I’m sorry,” he apologized.

“Not a problem,” the old man reassured him. “Can I have a sip of your Doctor Pepper?”

“Yeah,” said Sam. The old man drank from the soda. It was Doctor Pepper. (Oh, that’s why. Now I understand.)

“Aaah,” the old man sighed. The drink was refreshing.

“>Aaah,<” mimicked one of Sam’s nipples. The other nipple made a noise that sounded a lot like “>CANADA!<”

Sam froze. The old man’s brow furrowed. Across town, a Mexican woman threw up in her own sink.

“Was that—?” the old man began to ask, but couldn’t even finish his own question.

Sam unconsciously wiped at his nose. He noticed the ketchup on his finger. He wiped again—more ketchup. “How long has this been here?”

“Just a minute or so,” the old man said. “Mr. Noisy Nipples,” he added, teasingly.

Across town, the Mexican woman, wiping away her vomit, giggled.

Sam looked down, too embarrassed to make eye contact with the old man. “So... That’s my question. Why do my nipples make noises?”

The old man stroked at his chin a few times. He took out a notebook and scribbled down a quick drawing of a scrotum driving a sports car. He crossed it out, crumbled up the paper, and put it in Sam’s Doctor Pepper.

Finally, the old man spoke. “Listen—” the old man began. “I have a question for you. Is it more important for you to know why it happens, or how to make it stop?”

Sam didn’t have to think about that one for very long at all. “I just really want it to stop,” he said.

“Okay...” the old man said. “Okay. Come with me.”

Sam and the old man got up and settled at another table. It was nearly four tables away. The old man took a small vial from his shirt pocket. It was filled with a dark blue liquid. "This will solve your problems. I guarantee it."

">Gwoarz!<" one Sam's nipples interrupted.

The old man went on. "But I can't just give this away...and it isn't cheap."

"All right, how much?" Sam asked, determined.

The old man looked him straight in the eye. "Forty cents," he said.

There was silence.

Sam thought a moment. "I thought you said it wasn't cheap."

"Did I?" the old man asked.

It was the strangest thing, but Sam couldn't really remember if the old man did or not. He pissed in his pants again, just a little more.

">Fop,<" one of his nipples coughed.

">Tax time!<" the other exclaimed, as a kind of a pun. (Although I don't get it. Do you?)

Sam rummaged through his pockets. "All I have are dollar bills."

"Well I can't break one of those," the old man said, as if Sam were a total fucking idiot.

Sam was anxious. He gritted his teeth. "I'll give you the whole dollar then," he surrendered.

The old man's jaw dropped. He pissed all over himself, all down his legs and eventually into his shoes, much more than Sam's two little squirts combined. The old man took the dollar bill and put it in his shirt pocket, careful not to seem too much like he had just made a total sucker out of Sam.

"I haven't just made a total sucker out of you," he even said.

"Okay," Sam replied, confused. He was about to open the vial when the old man stopped him.

"No, no—not out here. Do it in the bathroom. Trust me. You'll make one of those embarrassing yucky-faces when you swallow."

"Oh, thanks," Sam said. He smiled. The old man again patted him on the shoulder. Sam stood up and dashed over to the bathroom. He accidentally first walked into the ladies room. Inside, there was an overweight, homely young teenage girl sitting on the toilet bowl with the stall door open. Just as Sam's eyes met with hers, she cranked out a hideous fart. It sounded kind of like a duck coughing up blood while being strangled. The fat, ugly teenage girl smiled at him. She looked a little prettier when she smiled; still, the smell was just obscene. Sam made a sour face, kind of shook his head as if to say, "no thanks!" and left.

Inside the men's room, Sam stepped inside the stall and locked the door behind him. He opened the vial and drained the dark blue liquid down his throat. He was dead inside of five seconds. The old man hadn't even gotten out of the parking lot yet.

The old man is my grandfather. When he first told me that story, I judged him very

harshly for it. I didn't speak to him for nearly seven years. Eventually I softened when he gave me 35% of the "take" from that "score" (approximately 35 cents.) Also, in time I came to realize (as he had always gone to great lengths to point out) that Sam's nipples did stop making noise after that day.

Oh, and one more thing. The secret to conning people out of a lot of money like that is credibility. Perhaps Sam wouldn't have trusted my grandfather had it not been for my gramps knowing what kind of soda he was drinking (Doctor Pepper, if you'll remember). In this case, the effect was achieved quite easily. When Sam filled up his cup at the soda machine, my grandfather watched which soda he chose. Devious, right? My grandfather also watched as Sam first pulled up into the parking lot, so he could correctly identify Sam's car in case he was questioned on that. (It also helped him know which one to steal after he murdered him.)

My grandfather—I love him. And guess what? You do, too.

# A Devil at our Table

Rene Solivan

When she told me she was the devil, I wanted to laugh but Gia spoke with such earnest intensity that I couldn't risk offending her... so I didn't. Even though I had only known her twenty, maybe thirty minutes, I liked everything about her, particularly her arrogant confidence, a quality I had always admired in a woman. We stood chaperoned by snow-covered oak trees and a misty lake as I shivered and wondered why Gia didn't. Christ, maybe she was the devil, but how could the devil be so beautiful and young and—God, when she spoke! Gia caressed every word, every syllable with an intoxicating musicality that was—up to her odd confession—very soothing, like she was singing some ballad with a band that only she could hear.

Gia paused deliberately after her confession as she studied my face, searching desperately for a reaction that I could not, would not give her. It was late and she was trying to frighten me, but I refused to fall for it. I had read every scare master from Stoker and Shelley to King and Koontz so I didn't frighten easily. Not even for a seventeen year old.

Minutes slipped by as we stared at each other, expressionless. Suddenly, I realized how quiet it had become. Too quiet. The forest sounds had ceased as if all the animals were holding their breath with me, waiting to see what this devil woman was going to do.

Gia continued to glare at me so I finally gave her a reaction. I threw a smile at her and pretended like she had just confessed to being an artist or a poet or some other creative creature. She returned the smile wrapped in seething disappointment then limped to the edge of the lake. I hadn't noticed the limp before.

"Why are you limping?" I asked with concern, trying to make amends.

"I hurt myself climbing over your fence," Gia muttered as she rubbed her leg. "Why is it so tall?"

"My dad wanted to keep them out?"

"Who?"

*Nuts like you*, I wanted to say. There was a mental hospital a few miles down the road, and a couple of times a year a patient would escape and wander on to our property. My dad would have to get his rifle and scare them off. One time we found this couple on our lake building a boat and when my dad told them they were trespassing, the man confessed that God told him to build a boat. He said his name was Noah and that a huge flood was coming. Though I didn't know why he was building such a big boat because the woman was only able to capture a pair of ducks and frogs. My dad called the hospital and had them taken away. He then made me untie the poor little creatures. I still have the duck-bite scars to prove it.

This other time a man snuck onto the property claiming to be Jesus Christ. My mom took a liking to him and convinced my dad to let him stay for a few days. Mom thought the Jesus man was handsome in his torn jeans and dirty t-shirt with a crucifix on it. She never told me she liked him but I could tell by the way she looked at him. Her face always lit up when she saw him in a way that it never did when my dad walked in the room with his stuffy ties and suits. I've never seen my dad in anything but ties and suits. When I woke up he was wearing them and when I said goodnight they were still on. He even wore suits on the weekends when he'd cut the grass. Now that used to drive my mom crazy.

Dad didn't like this Jesus imposter and he liked him even less when he ran off with my mother. The next day, my dad built the fence as tall as he could. That was a year ago. Now my dad and I sit on ten acres with the tallest fence our town has ever seen to keep them out.

"Keep who out?" Gia asked again.

"The foxes," I lied.

I watched as Gia moved closer to the water. The fog quickly surrounded her legs like an angry gang of ghosts. The pearly white mist crept up to her waist...and then eerily stopped. In her long black coat and endless curly locks, Gia resembled a witch drawing I had admired in one of my favorite Brothers Grimm tales. If I squinted my eyes, Gia appeared to be standing in a caldron completely oblivious to the boiling brew beneath her.

I walked cautiously towards Gia, trying to avoid the dead roses around me that were so vibrantly alive a few months ago. Gia was looking out over the lake. I followed her gaze and saw, just above the low fog, the very top of Dad's fence. I stood there pondering my dilemma: this spring, I was going to an out of state college on scholarship but my dad still didn't know. I was afraid to tell him because I knew he'd be heartbroken. I hated the thought of him alone. Gia would be a perfect wife for him, but if she mentioned she was the devil, Dad would have the hospital pick her up and then he'd build a taller fence.

"You're hurt. Why don't you stay here with my dad and me?"

"He wouldn't mind?"

"No. He'd love the company."

"I'll just stay until I heal."

"Stay as long as you'd like, Gia."

“Just for a night. That’s all I need, Jeremy.”

“We’ll play it by ear.”

“One night.”

“Okay,” I said as I rubbed my hands together. I was freezing.

“Aren’t you cold, Gia?”

“A devil never gets cold,” she said as she removed her coat, revealing a very short dress that accented the longest legs I’d ever seen. Her flawless skin possessed a mesmerizing sheen that glimmered in the moonlight. Her left leg had a long scratch—courtesy of Dad’s fence—that resembled a rose.

Yet even now in her summer dress, Gia did not shiver, and before I could react, she tossed her coat into my arms and headed towards the forest, and all I could think about was that she just referred to herself as a devil and not the devil, which—for a very brief moment—made her a little less insane to me, and after holding my breath for the last half hour...I finally exhaled.

“Gia?”

“Yes, Jeremy?”

“When you meet my dad, would you mind not mentioning that you’re...you know...”

“A devil?”

“Yeah.”

“It’ll be our secret.”

“Thanks.”

“Tell me something. Does your father believe?”

“In what?”

\* \* \*

“God?” Gia asked my dad as he lay dinner on the table.

“Of course I believe in God. We both do,” Dad said as he sat down to join us in his dated paisley tie and brown pinstriped suit, my least favorite of all his dreary getups.

Gia was as much bewildered by Dad’s outfit as he was of hers. When I introduced them, Dad was so distracted by Gia’s showgirl legs that he paid very little attention to my absurd tale of finding Gia walking along our fence after she had missed the Greyhound to New York City, where she planned on becoming a Radio City Music Hall Rockette. Even I didn’t believe the story. Luckily, Gia’s injured leg miraculously healed and she backed up my tale with a kick dance that left Dad and I breathless.

“How do you know there is a God, Mr. Mason?” Gia challenged.

“Faith. And please. It’s Ben.”

“Is your God good to you, Ben?”

“Well, I have a good job and home and a smart son—”

“And a wife who ran off with Jesus,” Gia said innocently.

There was an awkward silence as my dad threw me a harsh look.

“I don’t know where that came from,” Gia said apologetically.

“It’s okay,” Dad said trying to hide his embarrassment.



Gia put her hand on Dad's shoulder and he instantly relaxed.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I should've never mentioned it to her," I said as I tried to figure out how Gia knew about my mother. I never mentioned it. I thought it...but I never mentioned it.

Then it hit me. Gia knew the Jesus man at the mental hospital and he had written to her. I wondered if she knew where my mother was?

"In Canada," Gia said as she studied the food on the table.

"What about Canada?" Dad asked as he tucked his napkin in his shirt collar.

"Gia's from Canada, Dad," I said.

Can you read my mind, Gia, I thought. Don't answer. Just nod.

Gia looked up from the food, locked eyes with me... and nodded. I froze.

"I've always wanted to go to Canada," Dad said. "Are you alright, Jeremy? You look flush."

"I'm fine, Dad. Just hungry."

"You don't like meat, Ben?" Gia said more like an accusation than a question.

"No. Our family is vegetarian. Jeremy, would you say grace tonight?"

"Grace?" Gia muttered.

"We're Christians," Dad said as he held his hands out to us. "What are you, Gia?"

"I'm a—"

"Jew!" I blurted out. "She's Jewish, Dad. They don't say grace."

It's our secret, Gia. Remember?, I thought as I placed my hand in my Dad's.

"Yes, Jeremy. I remember."

"Remember what?" Dad asked with a confused look.

"That I'm...Jewish." Gia took our hands in hers. "Would you mind, Ben, if we said a silent prayer tonight?"

Gia's soothing voice had the same hypnotic effect on my dad that it had on me back at the lake. Dad couldn't speak. He nodded and bowed his head as Gia squeezed my hand. I closed my eyes, and silently prayed with a devil at our table.

\* \* \*

That night, I moved a dresser in front of my bedroom door, and then sat in my bed listening to Gia and Dad whispering all night. My dad was always in bed by ten on a work night but the whispering lasted until three in the morning. Two hours later, I sneaked off to school. I got off early from classes but I kept finding things to do so I didn't have to go home.

I walked into our house at six o'clock and was greeted by silence and a strange smell that led me to the darkened kitchen. I walked in and before I could reach the light switch, I slipped on the floor. I tried to get up but kept slipping on a pool of water, breaking into a mad dance as I struggled to stand. When I finally did, I turned on the light and looked down at myself and...I wanted to scream. I was wet but not from water. I was covered in blood. On the island sat a deer's head with blood flowing from it to the edge of the counter and dripping onto the tiled floor creating a scarlet lake where I had just done my desperate

dance. My rolling around had left behind a bizarre crimson painting that cried Picasso.

"Hi, son!" I heard my dad say as he entered the kitchen.

I turned around to find someone who resembled my dad but the dull tie and suit were gone, replaced with a black tank top and trendy jeans that made him look like a young Harrison Ford in some high-tech thriller.

"What's this?!" I yelled pointing to the deer's head.

"Dinner," Dad said casually as he opened the oven and inhaled. "Mmmmm."

"We're vegetarians!"

"Not anymore, Jeremy. Gia and I have already eaten. You're in for a treat. She's an amazing cook."

"Where is she?"

"Down by the lake. I'm going to go meet her. Now, go get yourself cleaned up and eat something. And when you're done, I've left a surprise on your bed. But don't look at it until after you've eaten."

My new dad grabbed me and did something he'd never done: He kissed my forehead. He picked up his coat, started for the front door, and then stopped as he pondered something. He began to laugh uncontrollably. He threw the coat over his shoulder and ran out in his tank top in thirty-degree weather. He jumped in his pick-up truck and headed towards the lake.... That was the most alive I had ever seen my father.

I picked up the deer head, threw it in the back yard and then changed my bloody clothes. I searched my room looking for Dad's surprise. There was nothing there except a thick envelope with my name on it. Inside, I found three thousand dollars and a note:

*Dear Jeremy,*

*Gia told me you're going away to college. I'll miss you but I understand. Here's a little something to get you started. By the way, Gia and I are going to drive up to Canada to pay a surprise visit to your mother...and Jesus.*

*I love you,*

*Dad*

I dropped the envelope and ran out of the house.

\* \* \*

When I arrived at the lake, Gia and Dad were gone. It had snowed earlier and I could still see their footprints and the tire tracks of my dad's truck. I followed the tracks and then stopped.... Dad had built the tallest fence this town had ever seen and now there was a huge hole in it where dad's truck had driven through.

It began to snow as I stared at the hole, wondering *Who was Gia the mind reader and why hadn't the hospital come looking for her?* And as if she had just read my mind, Gia sent me an answer in the spot where we had met. I fell on my knees and looked out and saw, in thirty-degree weather, a field of vibrantly alive full-blown roses.

# This Nagging at the Back of My Eyes

Richard Bashara

**S**omewhere in time I am driving. I am holding three CDs in my right hand instead of my steering wheel, and I'm eyeing them for the last time. The heat is sweltering, complete with wet tracks of sweat, hot and sticky, and here I am sitting in my undershirt, jeans rolled up to my knees, in an old Honda with no A/C and hardly enough engine power to make it up this hill anyhow. With the windows rolled down, a breeze sifts its way through my faded upholstery carriage, but it's the backhand of some crazy desert devil whipping me across my cheek and wisping through my hair that is far too long for this wretched heat wave.

I decide on one of the discs, mostly because the sun reflecting off those spinners sears my eyes. I am listening to: soothing guitar, background fireworks, children and laughing saxophone memories. It's a cold thing to hear but I can bear it, I think. The Honda chugs up the hill, leaving a lingering reminder of the cost of transportation with the unhappy sideways smirk of the fuel level gauge.

The hill caps off with a view of a valley paved in semis and the glistening rooftops of miscellaneous dated Camrys.

Somewhere in time I am at a bar. A local joint in the valley, and there is treble blasting out of speakers I cannot see. I am thinking of home in this overcrowded blast of noise, and I must shout directly into my own brain to think. I'm too drunk to drive; condemned to this dank pit of metal-headed malarkey.

Maybe it was the ultraviolet red to purple warping through the walls, or perhaps it was the three whiskeys I had between all of those Bud Lights. Either way, I find myself outside with the world bleeding in on itself and dribbling its entrails all over me. Someone offers me a smoke, and in a state of self regression, I accept it, sucking sweetly at that ashy tit. I become smoke, my eyes betray their own stare. Somewhere in my pockets there are

keys to a car, got to find them. Got to get out of here.

Cops will tell you that getting behind the wheel and driving as drunk as I was when I arrived at my home, a full half-hour and a bottle of water (less the water and more the piss worth of sobriety) later, can and probably will result in an accident. Had I been stopped, I was looking at jail time, license suspension, or a possible revoking.

By the grace of God go I.

Arrived at home, drunk as a skunk and about as appreciated, the stumble to my room is a blur of sidle-steps I hardly remember as I slip myself into bed.

During the night, I puke on myself repeatedly.

Somewhere in time I am crying. I am leaning over the casket of my grandfather crying, not because I feel I ought to. I knew the man, sure, I have sparse memories. I'm eyeing my grandmother, she does not see me, and perhaps never will. My father sits with his head bowed; this is the first time I see him cry. A single tear, then he picks up and walks out.

Somewhere in time I am screaming at my mother because she has taken things too fucking far, and I've about had enough of her insolence. How she enrages me with her blind accusations, and slanderous babbling! She chips away at my beliefs, and my family. I have broken a coffee mug and forcibly removed her from my apartment by way of tossing her bags out into the hallway and telling her to get the fuck out.

She tells me that everything I knew is gone. She tells me that the things I believed about my life are over.

Somewhere in time I am not holding three CDs. I am holding my father, my brother, and my grandfather. Somewhere in those mirrored music makers I am looking back at myself.

The sheen is so bright, it blinds. I look up from the discs in time to see this beautiful collie with patches of black and white hair, so well highlighted by the morning sun, look directly into my eyes as if to ask me why I'd already chosen to keep on going. I say that I am sorry, and I start to cry, even before my car shakes with the force of the impact.

It's ok.

I smoke a cigarette. I haven't done that in a while, but I figure I ought to.

Somewhere in time, I am letting go of those CDs. Someone is listening to them, maybe even now I wonder. Sometimes, what is most beautiful is learning to let go of the tangle in favor of the story.

I sit on my patio and smoke cigarettes.



**Aquarius**

Elizabeth Caffey

# Dorothy and John, a Love Story for the New Millenium

Kenneth Siewert

I'm in that nebulous place between sleep and awareness where everything seems right with the world. I roll over on my side and put my arm around her waist and spoon like I have spooned every morning for thirty years. The moment is pleasant, but I become conscious of the fact that I should be alone in my bed, as she has been gone for a very long time. This awareness is unsettling, but the moment is pleasant and it seems like a good reason to keep my eyes closed.

I try to orient myself. I try to puzzle out what day it is. Maybe it is Sunday morning. The way I feel it must be a Sunday morning after another hard Saturday night. I have dry mouth and my tongue against my front teeth squeaks. I believe I'm in my own bed. I believe the sun is skirting my gingham curtains and shining through my bedroom window, but I keep my eyes tightly closed as my head hurts. A burst of sunlight is the last thing I need. To make sure it is my own bed I sniff the pillowcase. It smells like my pillow, it smells like my perfumed laundry detergent, but there is an odd scent in the room as well, like a wool sweater, familiar, a scent similar to that of sheep. Briefly, I open my right eye and see the faint apricot color of my pillowcase. Knowing exactly where I'm located in the world and what day it is gives me a sense of security, but the smell of wool in my room stirs a bad memory.

I remember being sixteen and working on a sheep ranch. I remember the day the sheep shearers came to the ranch, rough men with big hands and how they had me climb into a large canvas bag, twice as big as myself, maybe twelve feet tall and they, sheep shearers with their powerful arms, pulled the bag up over my head from the second story of the barn. They threw sheared sheep fleeces, still warm from bleating ewes into the canvas bag. I looked toward the top, similar to that of looking at the opening to a well from deep within its recess, and watched as fleece after fleece appeared over the rim. One after another I wrestled the fleece down under my feet compacting the wool, but I couldn't

keep up and they buried me. I remember it was hot and claustrophobic in the sack. I thought I would suffocate, but I compressed every fleece that came my way and eventually the bag filled and I crawled out over the rim spent and exhausted. I was covered in lanolin. It took forever to get the oil off my skin, to get the smell of wool out of my nose.

My feet move against the cool sheets and a shudder runs through my body as I lay on my pillow and remember that day trapped in the bag as those powerful men attempted to bury me. The fleece and the sacks seemed never-ending and I lost count. Each time I crawled out of the sack those men would smile at me a knowing smile and then I would position myself in another sack and it would begin again.

I feel a warm breath on my cheek, which brings me back to my bed and maybe this tactile sensation will rescue me from my adolescent nightmare. I crack the lid of my right eye, as I know my left eye doesn't see well. I can't trust what I see out of my left eye. Things are fuzzy. The thing in my bed is fuzzy. I see big ears, big long ears with tufts of fur. I see big eyes, sensuous eyes with long eyelashes. A black nose. I close my eye. I can't trust my right eye either. I must still be dreaming about sheep. I crack the lids of my left and right eyes at the same time. The sunlight from my window is horrendous and piercing and it is all that I can withstand. My eyes hurt and my head pounds and I am blinded by the light. I close my eyes. I can handle pain, I think, and knowing I must face the morning I open both eyes again, just a squint and I see the face of a camel. This is overwhelming. I close my eyes.

I lie in my bed and try to remember if I had ever seen a camel in Billings, Montana. I have no recollection of such a thing. I wonder what it is that would make me think I just saw a camel in my bed? I become acutely aware that I'm spooning with what I think is camel. I roll over and attempt to go back to sleep with the thought that I want to dream about pleasant and far away things. I want to dream about Egypt, about pyramids, about archeological digs and mummies, about King Tutankhamen or maybe the Art Deco Period with its slinky women in long form fitting gowns. Maybe I'll dream about an old Humphrey Bogart movie, *Casablanca* and then I realize I have this odd thought that there is a camel in my bed breathing on my cheek staring at me with beautiful lucid brown eyes. I can't go back to sleep until I resolve this image. I feel that old panic rising up in my stomach, paralyzing my chest like that day when I was in the bottom of the sack buried in fleece. I'm certain that I am at the bottom of some mess and I have no idea how to get out.

Unwanted memories flood through my mind. I flash on my disgruntled days working on a turkey farm. Incredibly stupid life forms, turkeys. I fed them and watered them and pulled their heads out of knotholes in the barn when, in their dumb curiosity, they got stuck not knowing how to walk backwards. All those Toms strutting, fanning their tails and how I remember their showmanship, their red wattles dangling as they chased the hens and in their frustration, pecked the smaller Toms, pulling all the feathers off their backs. I think domesticated turkeys have lost every lick of common sense they may have once possessed. Left to their own devices I'm sure they would go extinct. I have a true dislike

for turkeys and an acquired dislike for Thanksgiving. Sheep are smarter than turkeys, but then rocks are smarter than turkeys and my body engages in a slight seismic disturbance.

I open my eyes to quiet my head and attempt to convince myself that this camel is not in my bed, that it is all part of a waking dream and that it will disperse quickly as I bring myself out of some sleepy hallucination and then she, the camel, whispers to me her name, Dorothy. She must have seen my eyes flicker and assumed that I was awake. My consciousness collapses back on my scented pillow. To make sure I am in my own bed I sniff my pillow again. I have always preferred the scent of Gain over that of Tide. Tide is so harsh. I feign sleep. Dorothy, I think, and had I ever heard this name before and then I remember *The Wizard of Oz*. With a smile on what I imagine is my dreamy face, I suggest that Dorothy snap her ruby shoes together and return back to Nebraska or Kansas or one of those non-descript red Midwestern States. I am pleased with my moment of lucidity. I have my eyes closed and I am content with my pillow, sniffing the scent of Gain and thinking that I am not so dumb. This could all end with a little magic. I remember Dorothy's sequined red pumps and the three clicks of her magic shoes. "I am not wearing shoes," Dorothy says, with a lisp, with a foreign accent though very much in the English vernacular. This puzzles me and then I realize I must be thinking out loud. "In fact, I'm not wearing anything," Dorothy says.

I try reorienting myself with the world. I firmly believe it is Sunday morning and I am in my own bed and I am not having a conversation with a camel. "Dorothy," I say, with substance in my voice, my eyes still closed, "You are a camel and you need to go home." Then I think she says to me that she is not a camel, though she is indeed in the camelid family and then Dorothy, in a rather matter of fact tone, states that she is a llama as if that clarifies everything. There is an odd chuckle in her voice. I try to figure out how this new piece of information changes things. I still have my eyes closed and she reaches out with her tongue and licks my cheek. Her tongue is rough and dry. I imagine it squeaks when she moves it over her big camel teeth or rather big llama teeth. It is very disconcerting.

What happened to the old days, I think, when it was just horses and cows, hard men at the trailhead straddling their saddles, stoic, thinking about the women they left behind? Confident men, in the evening sitting by a campfire eating beans and soda biscuits, dreaming about that apple pie their women used to make especially for them on Sundays. What has happened to those hard, bow-legged men, full of hell, raising the town and going home to gentle women in gingham dresses who were quick to pull off their men's boots and throw a blanket over their old bones? Once upon a time it was horses and cows and women that waited patiently and today I have a llama in my bed. When did everything change? Coffee, I think, during another lucid moment. That is what I need, coffee. I will drink some coffee, the hallucination will go away, I will be awake and everything will be normal. It is a simple plan. I also have a thought that I should spend a little more time with people. Isolation, maybe too much isolation is not good for anyone. I'm ready to get out of bed, go make some coffee when I realize there is a llama next to me by the name of Dorothy, and I am naked. I am very much aware of my nakedness. I become frozen with



embarrassment. Should I bound out of bed butt-naked as if this llama won't stare at me and laugh at my awkwardness, as if Dorothy doesn't exist, or should I be more prudent? I open my eyes and she is staring at me batting those long beautiful eyelashes. I close my eyes. I need to ignore her. I will just ignore her and she will go away, fade like a bad dream. "Do you want to snuggle?" Dorothy says. "I'm warm and cuddly like a teddy bear." I tell her that I once had a bad experience with sheep and that I can't tolerate lanolin. I don't mean to offend her, but I think she is so angry with me that she could spit. Camels spit. Llamas, like camels then, spit, don't they? I try to remember. I make a mental note to double up on the vitamin B-6 and 12 and then I make a mental note to write my proposed vitamin increase down on paper someplace so as not to forget and then I concluded that I will probably misplace both my mental notes before I can find paper and finish making coffee. This thought depresses me. I find myself in the middle of a long sigh.

I can hear the air pass in and out of her nostrils, her cute little button black nose. I can feel the tension radiating from the other side of the bed. "I'm sorry," I say. "I don't mean to imply that you are a sheep." She gives a rhetorical kind of snort and then says, "I've known a ram or two in my day. I had a brief encounter with an old goat. Disgusting creature. This might be my first experience with a turkey."

I think about the domestic turkeys back on the farm standing in the middle of the field during a storm too stupid to seek shelter. I'm just beginning to drift off into another adolescent nightmare when Dorothy says, "You should know that I wash my hair in rainwater and when I can't get rainwater I use distilled water, no lime buildup. I don't use conditioners. My hair is natural, undyed and greaseless." I remember how I watched those turkeys, their long necks and little heads pointed toward the clouds, the grey sky and how they were mesmerized by fat drops of rain. Standing there, the water pouring off their beaks and how one by one they fell over limp, their lungs full of water drowning in the downpour.

I ask Dorothy if she curls her eyelashes. I don't know why I ask her that. As soon as I ask, I realize it is a mistake. I should not be enticing her to become more real. I pull on the sheet. Part of her is on the sheet and she shifts her haunches, shifts her weight, sensitive to my needs and allows me to gather it up. "I'm going to make some coffee," I say and I ask if she would like some. Mentally, I beat myself again, thinking that if I want her to go away I should not be polite. I open my eyes and I watch as her tongue, with a maneuver that seems very sensual, licks her lower lip. I just want her to go away and to pretend that she is enticing or real is ultimately defeating. Again I try to reorient: Sunday morning, my bed, Billings, Montana and a llama. It's not normal and then I notice that she is wearing eye shadow, a soft golden brown and mascara as well, a small dark smudge at the corner of her eye. I tell her she is not real. I believe she tells me that a handful of coffee beans will be just fine. I wrap the sheet around myself and slip out of bed.

In the kitchen I grind beans, a good Columbian blend and for Dorothy I place a handful of unground beans in a white porcelain cup, my Portuguese cup. If I had a cup that was made in Peru, to be thoughtful, I would use that cup instead. Llamas come from

Peru, perhaps, and that is when I realize I am not a turkey. Turkeys are definitely not thoughtful, and then I think, on the other hand, I might be domesticated. Thirty years of marriage will domesticate anyone, which may be an altogether different issue. I have other odd thoughts in my head while I am grinding coffee beans. Where did I meet this llama? What happened last night? My body spasms and I spill coffee beans from the stainless steel scooper onto the parquet floor. I move around the kitchen picking up coffee beans and every time I bend over, my head begins to pound again and then I step on a bean, hurting the pad of my foot, and I do a dance of sorts. I don't really want to know the answer to these questions about last night and then I find myself concerned with how she might handle a Portuguese coffee cup full of beans. Should I hand it to her or set it on the nightstand? After all she is a llama with a split hoof and, as I remember, without fingers or a thumb. I don't want to embarrass her and then I think about her long, rough tongue. The coffee grinder makes an awful noise, which also hurts my head, distracting my train of thought. I think for a moment that I should get in my jeep and drive towards the sunset, disappear, and should I return she would undoubtedly be gone. I can't imagine that she will forage on the clover, crabgrass or the pink rose petals in my backyard awaiting my return. After all, she hardly knows me. I don't know her at all.

I walk back to the bedroom, my 500-thread count apricot sheet tightly wrapped about my body and trailing behind me down the hallway. Martha Stewart would be proud. I walk into my bedroom staring at the floor not wanting to give Dorothy eye contact. I am hoping that when I look up, Dorothy will be gone. "My favorite," she says, "dark roast." Her sense of smell is uncanny.

I fluff a couple of feather pillows and place them behind my back and settle in to drink my coffee. A few sips and I will sober, I think. I have a difficult time attempting to stop myself from glancing at Dorothy, her long neck and her sensuous eyes. Her tongue reaches out and gathers a few coffee beans and she begins to grind them as herbivores do, a slow mechanical grind. We are not compatible, I suggest. "You are a herbivore and I am defiantly a carnivore." "So," she says, "I'll just pick the roasted chicken strips out of the Burger King leafy salad and give them to you." I catch myself staring at her long auburn locks that fall in soft curls along her neck and over her back. I feel compelled to reach out and stroke her hair. "You can touch if you like," she says. "I love to be brushed." Am I so transparent? I wonder how she knows what I am thinking. I do want to run my fingers through her long hair and scratch the nape of her neck, but I slurp more coffee and hold my impulse at bay.

I reminisce about those long years of marriage, domestication, and how I changed over time, tamed over time. I remember, after thirty years, how she, one day, told me she needed to find herself and then she went out and found a cowboy with a black hat and a rough demeanor. She also found a lawyer. She got the house and the dog and like a good cowboy, I put on my white hat and climbed in my jeep and drove off into the sunset and arrived in Billings. That gesture worked so well in those old movies.

"Dorothy," I say as I scratch some itch on the top of my balding head. "I'm not exactly

sure what happened last night." "You were wonderful," she says, "You do a hilarious Texas Two-Step and I was doing the four-step, dancing circles around you. God, we were good, showstoppers at McLintocks last night." I tried to remember the bar. I'm a rock and roll sort of guy, some folk, some jazz, blues, bluegrass, but not country music. I try to imagine myself doing the Texas Two-Step. It seems a rather complicated contrivance and I've never taken lessons. Deduction, slow methodical deduction, and I come to the conclusion that she is making this up to confuse me. "I've never done the two-step," I say. Then she tells me how I threw her up on the bar and then climbed up after her and we danced the length of it kicking beer backs and tequila shooters left and right. "We got eighty-sixed," she says. "We were over the top." I close my eyes. I have a thought that I can never show my face at McLintocks.

She takes another long tongue full of coffee beans and begins to chew them in her slow methodical way. I find her grinding irritating, but then I can sense a kind of peace about her as if nothing could dampen her spirit. Her inner security, her sense of peace seems to put me at ease. "Dorothy," I ask. "Are you married?" This seems to be a faux pas as she spits little flecks of coffee beans all over my white comforter. I have learned to never talk to anyone until after two o'clock in the afternoon when I am dead sober, wide-awake, and cognitive—in that state I'm less likely to offend anyone. "If I was married I would certainly not be in your bed," she says, once she stops spitting coffee beans. "I'm sorry," I say. "I only meant to inquire if you were available." "What, available, like a rental car?" she says, "Hertz?" I realize my eyes are closed again and I can feel drops of saliva smacking my forehead as she extends out the "Z" sound at the end of Hertz and seems to hold it for an eternity. I think that she is hungover too. Not in the best of moods and I am thinking I should offer her a Bayer aspirin, but this too may imply far more than I'm trying to say, so I just keep my mouth shut. I can feel her move around on the bed.

I crack my left eye, the one I can't trust, and watch as she dresses. Standing up she doesn't look like a llama anymore, and as she snaps her red thong in place she looks very much to me like an attractive woman. I find this puzzling. "Stop looking at me," she says. She hops up and down a couple of times until she gets her blue jeans up over her hips. Wonderful hips. Baby-making hips. She sits back down on the edge of the bed and I watch as she pulls on her alligator and red-sequined cowgirl boots. I open my right eye so as to limit my tunnel vision. She fastens her bra and begins buttoning a white cotton blouse with multicolored parrots resting on her breasts. I think they are parrots, maybe toucans, some exotic South American bird. Definitely not sparrows. "Do you always wake up like this?" she says. "You have been nothing but an insult. Men, just plain stupid," she says. "Can I get your telephone number?" I say. "Dumber than rocks," she says. Then with a click of her heels, her boots on the hardwood floor, she disappears down the hallway. I hear the front door open and close and another cowgirl rides off into the sunset or sunrise I suppose. I lay in my bed; my 500-thread count sheet wrapped tightly around my body, two feather pillows behind my back and I sip my Columbian roast. I have another lucid moment. I think I'm probably going to die a lonely old man.

# A Minor Life

Sean MacIntyre

A

**B**efore the incident, my husband, Joseph, was considered to be one of the greatest living violinists in the world, despite having often been criticized for never playing a single composition or with any other musicians—always, instead, improvising all of his performances and never playing the same thing more than once. As a performer, though, his power and skill was often written as being “indisputable,” the notes emerging from his instrument carrying with them a certain tone or a feeling—whatever was inside of him at the time—and delivering these things to the listener in a manner that was impossible to resist, sometimes leaving entire audiences in tears or laughter, agony or ecstasy—but more on that later.

I always thought it was a curious thing that people criticized him for eschewing musical conventions when the same people were so quick to laud him for never hearing anything he ever played, as if his Deafness was no excuse for circumventing centuries of tradition—whether or not it was by design or necessity.

At this point I should also preface that, like my husband, I have never heard a single note that has ever emerged from the strings vibrating beneath his fingertips.

B

We met in college, taking the same course on nineteenth-century poetry, both of us sitting next to each other near the front so we could see the interpreter. I liked him immediately, though I think it couldn't have been any other way. His skin was dark, his face blemished with the faint shadows of acne scars, and his hair black and thick and long. He was the only other person I knew in the community that didn't have an aid or an implant. It was his smile, though, the smile he gave whenever he motioned something

lewd about the teacher and I would pretend to contemplate it for a moment, acting coy, before responding in the affirmative, the smile that wasn't quite a smile so much as it was a grin that had tried to move beyond its abilities and nearly succeeded—his eyes slightly narrowed, a dimple forming on only one cheek, and his top lip shrinking back just a little, revealing the tiniest white line of teeth. Even in the middle of class, the middle of moving crowds, it was like we were slightly apart from others, connected together by something intangible but special, but it was the smile I fell in love with.

We began studying together, in the library between classes at first and then at his house over the weekends. His parents were the children of Dzhidi immigrants. They were Deaf as well and very friendly (unlike my parents, who were none of these, and treated signing like a burdening obligation and Joseph like some curious anomaly—but they do not belong in these pages). The smells of cumin and anise would creep between the gaps in the door jamb of his room where we would lie with our stomachs on the floor and a book beneath our faces, each of us holding a side and using our free hand to signal when we were ready to turn the page.

Truthfully, for the longest time I never really understood poetry, or I just couldn't quite immerse myself in it, and so I struggled in any class that had a large amount of it on the syllabus. So this course that we shared, required for an English degree, was especially difficult for me. However, I remember one night in particular when we were studying, and he had slowly, cautiously—he was so adorably shy when he was young—moved his fingertips to rest on my forearm. As we did the readings for class—an assortment of Byron—he would tap his index finger against my skin, pulsating differently for every poem. Finally, when we read “The Destruction of Sennacherib,” something switched on for me. With his fingers tapping anapestic triplets against my arm, the words began to flow from the page to my head, moving in the same rhythm as Joseph's fingertips—a soundless waltz I could now intuit the steps to.

I've seen so many lovers gush over flowers and gems. Joseph gave me something else.

I forgot to raise my thumb to show that I was ready for the next page. Is everything all right? he signed to me. I snapped back, like a person coming out of hypnosis. Yes, I replied, trying to think of something else to add, my hands hanging motionless in the air and my mouth open for a moment. I liked that poem, I signed and mouthed. That smile spread across his face and he signed, I agree, those Gentiles received more than they bargained for.

I smiled, and he leaned in to kiss me for the first time.

## C

It was not long before Joseph asked if he could play the violin for me—I remember the night fairly well, because it was also the first night we made love. I was more than a little confused—he had never mentioned anything about it before—and questions immediately came to mind. Questions like, “How does he know what he's playing?” and “How am I

supposed to hear it?" When I asked him the first, he shrugged and told me that he could just feel it, that he couldn't quite explain. And when I asked him the second, he simply told me he didn't care; he just wanted to play for me. I consented, there wasn't a single part of me that didn't want to see him play; I just thought it was odd at first—but only at first.

I sat on the floor of his room while he was perched on the edge of his bed. He held the violin between his neck and shoulder while he stretched his hands, rosined his bow, and signed to me. When he began, the bow sliding slowly across the strings and his left hand pinching the fingerboard and pivoting in slow rocking motions, his face contorted a little, the muscles going taut with concentration, his eyes closed, and his mouth parted like a person leaning in for a kiss. He rocked back in forth with the motion of his bow and his fingers laced up and down the strings with a dancing lightness.

He stopped suddenly only a few minutes after he had begun and looked at me like a man collapsing in on himself, as if he were about to cry. You look beautiful when you play, I signed. He held his hands in the air for a moment before he replied, and he simply asked me to come onto the bed with him. He positioned me behind him—my legs spread on either side of his hips—and brought one of my hands to rest on the back of his neck. When he began playing again, I could feel the slightest vibrations resonating through his skin. I leaned in and put my lips up against his neck in that tiny hollow below his ear, the gap formed between the muscles in his neck and his jaw, and I could feel his pulse gently beating and the vibrations moving in time with it. It's an inexplicable thing, but at that moment I felt something, something that exceeded the tactile experience. It felt like yearning, longing. It felt like desire. I breathed onto his neck, my hand sliding up into his hair, and as he played something pushed into me that I cannot describe, something that seemed to harmonize with the subtle beats and vibrations in his skin.

The closest I can come to explaining it is with what happened after, when he put down his violin and turned to me, kissing me with his perpetually chapped lips and us slowly descending towards the bed's surface. His fingertips were so callused—with tiny edges in the flesh pointed and sharp. As he moved them across my body almost haphazardly I couldn't help but wonder how someone with such deft and grace against wood and cat gut could be so clumsy with skin, pressing and gliding with force that seemed to ebb and return. But there was something wonderful in his touch, and as he moved the rough tips of his fingers across my stomach I couldn't help but close my eyes and try to catch as much air as I could with every sudden breath I felt forced to take. We had never been with anyone else before each other, and the experience was awkward and sweet and painful and wonderful and perfect. As we finished I looked into his eyes, opened wide and his pupils incredibly dilated, and I noticed something there. His eyes were a deep dark brown, so dark that in a certain light the entire area beneath his cornea looked almost uniformly black. But on his left eye, on the rim of the iris around the edge of the pupil nearest the bridge of his nose, there was the faintest hint of yellow that I had never noticed before, like the sun emerging from an eclipse with the first crescent flash of

corona, like he had something beautiful and powerful inside of him being suppressed, but barely held.

## D

Despite numerous critics, researchers, and biographers sifting through Joseph's past to uncover some explanation of his abilities, some fathomable reason why his playing should have the effects that it did, and how he managed to acquire his skill, I don't think I've ever seen any of them ask the question of how he came to know that his playing had the qualities it did. I wish I could answer this question myself. The violin he played was a Guarneri original, a family heirloom brought over by his grandfather, which he only began playing after it was bequeathed to him. I can imagine him as a little boy, his tiny hands delicately manipulating the knobs and strings, terrified of breaking something he could barely understand, the worth of which he could not even fathom. He never played for anyone except his parents and myself—the most accepting and indiscriminate audience you can imagine—until shortly before we graduated when he told me, giving no reason or explanation, he was going to apply to CalArts.

A few months after he submitted his recorded sample—one minute and twenty-seven seconds of whatever he felt like playing into a pawn shop tape recorder after a hot shower one afternoon in the late Los Angeles fall—he was asked to audition in person before every faculty member of the school. I read an article a number of years ago where the writer had interviewed Steven Lavine, the president of the school at the time, and asked him why Joseph was asked to do this performance, and why he was rejected (a question I imagine Mr. Lavine had to often face after Joseph gained a great deal of notoriety). Supposedly, the overall consensus of the faculty was that the recording was by no means good, that it was raw and unskilled and showed a clear lack of technical ability, but for some reason nobody wanted to stop listening to it—that it filled the admissions board and everyone the members of the board brought it to with a curious sense of serenity and peace.

Joseph told me what happened then. He walked out onto the auditorium stage, dizzy and with sweaty hands, and played for a room of artists and musicians and painters that was far from reaching capacity. He told me he played as best as he could, but his stomach felt hollow and nauseous, his hands kept slipping, and a headache began to arc along his synapses. The feelings that Joseph described to me about his audition are similar to the ones that, in the interview, Mr. Lavine described himself and many of the faculty members sharing. A number of people left immediately, uncomfortable and mysteriously anxious, while others simply squirmed in their chairs, trying to do anything to manage the vertigo that had beset them. Joseph finished quickly when he opened his eyes to see what their reactions might be, and one of the music faculty members had an interpreter ask Joseph if he could play something more traditional, not improvised.

I'm sure he thought about it for a while, the sweat of anxiety dripping down his back and sides, before he played the only thing he ever tried to learn, the simplest thing he could find as a boy with no understanding of music at all, an A minor scale—a simple run

up and down the first seven letters of the alphabet if, of course, one were able to hear the notes being played.

It's easy to understand why his audition ended abruptly after he began sawing out those beginners notes that I'm sure were still imbued with all the pain of knowing that he was failing, and it's fairly plain to see why he was not admitted into the school. However, I could still sense in him this explosive desire, that hidden and indefatigable something within him that couldn't be appeased until the world had felt it as well. I could sense it every evening we spent together, me reading and Joseph playing and playing with an unwavering singularity of purpose.

## E

We began going to Third Street in Santa Monica together, that long pedestrian road that was host to so many oddities and captivating distractions. Joseph asked me to come with him every evening he went because, he told me, it calmed him to know that I was there, watching. And, sitting on a metal bench on the opposite side of the street, watch is exactly what I did. I watched as he delicately removed his violin from the case, I watched as he awkwardly shifted his weight and tried to find the most comfortable way to stand or rest his instrument between his shoulder and neck, and I watched as, only a few gentle movements into whatever he was playing, people walking by just stopped, as if they suddenly recalled something forgotten and distant—like a memory or a dream.

The crowd around him would grow and grow until I couldn't see Joseph at all and I was surrounded by people, tourists and shoppers and children and homeless, all staring glassy-eyed or tilting their heads to odd angles if they couldn't get a direct glimpse of him. People moved on, but only reluctantly, and the police stopped him from time to time because he didn't have a permit, but very rarely—sometimes I would catch an officer or two standing in the crowd as well.

When he finished, he would put away his instrument and close the bag he brought for people to toss money in—he stopped using his violin case for this purpose after the second or third time we came, when his violin wouldn't fit inside properly because there were so many dollars and coins inside of it and they threatened to rattle around, scratching or warping the wood—and he would walk over to me, smiling and nodding at the people that seemed to be saying something to him along the way, and sit on the bench beside me when I moved my bag for him. I would have individual slices of pizza on paper plates for both of us that I bought from a shop nearby and the little packets of parmesan cheese and red pepper to go with them. We ate, the pizza at varying levels of coolness depending on when I would go get it or when he would finish, and we would watch the people walking by or the homeless curled up in dirty blankets on nearby benches or the cars drive by on Arizona Avenue.

On some nights we would walk down to the pier, less than a mile away, Joseph hugging the violin case to his body out of care or paranoia instead of holding it by the handle, going all the way to the end and sitting on the wooden, step-shaped seats and staring out



at the tiny, flickering oil rigs on the horizon—little beacons glimmering in the dark like promises or premonitions. One of the nights we did this—I think it was late in the summer after our graduation—when a cool breeze rolled off the ocean and wrapped around our faces, he turned and lifted his hands off the case sitting in his lap and asked if I would move to Massachusetts with him. Why? I signed back—the question caught me off guard. It will be easier for us to have a future there, he replied, together, he added. I pretended to contemplate it for a moment, acting coy, before responding in the affirmative. Joseph just smiled.

## F

Joseph's rise to fame, as cliché as it seems, is well documented in literature and television and easily accessible to anyone interested in his life—or, at least, some of the broader details that I am not addressing here. There are a number of biographies about him, most of them unauthorized, that describe in detail the years after he moved to Boston—his first few performances at open mic nights and bars, his moves into bigger and bigger theaters and auditoriums as demand for him grew, the small riot that nearly started when he did not respond to the call for an encore. There was a *60 Minutes* profile of Joseph around this time as well, shortly before his performance at Jordan Hall. The interview was similar to all the others Joseph has faced, Lesley Stahl asking him questions about his playing that he could not definitively answer and breaking away from the interview to show distant shots of them walking along a path through a park—Stahl on one side of Joseph and an interpreter on the other—while she narrated about how almost all of the money Joseph earned from his performances were donated to organizations and schools that assist the “hearing impaired” and also charities like the IFCJ. Stahl also interviewed me, but the only part of it that aired was when she asked me what kind of music Joseph liked and I replied, simply, that he did not know any. That clip was the one that ended the segment before switching to the screen with “[clock ticking]” appearing on my closed captioning, as though what I said about Joseph was so revealing and profound that it summed up the entire interview and Joseph's entire life. I was furious about it then, and I suppose I still am now.

A few years later there was a made-for-TV movie about Joseph on one of the network channels that didn't receive much attention or acclaim. Joseph was played by a young, white actor that wasn't deaf, and he was portrayed as growing up in an abusive home, losing his hearing after a severe beating by his mother, and being taken in by his grandfather who showed him how to play the violin (there was a very melodramatic scene when the grandfather is about to die “[music swells]” and he, the grandfather, never having been able to master ASL before, signs and says to Joseph, “Never give up”). An hour later, after battling with everyone in his life who told him to quit wasting his time (including me—in the movie I'm a jaded interpreter that falls madly in love with Joseph when we're arguing about something and he grabs my hands and tells me to speak to him like a “normal person”), just as he's about to go on stage for his first major performance his estranged mother

enters his dressing room. She signs and subtitles flash on the bottom of the screen, “How did you come this far?” He replies, “Because someone told me never to give up.” The camera has a close-up shot of each of their faces, and she nods and lets Joseph go out on stage. It was atrocious, and Joseph, when he saw it, couldn’t stop smiling at the absurdity of it. His parents complained about it in an email to us, and my parents asked me in a letter how much of his sordid upbringing was true (they never met Joseph’s parents, nor did they suggest that they wanted to—but, again, that is another story entirely). An interesting thing about the film that I read in a review of it later that said that all of the songs played in the movie were excerpts from Bartók pieces.

All of these things and more emerged in the decade or so after we moved to Boston, those wonderful years we shared together, before that notorious performance at Carnegie Hall that set Joseph walking down a long path of misfortune.

## G

While there is a great deal written about Joseph’s Carnegie Hall performance, its impact and its controversy, there is one crucial thing—crucial for me, anyway—that has never been mentioned. Almost like the dressing room scene in that terrible movie about him, shortly before he was supposed to go onstage and as I was about to leave him to go to my own private box seat, he turned to me and, suddenly and without preface, asked me to marry him. It was a subject that occasionally came up between us, and, nearly every time it was brought up, we both agreed that we didn’t need to be married to love each other and be together. But at that moment in the dressing room, Joseph in his tuxedo looking so timid and scared, I didn’t even pause to think, I didn’t act coy or joke, I just started to cry and responded yes over and over again. He smiled wider than I’ve ever seen him smile, and I think he almost started to cry too.

While I sat in the balcony, I looked at the people in the audience, the lights over them dimming until only purple and gold ones remained on as the concert was about to begin. Most of the people in the audience were white, all of them able to hear, I assume, and the lights tinted their faces with an odd, dark jaundiced lavender—seeming only a few shades away from Joseph’s skin color, actually. When Joseph began to move his bow along the strings, I could tell that there was a certain giddiness, almost a playfulness to what he was doing—more so than usual. I didn’t think anything was different until I looked at the audience and saw everyone melting like snow, sliding down in their chairs and rolling about on the floor like drugs had destroyed all of their muscle control and all that was left was uninhibited sensation. It didn’t descend into an orgy of hedonism like some commentators have intimated, but whatever elation Joseph felt was soaked up by the audience the same way the brain soaks up MDMA. Three elderly patrons and one middle-aged woman died that evening when they fell out of their chairs.

I should also emphasize at this point the fact that Joseph had, up to this particular concert, never before been professionally recorded. Many of his performances were captured by audience members and bootlegged or shared online, earning him a following in many

countries of the world even though he had never played outside the United States. The Carnegie Hall performance was to be the first in a series of official recordings that were packaged and sold. However, Joseph stopped playing after about six minutes when he paused momentarily and looked out at the empty red-velvet seats and the bodies on the floor that were just beginning to move voluntarily and raise themselves up.

The scandal that ensued is well known and doesn't need to be dwelled upon for too long. The recording was never officially released but leaked onto the internet shortly after the concert and people began listening to it for recreation, playing it on repeat for days until they passed out from malnutrition and, sometimes, died; a number of cults began to use the recording in suicide rituals, claiming the music to be a divine invitation to heaven; the DEA was assigned to try and stop the spread of the recording, individual agents being assigned earplugs so they could burst with impunity into the suburban houses and college dorms where the recording was supposedly heard; there was a major incident when a group of anarchists violently took over several radio stations in Chicago and played the recording on the air, resulting in hundreds of deaths and injuries when people driving and listening to the radio suddenly lost control of their car; some evangelical Christian groups called Joseph a minion of Satan trying to lure the innocent into hell, staging large public gatherings where church members, wearing earplugs and large orange earmuffs and holding signs that had "Hear No Evil" written in block letters, would have large bonfires for burned and bootlegged copies of the recording. There were a series of congressional hearings held to try and address the "epidemic"—lawmakers once again proposing government regulation of the internet and giving subpoenas to the concert promoters and organizers (Joseph, to the surprise of many including myself, was never called). Hundreds of articles and dissertations were written by acousticians and physics grad-students trying to unlock the secrets of the recording, and psychologists used it in experiments and therapy for a few years until its use and possession was made completely illegal.

Many of the people who wrote about Joseph talked about how he was completely blacklisted from performing, which is not entirely true. Indeed, many of the major concert promoters stopped contacting his agent, but the invitations for Joseph to play by no means stopped: a number of small and new theaters trying to attract media attention wanted him to perform there, and a handful of wealthy people—hedge-fund operators and entrepreneurs and one Saudi Arabian prince—asked him to be their personal violin player for social functions and entertainment and such. Joseph declined them all, however. After Carnegie Hall, he seemed terrified of playing, of what his playing could do. I would see him sometimes, late at night or early in the morning when it was still dark, just sitting, naked, with his violin, holding it between his neck and shoulder, running his fingers over the hair of his bow, but never playing, just looking like he was about to collapse in on himself or explode.

#### A

There is not much else to tell, really. Joseph was sued a number of times by family members of the people who had died. We had a number of fights during this period of

time because, for almost every lawsuit, Joseph would always choose to settle, submitting one written apology after another with his promise to reimburse the loss to the fullest of his abilities. Joseph always won the cases where the plaintiffs refused to settle, but still offered them money anyway. No matter how many times I would tell him that he shouldn't feel guilty, that none of the things happening were his fault, he would always look at me with impossibly sad eyes and disagree. It didn't help his conscience that, in the Times and the Post, they started comparing the deaths of people listening to the recording—one-hundred eighty-five thousand people to date—to the deaths that resulted from drugs or violent crimes (The Onion had a parody poll comparing Joseph to historical genocidal dictators). Eventually, we had to sell our house and, after a few years, he sold his violin at auction to an anonymous collector. When the media frenzy began to subside and the lawsuits stopped coming, this money helped us start over and begin to live in a modicum of peace and comfort. Occasionally, there will be another book or article written about Joseph and the phenomenon his playing created, but most of what's written now is derogatory of his skill and person, one author making the ridiculous and nonsensical postulation that he drugged all of his audience members and listeners. None of it really pays attention to the beauty, that transcendent beauty that was there regardless of the sound, that pulsing thing still hiding inside of him looking for other ways to emerge. Still, I collect it all, placing the articles in scrapbooks and the books on the shelves and the television reports on DVDs, trying to archive a life.

As for me, I've worked as the poetry editor at a Boston literary magazine that focuses on publishing Deaf writers. I sit at my desk and read the submissions, tapping my hand against my thigh, looking for that rhythm and flow and beauty. I'll show some of them to Joseph, and he helps me decide on the ones I'm on-the-fence about. We were married quietly at a courthouse early in the debacle, a year or so after Carnegie Hall. From time to time we discuss adopting a child, but, like getting married, neither of us are in a hurry. For his fortieth birthday I bought him a harmonica as a joke, but every once in a while I'll go upstairs, to ask him a question or show him a poem, and I'll see him sitting, staring out our bedroom window at the Boston cityscape, with the harmonica pressed against his lips and his scruffy, unshaved cheeks full of air. Sometimes I just stand in the door and watch him play, and sometimes I walk up behind him and place my hand on his neck, running my fingers up through his hair. When I do this, he turns to me and smiles his smile, something he rarely does now, and we kiss and sometimes make love, but whenever I see him playing his harmonica it helps me to know that he'll be all right, even if I am the last audience he will ever share something with.

Dram

**Drama** ama

# College of Screwed Babbleheads

Juvicel D. Ingal

*University of Questionable Scholars and Inept Professors. The setting is inside the library. The character who is speaking is the only one who is moving; the rest are stationary. The spotlight is on the speaking character. The rest of the stage is dark.*

*WORKING STUDENT is positioned in the farthest part of the stage, between STUDENT A who is in the computer area and STUDENTS B to D who are all seated around a big table. The PROFESSORS and the DEAN are not on the scene yet. The LIBRARIAN is seated in the front left corner of the stage.*

WORKING STUDENT: What happened to the world? Do I need to blame the school or the students? Most schools are no longer doing their jobs. Most students either. I went to a coffee shop this morning. One of the ladies was writing on the board, designing some new promotional campaigns. Good gracious! Artistic bitch! Her drawings are alive (*Pauses.*) Everything became lifeless, though, when she wrote raspberry. (*Spells it out.*) R-A-S-B-E-R-R-Y. Heaven forbid! The P is missing! And she was bragging that she is a good student. The coffee shop should have asked her to write strawberry instead. (*Freezes.*)

*While the WORKING STUDENT spells the word, there's a slide on the upper left corner of the stage that shows every letter that is mentioned. The letters are artistically animated. After the word is spelled, an animated letter P tries to squeeze in between letter S and B, then P falls and "rasberry" is still spelled without a "p."*

DEAN: (*Enters the library.*) This is the University of Questionable Scholars and Inept Professors. I call it the College of Screwed Babbleheads. Contemplate. Insinuate. Evaluate. Investigate. Welcome to the doomed animated manuscript. (*Exits.*)

STUDENT A: (*Stands up. She is looking at the computers beside her.*) Hmm, I wonder which of these computers have Internet access. You pay hundreds of dollars in this university and you can't even go online. (*Smiles deviously.*) The thing is I like doing research online. It is fast. Who cares about the millions of books here? Card catalogue? Dewey Decimal System? Give me a break. I have no idea what those are. These computers better work. Hell, I need to check my messages on *MySpace*. The president of this university needs to do something. (*Freezes.*)

PROFESSOR 1: (*Starts walking inside the library, then faces spectators.*) Students' endless complaints. You give them homework and they condemn you. No work and they call you lazy. Give them pop quizzes and they will eye you angrily. Don't give them quizzes and they complain about your teaching style. Teacher is never right. (*Speaks like a student.*) "Mrs. X is too harsh. She gave me a C. Professor Y is too nice. She gave everybody an A. Not fair for those who really study their lessons." (*Faces the closest immobilized student.*) Professor is like this, like that. Right? Never right, overall. (*Freezes.*)

STUDENT B: She gave me a B+, a B+ after all the extra credits. She said if I will do extra credits I would be fine. I went to museums. I went to a rally. I went to court. She also said if I participate in class discussions I will be fine. But that professor embarrasses students. I feel nervous every time I talk in class, like a caffeinated human being. The dean should know how that professor rejects the students' opinion harshly. It's inconceivable how a Sociology professor doesn't know how to speak with students. A Sociology professor. Did you hear me saying Sociology?! Hello, hello, hello. (*Freezes*)

STUDENT C: Professor Butterfly said she wants us to know what an existentialist is, but she doesn't want us to be one. That's not her business. Not her business, I repeat. She said nasty things about it instead of discussing it. Oh man, Kierkegaard, Sartre and Nietzsche are going to abduct her tonight, I swear. We spent hours and hours discussing that topic, and then she didn't put it on the exam. Only because she doesn't want us to master it. Then why teach it, old fool?! (*Freezes.*)

*The slide on the top corner changes to a glass animation. It shows a face of Nietzsche smiling. After five seconds, a butterfly flies around him, then Nietzsche frowns and squashes the butterfly using his hand.*

STUDENT D: The opposite of Professor Grasshopper. One time she told us that a certain topic was not included in the essay, so I didn't study it. Guess what? The essay question is based on that stupid topic. I got a D. (*Freezes*)

*The slide changes. There's a student essay on the screen. A grasshopper will hop in and write a big letter D on the paper.*

*The five students stand up, but they stay in their places. They are responding to each other.*

STUDENT A: Ditch!

STUDENT B: Students' rights!

STUDENTS C AND D: Ditch!

STUDENT B: Students' rights!

ALL STUDENTS: Ditch school! Ditch school!

STUDENTS A AND B: *(Throw paper on the floor.)*

STUDENT B: *(Writes "Ditch School" on the board.)*

STUDENTS C AND D: *(Vandalize. Start writing on chairs and desks.)*

STUDENT B: Alright!

STUDENT A: *(Hands on her waist.)* Cool!

ALL STUDENTS: *(Sit and start talking to each other.)*

STUDENT A: *(Faces STUDENT B.)* Do you want to be the next Emily Dickinson?

STUDENT B: Oh, what are her movies? I haven't seen any.

STUDENT C: Probably a reality show. Awesome.

STUDENT D: Stupid. She's an artist. She painted "Starry Night."

STUDENT A: No, that's Van Damme. The artist's name is Van Damme.

ALL STUDENTS: *(Freeze.)*

PROFESSOR 2: *(Enters from the right side of the stage. Take a few steps only, then stops and starts speaking.)* Students' excuses. I wrote it in the syllabus. They didn't read it. I e-mailed them. They don't open their e-mails, they said. I wrote it on the board. They said they didn't understand my handwriting. Deadline came. No papers from them. I gave



them an extension. Merciful enough. Half of the class didn't turn in their papers. I warned them that the paper is 30 percent of their grade. Ignored me. I failed them. They went online and wrote comments. Rate my professor dot com. I got boos and curses. What's wrong with this generation? (*Pauses.*)

I wonder what the President of this university has to say about this. Hopefully he has resolution for this. I can't wait to hear his announcement later. Something bigger than the constitution perhaps. (*Facing Spectators.*)

*The slide changes to a similar homepage of ratemyprofessor.com. A big "BOO" and an angry face is projected next to the teacher's name.*

LIBRARIAN: (*Positioned in the left side of the stage, in front*) I don't know if I still want to be the librarian in this college. Vandalism. No resolution. (*Heads to the shelf, then fixes some books.*) You see, students borrow books and write in them. (*Opens one book.*) "Single. Call 1-800-345-6789." (*Stands up and moves around so he is close to the edge of the stage. Opens another book.*) "Moby Dickhead versus William Fuckner." (*Opens another book.*) This is creative: "If you are lonely, ask your professor out. A guaranteed 4.0 if the dinner and the late night affair is excellent." This college is screwed. (*Freezes.*)

DEAN: (*Recites. Not singing.*) Oh, say can you see by the sunset's late grade. A whole new school. A new fantastic point of view for the poor unfortunate souls. That's what we need. This university. The University of Questionable Scholars and Inept Professors is the College of Babbleheads.

*Pause. A count from 1 to 5. Then everybody moves and goes in front of the stage. The lights turned on. Bright stage. No more spotlights for each of them.*

STUDENT A: College of Procrastinators.

STUDENT B: College of D Students.

STUDENT C: College of Cheaters.

STUDENT D: College of Plagiarists.

WORKING STUDENT: College of Course Repeaters.

PROFESSOR 1: Transformation.

PROFESSOR 2: Reformation.

LIBRARIAN: New mission.

DEAN: More dedication.

EVERYBODY: University of Questionable Scholars and Inept Professors. It's everywhere.

VOICE OVER: (*Announcement is heard all over the stage.*) Attention everybody. The President of the University has an important announcement. Please proceed to the quadrangle in front of the flagpole.

EVERYBODY: (*Exits stage.*)

PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY: (*Enters, holding a roll of parchment.*)

EVERYBODY (EXCEPT STUDENTS B AND D): (*Enters stage and forms a circle, like a crowd/audience, in front of the president.*)

PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY: (*Looks at everybody who is coming. Waits for them to get together.*)

STUDENTS B AND D: (*Come late. Try to find a place in the crowd.*)

STUDENT B: Excuse me. Excuse me. (*Pushes STUDENTS A and C.*)

STUDENT D: (*Giggles.*)

PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY: (*Looks at the students with annoyance, then tries to ignore the commotion. Reads the parchment inaudibly.*)

EVERYBODY: (*Looks disgusted while listening to the President. Some are whispering to one another. Some are shaking their heads.*)

PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY: (*Finished reading. Rolled the parchment. Looks at everyone, faces spectators, and then leaves.*)

*Lights onstage fade to black.*

# Raindance

Holly Johnson

CHARACTERS:

KARIN KINGSTON

WILLIAM NOVSTRUP

A SERVER

A MAITRE'D

*Setting: 7 PM, a posh New York City restaurant. A SERVER paces around in the back looking busy. A MAITRE'D walks away from his podium and walks offstage. In the center is a table for two with a small candle on it. Sitting at the chair on the right facing away from the door is KARIN, dressed in a burgundy cocktail dress, hair pulled up. While talking on her cell phone, she fidgets with her silverware with the other hand.*

KARIN: Behave normal? I can't ruin this after the trouble Marianne went through to set it up. Behind my back of course...again. The server already asked me twice for something to drink. If I were to behave normally I'd have drunk two glasses of wine by now so normal is not the way to go. *(pause)* I feel a little underdressed for this place but with the heat wave out there I'd boil in anything else. I should go; I want to review my talking points. *(pause)* No I don't have the note cards. *(Stashes note cards in her purse, while she listens)* I'm sticking with safe, clichéd questions then slowly—very slowly—I'll segue to the personal. *(pause)* Oh Julia, why did I let Marianne talk me into doing this? *(pause)* I know. *(Longer pause)* I know. *(Longer pause, KARIN looks agitated)* Ok that's enough reasons. I'm hanging up now.

*She puts her phone back in her purse which she sets in front of her, she then moves it under the table, then finally hangs it on the back of the chair. Meanwhile, WILLIAM has walked in. He stands, looks around, then walks past KARIN's table. He stands and looks around again. KARIN looks up and notices WILLIAM.*

KARIN: William Novstrup? *(He turns around)* I believe you're looking for me, Karin Kingston. *(She stands up. He walks to her and stares.)*

WILLIAM: What is your size?

KARIN: Um. . . I'm an eight.

WILLIAM: Marianne said you were a four.

KARIN: Well I'm not, I'm an eight. Six if the designers make their clothes a little bigger. Sometimes I'm a ten if. . . well you know what I mean.

WILLIAM: What gave Marianne the impression that you were a four?

KARIN: Is this going to be a problem?

WILLIAM: It's nothing against you I just wish Marianne would get her facts straight, considering she begged me day and night to do this. *(KARIN looks away insulted, WILLIAM notices)* I'm sorry, that was unnecessary. I've had a long day of meetings and I apologize for all that nonsense about your size. Let's sit down, start over, and do this right.

KARIN: Okay. *(WILLIAM walks to KARIN'S side and pulls her chair out for and waits for her to sit down. The entire act comes off awkward. WILLIAM sits down; both contemplate where to place their hands on the table. KARIN fidgets with her hair.)*

WILLIAM: Anyway I— *(the SERVER walks up to the table).*

SERVER: May I bring a bottle of wine for you?

WILLIAM: Glass of Pinot Grigio for me. And. . . *(Points to KARIN.)*

KARIN: Just iced tea thank you. *(SERVER walks away.)*

WILLIAM: As I was saying, I apologize for my being late. I'm usually very punctual; I even won an award for such back in school. The only day I was ever late to work was 9/11.

KARIN: That would be understandable. Did you lose anyone?

WILLIAM: No. I have friends who did. I remember that I was about to walk into work when I heard a noise, and then I could do nothing but stare.

KARIN: I was beginning my senior year at Columbia. My friends and I ran outside after the noise. Aside from various gasps of shock, we just...stared. (*Both stare down about to look depressed.*) I suppose this is hardly the time to reflect on such vivid events.

WILLIAM: I suppose not (*SERVER drops off the drinks*).

SERVER: Ready to order?

WILLIAM: Not yet. We'll be ordering in thirty minutes (*SERVER nods and walks away, KARIN looks confused. WILLIAM turns back to KARIN.*) So aside from...that, I've always been on time.

KARIN: It's fine. To be honest, I appreciate someone who recognizes the importance of being on time.

WILLIAM: I agree. What's with these people who want to be, as they say, 'fashionably late'? An invitation says seven, I show up at seven.

KARIN: I always thought 'fashionably late' is a term people came up with to excuse their own rudeness.

WILLIAM: I once was invited to a dinner party on Park Ave and I showed up exactly when the invitation said.

KARIN: Let me guess, seven.

WILLIAM: (*laughs*) The host looked at me as if I have no sense of social etiquette, then passive-aggressively reamed me because she hadn't had her table settings in order. Like I threw her off.

KARIN: I say, you schedule a party by seven be ready to receive guests by seven.

WILLIAM: You just might be the first person who has ever agreed with me on this subject. (*KARIN smiles, she's more comfortable.*) So you graduated from Columbia, how's life since then?

KARIN: Bumpier than expected. When you graduate from the Ivy League, you tend to assume that there are jobs out there specifically set aside for you. Unfortunately that wasn't the case. It's kind of like rain.

WILLIAM: Rain.

KARIN: Yeah. Certain times of the year, we expect it, prepare for it. But then a drought, like the one we have now, hits and there's panic because it's not what we planned. I always liked walking in the first rain of the season without a coat or umbrella because I've missed the feeling of the drops on my skin. I miss it even more now with the drought.

WILLIAM: The Weather Channel said there'd be rain by next week.

KARIN: They've said that the last three weeks and still not a drop. (*WILLIAM is uncomfortable.*)

WILLIAM: So the job search was tough?

KARIN: I eventually had to pay my rent being a Starbucks barista.

WILLIAM: What was your favorite beverage?

KARIN: I don't drink coffee.

WILLIAM: Then why work with coffee?

KARIN: Because I wouldn't get fired for stealing.

WILLIAM: Where are you now?

KARIN: An entry-level position at a culinary magazine.

WILLIAM: Doing well?

KARIN: It pays less than Starbucks. (*Short silence, KARIN turns to him.*) Marianne says you were married.

WILLIAM: Twice.

KARIN: She never mentioned twice.

WILLIAM: I don't really talk about the first.

KARIN: Bad experience?

WILLIAM: More humbling than bad. (*beat*) She was my high-school sweetheart. I proposed to her at prom, everyone looked at us like we were a paragon of true love.

KARIN: I had a friend; she was also engaged in high school, proud of it also. She'd always parade in front of everyone about how she's getting married. (*pause*) He cheated on her at his first college party.

WILLIAM: It's like I always say, young people are dumb.

KARIN: You always say that?

WILLIAM: Well...no. But it's true. Your friend probably believed that at what, seventeen? Eighteen years old? That she was set and nothing could touch that. She probably looks back now and says 'boy was I dumb.'

KARIN: Yes I suppose she does. I reckon you reflect on your first marriage the same way also.

WILLIAM: Not really.

KARIN: You weren't, quote 'dumb' unquote.

WILLIAM: I really did love her. I was impulsive, not dumb.

KARIN: Impulsive can be translated as a variation of dumb if you look at it close enough.

WILLIAM: Like running out of the house in the rain without an umbrella because they like the sound of the drops as it hits their skin.

KARIN: That was impulsive.

WILLIAM: No, that's dumb.

KARIN: (*Insulted, she picks up the untouched menu and begins to look at it intensely.*)  
What's good here?

WILLIAM: It hasn't been thirty minutes yet.

KARIN: By the way, what was that telling the server to wait thirty minutes? You didn't even ask if I was hungry.

WILLIAM: I wanted to get some good conversation in before the food arrived. I don't like awkward pauses that couples are required to take in order to get a bite of food that's already gotten cold.

KARIN: I take it you date a lot. I guess I should expect the cynicism from someone who's been divorced twice.

WILLIAM: And I take it that you don't hence the uncalled for judgment, maybe I shouldn't expect less from a Columbia grad.

KARIN: Why the thirty minute wait?

WILLIAM: Is it that you can't get a date without your friends setting you up?

KARIN: I mean there has got to be an ulterior motive besides 'good conversation.'

WILLIAM: Maybe your harsh words on a perfect stranger aren't so cumbersome with the men.

KARIN: Look. I get around but I don't date. (*WILLIAM pauses then nods.*)

WILLIAM: I see.



KARIN: If I'm coming off like I think I'm smarter than a lot of people that's because I sometimes think I am. Unfortunately the men I attract myself to are a little bit on...well to say the least—

WILLIAM: Dumb.

KARIN: There's really no better word. (*WILLIAM laughs.*) What?

WILLIAM: You put out but you don't get out.

KARIN: I don't want to talk about this.

WILLIAM: Oh there's no shame in getting some with numerous men. You're not married. (*KARIN, embarrassed, takes a long sip of iced tea and looks away*) It's our animal side, human nature, let it all out. Just out of curiosity, how do you do it?

KARIN: Like I'm telling you. (*WILLIAM leans in*) Fine. I can be very charming when I want to. Particularly in bars; I find it very easy to get certain guys to buy me drinks.

WILLIAM: You mean the dumb ones.

KARIN: Can we stop using that word?

WILLIAM: Pardon me, the gentleman folk of subpar intelligence.

KARIN: Anyway, I get lonely and sometimes it feels good to let yourself loose. I don't normally admit to guys that I'm much more in my element with men physically than emotionally. At one point I stopped dating altogether because I froze up mentally trying to connect with any man and then the whole date would stall.

WILLIAM: So you'd go to bed with them.

KARIN: I had to save the date. (*WILLIAM grins as the maitre'd passes by*)

WILLIAM: Excuse me, can you tell our SERVER that we're ready to order? (*MAITRE'D nods and walks away.*)

KARIN: But it hasn't been thirty minutes which by the way you still haven't explained.

WILLIAM: Well...while we're talking about dating I might as well explain my eccentricity. (*pause, KARIN waits*) I have recently set higher standards in the women I date.

KARIN: You don't say.

WILLIAM: Think about it from the man's perspective: I'm out here having many meals with many women and restaurants are expensive nowadays. (*He pauses, no response from KARIN.*) Anyway, I've come to tell whether or not I like a woman in thirty minutes or less.

KARIN: Meaning.

WILLIAM: If I like her we order, if I don't—

KARIN: You bail! Oh my god I should've guessed.

WILLIAM: I don't just up and leave. I give an excuse.

KARIN: This I have to hear.

WILLIAM: I'm not going to tell you now.

KARIN: After all that buildup.

WILLIAM: You're clearly offended, why add to your thunderstorm of judgment?

KARIN: You're saying that if you don't like the woman you just skip out to avoid paying for a meal.

WILLIAM: You know you're right, it is rather idiotic. I should stay and have sex with her to save the date. (*KARIN grabs her bag and starts to leave.*) Oh come on.

KARIN: I'll spare you a meal and an excuse because I'm leaving.

WILLIAM: Wait. You're getting the wrong impression. I'm trying to— (*SERVER walks up to the table.*)

SERVER: What can I get for you?

WILLIAM: Man, no offense, but we're not ready yet. (*SERVER walks away in a buff.*) Now I'm gonna have to tip him extra. (*Back to KARIN*) Come sit down.

KARIN: Why?

WILLIAM: You think I'm not having fun with this I'm having a wonderful time. I want to argue with you all throughout dinner.

KARIN: I've only earned dinner because you think I'm going to let you (*makes air quotes*) 'save the date.'

WILLIAM: Nothing of the sort. I'm expecting no physical obligation of any kind. (*beat*) Though if you wanted to there's no shame, I've never found it unscrupulous to give it up on the first date. (*KARIN rolls her eyes, but nonetheless finds herself amused.*)

KARIN: I never blurt anything like that out. I don't usually share this with guys I date.

WILLIAM: Why is that?

KARIN: Because. (*Sits herself down again.*) The minute they get the impression that I'm easy, their intentions immediately shift to physical.

WILLIAM: Whether you say it or not, our intentions are always physical.

KARIN: But by then they don't even hide it.

WILLIAM: Don't be ashamed of it. It's part of who you are.

KARIN: But I don't want it to be. I want to evolve from it and become a more sophisticated dater. (*WILLIAM smiles and studies her.*)

WILLIAM: I like you Karin. I like you now because I know I'm getting to know the real you. I may be jumping to conclusions but I think you like me.

KARIN: What's your reasoning behind that?

WILLIAM: For one, I haven't seen you use those little note cards Marianne says you keep on you.

KARIN: She told you about those.

WILLIAM: Not in detail. She told me 'if Karin seems stiff at times she's probably just reciting something she memorized from her little note cards.'

KARIN: She didn't!

WILLIAM: What's written on them?

KARIN: Nothing. Just questions. Topics. (*SERVER walks up to the table.*)

SERVER: Have you had enough time?

WILLIAM: Karin?

KARIN: Chicken Picatta please.

WILLIAM: Veal Parmigiana, slightly more well done. Thanks for your time (*SERVER walks away, WILLIAM turns back to KARIN.*) You're not gonna bust my chops for ordering veal are you?

KARIN: I wasn't planning on it.

WILLIAM: I order it a lot and I swear, you should see the looks old dates have given me. Like I told the server to slay the poor animal in front of them.

KARIN: If I was my friend Julia, you'd get a nasty look.

WILLIAM: Why though?

KARIN: She's a vegan.

WILLIAM: Not all women are. Look, I like pigs. Sometimes I wish I owned a farm so I can raise pigs; and yet when anyone orders pork I don't raise my voice in disgust. Two dates before us, I ordered the veal, the woman stared daggers at me. And she walked in wearing a mink coat. (*KARIN laughs, she's loosened up again.*)

KARIN: Do you ever feel that everything you do is a societal faux pas?

WILLIAM: Haven't I made that clear? (*KARIN laughs, a short pause.*) So why Chicken Picatta?

KARIN: I like the dish.

WILLIAM: You order it anywhere else?

KARIN: I...uh...yeah. (*besitates*)

WILLIAM: What?

KARIN: It's silly.

WILLIAM: Karin, look how far we've come, no conversation is beyond us. Tell me.

KARIN: I've ordered Chicken Picattas at ten different restaurants in this town and I'm trying to see which is best. It's for an article.

WILLIAM: For your magazine. When's it due?

KARIN: See, I haven't exactly gotten it approved yet. I'm not a staff writer but I hear that if you pitch unusual ideas like mine it can get you noticed.

WILLIAM: The Top Ten Chicken Picattas of New York City. I smell Pulitzer.

KARIN: This isn't funny. I'm serious.

WILLIAM: I apologize. Where do you expect this to get you?

KARIN: I want to be a food critic.

WILLIAM: What kind of courses did you take at Columbia?

KARIN: I was an English major. If I can write about Eliot I can write about food.

WILLIAM: Have you always aspired to this?

KARIN: No it took some hard thinking. But (*beat*) I enjoy the experience of dining at a

restaurant. I've always taken note of décor, atmosphere and service. When they know you're a food critic you get the best quality items, recipes you've never heard of so they can better distinguish themselves, and the service is always exceptional. I could make or break or place; I've never had that kind of power.

WILLIAM: You have that written somewhere on those note cards.

KARIN: What, no. Why?

WILLIAM: At times you sounded awkward and skeptical as you said it. Like something you were trying to memorize.

KARIN: No. It's just I've never really talked about it with anyone.

WILLIAM: You've never really talked about a lot before tonight. What the hell are on those note cards?

KARIN: Can we stop with the note cards.

WILLIAM: I just want to see one. (*KARIN doesn't move.*) Please. (*After hesitating, KARIN finally grabs her bag, pulls a blue card out and hands it to WILLIAM.*) Are they color-coded? (*KARIN shoots him a look.*) No okay. Sorry. (*Reads the card in a monotone.*) 'Marianne says you have lots of business trips, do you like to travel?' Oh now see that's a boring question.

KARIN: No it's not. I like hearing about where people go.

WILLIAM: That's the thing. There's nothing interesting about travel other than naming the places you've been. In fact it's only a boring segue for me so you can talk about the places you want to go.

KARIN: Paris, London, India, Sydney—

WILLIAM: Hey I didn't ask.

KARIN: You're saying you can't think of one place you enjoyed.

WILLIAM: Well for one, I don't travel out of the US a lot. It's mostly places like: Dallas,

Seattle, sometimes Vegas. Conference rooms look the same no matter what city you're in.  
(*beat*) Although, I did have a nice trip to Valparaiso once.

KARIN: What happened there?

WILLIAM: I don't know if I should say.

KARIN: We've disclosed a lot up to this point.

WILLIAM: While we're being honest, it's where I met my second wife, and married her.

KARIN: I see. It still sounds nice.

WILLIAM: It was until the honeymoon was over. (*Long awkward pause, WILLIAM sips his wine, KARIN fidgets with her silverware.*) But enough about—

KARIN: William, I lied earlier (*beat*).

WILLIAM: About the food?

KARIN: Not exactly. Remember when I mentioned a friend who was engaged in high school? It was no friend, it was me.

WILLIAM: No shit.

KARIN: And you're right, I do feel dumb about it.

WILLIAM: But you didn't go through it like I did. That was dumb.

KARIN: I thought you said that was impulsive.

WILLIAM: I lied. All my friends said I was crazy but I didn't listen.

KARIN: I remember being that age thinking I knew everything.

WILLIAM: What a jackass I was.

KARIN: I have my ten year reunion soon. I'm embarrassed to go (*food arrives*).

WILLIAM: That's it. Enough backtracking we're shifting gears. Let's ask each other questions, I'm talking really personal questions and you and I have to answer with brutal honesty. *(During all this KARIN has sniffed, poked and examined her food before taking a bite out of it.)* What are you doing?

KARIN: Hmm. *(swallows)* Nice garnish with parsley leaves. Good amount of capers, a nicely presented dish. Definitely Top 5 in presentation.

WILLIAM: And the taste?

KARIN: Sauce is unusually bland. Chicken is fine enough but you need a caper or two with every bite to bring out any flavor.

WILLIAM: So not as good as it looks?

KARIN: Presto Pasta outranks this. *(beat)* I'm sorry what were you saying? Questions. Oh yeah, you first.

WILLIAM: I'll start light. Have you ever told anyone off and I mean really told them off?

KARIN: I wouldn't talk to Marianne for two months because she tried to set me up with this guy.

WILLIAM: Uh oh.

KARIN: Relax this is different. This guy was still married and only agreed to it because Marianne let it slip about my past, you know, affairs. I thought our friendship would be over after that.

WILLIAM: Did you sleep with him?

KARIN: It's my turn.

WILLIAM: Sorry.

KARIN: You ever thought about having kids with either of your wives?



WILLIAM: My first wife miscarried, she almost died. And well, my second wife got pregnant by her boss.

KARIN: Wow that would do it.

WILLIAM: My turn. Did you sleep with him?

KARIN: Fine yes. (*WILLIAM laughs*) What, he was outrageously charming. Although looking back it all seems so obvious.

WILLIAM: I'm assuming you didn't know all that crap about him until a day later.

KARIN: More like ten minutes later. And he acted like I was the bitch.

WILLIAM: Follow-up question: why are you still friends with Marianne?

KARIN: My brutally honest answer: I really don't know.

WILLIAM: She seems to see you more as a project than as a friend.

KARIN: Maybe. Would you prefer me as a size four?

WILLIAM: Of course not.

KARIN: Because it's physically impossible for me to be a four. It's just the way I'm built.

WILLIAM: I've never dumped anyone because of their size. If it became a matter of wasting themselves away, then that's another issue. Back to the questions: (*brief pause*) who is the best you've ever had?

KARIN: This guy I was seeing about three years ago.

WILLIAM: No name? Just 'this guy.'

KARIN: I'm not naming him. Anyway, he was a musician. Well more like part-time musician, part-time stoner. (*Gets reminiscent.*) Played tenor saxophone in a jazz band; at least when I knew him. God he made me crazy, in the good way.

WILLIAM: What is it with girls and musicians?

KARIN: My turn, when was the last time you got any? (*WILLIAM freezes up.*) Well?

WILLIAM: Um, about three-thirty.

KARIN: Today!

WILLIAM: Yes.

KARIN: (*shocked*) I just...um...how...who is she?

WILLIAM: My turn.

KARIN: I'm pausing the game.

WILLIAM: You still love this guy?

KARIN: No. Haven't talked to him for over two years, don't change the subject, who is this girl?

WILLIAM: Friend of mine that I've known for ages. Size four, very cute. (*KARIN looks down in disbelief.*) You weren't very convincing are you lying about not loving him?

KARIN: Little bit, not important right now. How can you sleep with whatshername—

WILLIAM: Stacy.

KARIN: Excuse me, Stacy. How can you sleep with Stacy if you knew you were going out with me?

WILLIAM: We're not together, we're just 'special friends.' (*SERVER arrives with the check and starts to take off.*) Hold it. (*Puts a credit card in the checkbook.*)

KARIN: You lied about being in meetings? (*SERVER runs off.*)

WILLIAM: I'm so sorry. I didn't realize how much I'd like you.

KARIN: Oh so you were hoping this would be one of your dinnerless thirty minute meetings?

WILLIAM: That's three questions in a row. Can I catch up?

KARIN: You're despicable.

WILLIAM: You're bombarding me because you don't want to spill details on saxophone boy. Are you trying to avoid talking about it?

KARIN: Yes but it doesn't matter because I really am leaving. *(Grabs purse.)*

WILLIAM: *(panicked)* Wait wait wait. We've come so far.

KARIN: Game over. *(Starts to get up.)*

WILLIAM: JUST WAIT! We've been extremely honest this whole date. And I have to tell you, I love it. I want to invite you as my date to this dinner party I'm invited to next week. I'd like to be approximately on time with someone who enjoys it as much as I do. Forget Stacy. I told her about the date, she wished me luck. Answer one last question for me.

KARIN: What?

WILLIAM: Have you—for the most part—enjoyed yourself and my company this evening?

KARIN: *(She starts to sit back down.)* Fine yes, I have. It's been a little unorthodox but then I think that's why I like it. *(SERVER returns with the closed check.)*

SERVER: Hope you two brought your coats, it started raining.

WILLIAM: How? The sky was cloudless when I came in. *(SERVER runs off.)* Looks like the drought has ended.

KARIN: Time flies when you're eating chicken picatta. *(Both laugh.)*

WILLIAM: So about that dinner party.

KARIN: Let me think about it. *(beat)*

WILLIAM: I learned a lot about you tonight.

KARIN: There's still more where that came from.

WILLIAM: Knowledge is an interesting paradox. We learn so we can solve a certain amount of life's mysteries. But the more we learn, the more mysteries that open up for us to solve.

KARIN: Like how those clouds moved in so fast.

WILLIAM: Something like that. But what I'm really saying is that the next date we go—

KARIN: Which I haven't said yes to—

WILLIAM: will be a new round of mysteries.

KARIN: So now you're likening dating to detective work.

WILLIAM: Isn't it?

KARIN: I suppose. I'll have to sleep on it.

WILLIAM: We can sleep on it tog—

KARIN: Quit while you're ahead William.

WILLIAM: Can do. (*They rise together*) I'll call you tomorrow to get your answer. That is, if you have your answer 'cause there's no rush. Of course I should know before the day of the party so I can RSVP. You know we never got around to the annoyances of people who don't RSVP? This is definitely an issue I think you and I could—

KARIN: William!

WILLIAM: Right. I'll call you, but not tonight so I don't sound too eager.

KARIN: I wouldn't worry about that.

WILLIAM: Let me call you a cab. (*He walks her out of the restaurant. The SERVER walks to*

*the table, then watches the two as they leave and shakes his head.)*

END OF PLAY



L54515604E

Ashlyn Morse

# Chale - It Ain't Me

Guadelupe Marquez

CHARACTERS:

LALO

ANDRES

SUSIE

MANUEL

YOLANDA

ROSA

Act 1, Scene 1

*Bedroom. A desk is set up in the middle of the two twin beds. Computer, books, and writing material on top. Two young men, early twenties, are in the room. One sits by the computer and the other on a bed. Late afternoon.*

LALO: Tell me if you heard this one already.

ANDRES: Alright.

LALO: *(Stands up and mimics Jesus on the cross: legs together and arms spread out.)*

Okay. So, Jesus is up on his cross right, asleep, and he feels a trembling that makes him wake up from his nap. He looks around, sees nothing. He goes back to sleep, and like ten minutes later he feels the tremble again. He wakes up and looks around like what the...

ANDRES: Man, you better be glad Aunt Rosa's not around. She'd kick your ass for going there!

LALO: Ha! Yeah man, she'd be like (*makes his voice sound feminine*) "Ay, Dios Mío, forgive these chamacos, they're so bad but they don't know what they say!"

ANDRES: (*Nods his head and laughs in agreement.*) So what happened to Jesus?

LALO: So he's looking down, and he says, "Must be an earthquake." He doesn't see anything, shrugs and knocks back out. Then the trembling gets all crazy, and he's all like this, right (*he stretches his arms out again and shakes excessively*) and all of the sudden his cross starts to fall, with him on it, and he looks down to see what's causing his cross to fall, and he spots it out and screams, "Oh shit, you fucking beaver!" (*They laugh.*)

ANDRES: So you're serious? You don't believe in God no more?

LALO: No man. I mean yeah. I mean, no I don't believe in God no more, so yeah I'm serious—

ANDRES: Don't let our jefita hear you, she'll say you'll be the reason why she's gonna die at a young age.

LALO: (*Changes his voice to mock a female's voice.*) I didn't raise you to be like this. Cabroncitos, now, just pray for forgiveness now. You going straight to hell. Ay, if your grandma was alive, she'd bend you over her knee and mira. (*He mimes bending someone over his lap and spans the air.*) They always thought hitting us would solve the problems. Shit, they only showed me tolerance for pain.

ANDRES: I was talking to this homeboy from school. He told me we should write a book man. He was like, "what?" to half of the shit I told him about Dad. I told him the time Dad came home drunk out of his ass with that hoochie lady he picked up at the bar and my jefa had a fit and chased them with the comal all around the house.

LALO: My jefa knocked his ass out! The fucking ten pound comal flattened his face like a fucking tortilla! (*He laughs so hard he can just get the words out his mouth.*) He didn't see her ass waiting around the corner!

ANDRES: When I told this vato that the next day when my jefe woke up with the chipote on his forehead and the biggest headache he ever had and my jefa told him he came home so drunk that he fell on his face when he came in the house, this homeboy was cracking up!

LALO: Fucking classic shit dude! To top that shit off, their ass just celebrated their thirtieth anniversary! I don't know how she put up with so much of his shit.



ANDRES: I told this dude my dad still has flashbacks of that night and asks if it happened and my jefa tells him he's crazy, that it's all the drinking that's got him like that! I bet one day we're gonna have flashbacks of all the ass beatings we got from his ass!

LALO: No shit, man. I was glad my jefa popped his ass one! Yeah man, I heard the same shit about writing a book from some girl I work with. Fine ass honey, dude, and hella cool, but she's kinda nerdy man—

ANDRES: I heard the nerdy chicks are the best to—

LALO: Dude, they don't even like to be called "chicks"—that tells you they probably aren't that great. Chale, that ain't me, man! I'll probably go down to the club tonight and hook up with a cutie with one of those little ass outfits they buy at the chinito stores. Yeah baby—

ANDRES: Are you hooking up with Cynthia?

LALO: For a minute—*(A woman's voice is heard off stage. "Lalo! Andres! Come eat! Your dinner's gonna go cold! I made albondigas. You want corn or flower tortillas? Andelen!")* Fuck man. I hope my dad doesn't start asking us to do shit this weekend for Susie's quinceañera. I don't even know why she's having one, she probably already had her cherry popped!

ANDRES: Nah, man. She's strictly school and politics. Little ass girl won't let nobody fuck with her. I saw some shit she was writing on her MySpace about a strike or some shit.

LALO: A strike?

ANDRES: A bunch of people getting together to talk shit about stuff they don't agree with.

LALO: Ohhh, I know, like the Albertson's thing. Yeah, I supported that shit, man. Messed up to lose all the benefits you've been getting, after all the years you put in to their business. Plus, there were some cuties out there talking to people about why they were on strike. I gave one my number, but she didn't call. Her bad—

ANDRES: She'll read your book and regret not calling you—

LALO: Or be thankful that she didn't. *(Woman's voice is heard again. "Boys?" Stage goes dark.)*

Act 1, Scene 2

*Kitchen. Table in the middle of stage, pitcher of lemonade in the middle, and bowls filled with salsas. A stove is set behind the table with pots and pans fuming. A woman, heavy set, wearing a long skirt, short sleeve blouse and apron is standing over the stove. A man is sitting at the table reading a piece of paper.*

YOLANDA: *(Stands over the stove stirring contents in pots and pans.)* Ay. What's taking these guys so long? Manuel, can you whistle at them so they hurry up?

MANUEL: *(Tilts his head back and let's out a loud whistle.)*

YOLANDA: Andelen! Hurry up!

ANDRES: *(Enters stage through a door on the left side of stage.)* What's the dealie yo?

MANUEL: What? That's no way to step into the room. Where's your brother?

ANDRES: Huh? Oh, my bad, Pops. *(Walks over to his mom and kisses her on the cheek.)* Buenas noches, Jefita. Mmm, that smells really good. What is it?

YOLANDA: *(Caresses his face. He holds her hand for a few seconds and he walks away while she speaks.)* It's your favorite. Albondigas, rice, beans, and some guacamole.

ANDRES: *(Dialing something on his cell phone.)* Huh?

MANUEL: *(Looks over the paper he is reading.)* Where is your brother?

ANDRES: *(Dialing something on his cell phone.)* Huh? Oh... he's coming. He had to take a shit before he came down.

YOLANDA: Watch your language! Ay, your grandma's probably turning in her grave right now, hearing how you two do not respect this house.

ANDRES: Okay Mama, sorry about that.

LALO: *(Enters through a door on the left side of stage. He's talking on his cell phone.)* I might head out in a couple of hours. I have to grab food and take a shower still... *(Pause)* Yeah... *(Pause)* No, I told you I would see you for a little bit. I'm hooking up with Mike and then—

ANDRES: (*Grabs LALO by the arm and whispers.*) Ey. Tell her I'm sick, that I'm not going out tonight. Tell her I've been asleep all day and Mom said no one can come over.

LALO: (*Nods at ANDRES.*) I'll see you in a few hours. (*Pause*) No, he's not coming. He's sick. I don't think she's coming over. My mom doesn't want anyone over. She's having a meeting with the church people and she said she doesn't want this to look like a whore house with chicks coming in and out of our bedroom. (*Pause*) Man, I'm just telling you what she told me. Here, you want to talk to her? (*Holds the phone above his head.*) Okay, then stop telling me I'm lying then. I'll see you in a while. (*Hangs up the phone. Walks to his mom and gives her a rough hug.*) Ay, Jefita! These girls won't leave me alone!

YOLANDA: Pelado! And why do you lie to that girl? You're using the Lord's name so you could get away with what you do. That's a sin—

MANUEL: Okay. Stop playing. I'm hungry.

YOLANDA: (*Walks towards the table with two plates.*) Here Viejo, this one's for you, and Lalo, this one's for you. (*Walks back to the stove and returns to the table with one more plate and places it in front of ANDRES.*) Here mijo, this one's for you. (*She goes back to the stove and remains standing next to it.*)

ANDRES: Gracias, Jefita. Talking about the Lord, has Lalo told you the joke about the beaver?

LALO: Shut up man. We're gonna have to stay here for three extra hours if you tell her. She'll straight force an exorcism on us, for reals!

ANDRES: I'm messing—

MANUEL: Boys. We need your help over the weekend. The quinceañera for your sister is next weekend and we need to have the backyard all set up by Friday. On Saturday your mom and tías are going to decorate starting early.

LALO: Yeah baby! That party's gonna be filled with some of Susie's fine little friends.

YOLANDA: Lalo! Her friends are 14 or 15 years old! Don't be acting like a pervert! Mira no más este.

LALO: Mom, they might be 14 but they have bodies of 26-year-olds, serious!

ANDRES: I agree with Lalo.

Yolanda: Andres! I expect better from you!

MANUEL: I hope you two are not involved in this thing. *(He takes the flyer and gives it to LALO.)* People are killed in my country for organizing those things.

LALO: *(Looks at the flyer and shakes his head)* No, pop. Not me. *(He hands the flyer to ANDRES.)*

ANDRES: *(Takes the flyer and examines it.)* No. But check it out... it says that they are organizing against all the stuff the government is doing against immigrants right now. Shit, I'm glad someone is doing something.

YOLANDA: Lalo, can you please not talk like that when you're at the table. That table was blessed by Father Tony! Ay Diosito, what am I gonna do with these two? *(She looks up and makes the sign of the cross.)*

ANDRES: My bad—

MANUEL: I don't want you two doing that stuff. Then problems are gonna come to our home. I don't even know how this got in the house—

LALO: Let me see the paper. *(He reaches for it and takes it from ANDRES. Studies it attentively.)* You know... this is alright. I think it's messed up how the migra and the cops are working together to deport *(Short pause)* your people, Dad.

MANUEL: But we can't do anything about it. Protests don't work and nobody cares. Those white kids that get all crazy and throw bottles at the police at these protests even mess things up more.

LALO: We throw a bottle, we're called criminals. They drop bombs on countries for no reason. They are—what do you call those people who go around the world with the church brainwashing people?

ANDRES: Missionaries.

LALO: That's right. Bush calls himself a "Missionary from God"—fools been smoking too much weed, talking about "God speaks through me." I'll be like, pass some of that shit over here.

ANDRES: Ey man, Bush sees dead people!

YOIANDA: Groceros! Los misioneros son buenos.

LALO: Buenos? At taking people's money maybe.

ANDRES: I think we need a revolution. Jefita, what do you think?

MANUEL: Your mom agrees with me! She knows how it is in our country when the government hears crazy talk like that—

LALO: I agree with Andres—if you ask me, people need to do more at these protests. Like in the '92 rebellion.

MANUEL: People were idiots in those riots! They burned down stores that gave them good prices they could afford, like Payless Shoes!

ANDRES: But what about what they were pissed about. I mean, that black guy the police beat up, that was messed up—

MANUEL: But that was a black guy, why did the Mexicanos have to go out and burn things, had nothing to do with them—

LALO: What if that was a Mexican they beat up, like they usually do without being caught on video? We would want black people to come together with us, que no?

MANUEL: No. I don't want to mix up our people with negros—

ANDRES: That's funny. Someone that's called a wetback constantly in this country can actually be racist against someone else—

LALO: Chale! That ain't me! I'm not like you, Pops. I didn't like blacks before—but this girl I work with—she's black and she's teaching me some cool shit.

MANUEL: I don't want you dating no negra—

LALO: Ey, Pops—I don't think you can tell me who I can date anymore—you know what I mean?

ANDRES: She's black?

MANUEL: You can consider yourself not part of this family if you do.

LALO: If I ever hook up with anyone, I don't care if she's brown, black, yellow, green, purple, it will be because I love her, not because my dad chose her for me.

ANDRES: I'm going to this protest. Jefa, you want to go with me?

MANUEL: She does not want to go. She agrees with me—

LALO: *(Stops eating and leans back on his chair and looks around the table.)* You know Pops...you never let her say what she feels. You always say she thinks what you think. How about letting my jefita speak and tell us what she thinks?

MANUEL: Qué?

LALO: *(Stares at his dad and turns to his mom.)* Isn't it true, Jefa?

YOLANDA: Boys... don't start. Finish your dinner, it's getting cold. Let me heat up some more tortillas.

Act 1, Scene 3

*ANDRES, LALO, MANUEL, ROSA, and YOLANDA are standing in the kitchen. YOLANDA stands over the stove. Everyone's dressed up. Mexican music, ranchera, playing in the background. Conversations take place randomly.*

ROSA: Andres. Mijo, your mom tells me you're in school. What school are you going to?

ANDRES: Valley College, Tía.

ROSA: Oh. That's were Lina goes. Are you planning to go to the University after? Lina tells me she's planning to go to UCLA after—

MANUEL: Don't encourage them, Rosa. What they need to do is start to work with me. All they do in college is smoke marijuana.

ROSA: Ay Manuel. It's a good thing that they will do something different than us. Maybe they can contribute to our people.

YOLANDA: What they need to contribute to is this party. Come on boys, help me bring this pot of posole outside.

LALO: Here, I'll get that one. *(He takes the pot off the stove and walks off stage with it.)*

ANDRES: I want to become a writer, Tía. I have always written songs and even experimented with poetry.

ROSA: Ay, Mijo. That's good. What kinds of songs have you written?

ANDRES: Mostly hip-hop, Tía—

ROSA: Hip-hop? Isn't that rap? Ay no! Santo dios, Mijo. That's not good music. Only people in gangs listen to that music.

MANUEL: I told you, Rosa. These kids aren't even serious—

ANDRES: Man. Here we go—

MANUEL: It's true—

ANDRES: You wouldn't know truth if it bit you on the—

MANUEL: What? I didn't hear what you said. The music is loud—

ANDRES: I said nice shoes, Dad—

YOLANDA: Boys—

ANDRES: Here comes Susie. *(SUSIE enters the stage wearing a traditional quinceañera dress. LALO walks in behind her.)* Oooh, que pretty.

SUSIE: Shut up, Andrew.

LALO: So, hook it up, okay Susie.

SUSIE: Shut up, Lalo! I'm not gonna hook it up. Leave my friends alone, nasty pervert!

LALO: But, they look older, Dude. You know they like their gardens watered, their flowers plucked.

SUSIE: Mami! Tell these perverts to stop!

YOLANDA: Lalo! Andres!

ANDRES: Why me?

ROSA: Both of you—

ANDRES: Ey, Tía. Have you heard of the protest to help immigrant people?

MANUEL: Andres, I thought we talked about this.

LALO: No, you told us how to handle it, but “we” never agreed on anything.

ROSA: Lina brought a flyer the other day—

SUSIE: They're doing a walkout at my school for that. I think it's good, no Mami?

MANUEL: Not you too, Susie! No, it's not good Señorita!

LALO: Mami?

MANUEL: What?

LALO: Susie asked Mami.

SUSIE: Times have changed, Papi. I think you shouldn't try and control us like this. Don't you think it messes up what this government is doing to immigrants? I mean, they mess up the economy because of their war and they try to put the blame on immigrants—

MANUEL: You don't know nothing, Susie! We need to stay out of those things, you'll just bring trouble to this home just for talking like that.

ANDRES: That's why things don't change, because people don't want to make waves. But, tell me, if everyone made waves how could they go after them all? They wouldn't be able to—

YOLANDA: Well, I think—

MANUEL: I think that's the end of the discussion. Not here, not in this house!

SUSIE: But Papi!

MANUEL: No!



SUSIE: I'm walking out!

MANUEL: What do you mean? Walking out of what?

ROSA: Of school, Manny—

LALO: Yea, that's dope—

ANDRES: Dad, these are your people—

MANUEL: No, my family is my people. I would never do anything to get them in harm's way.

ANDRES: But we already are Dad, they're gonna come after us anyway, and what if they take everyone a little bit at a time and then there's no one left to fight with us—

YOLANDA: I think they're right, Manuel, mi amor, listen—

MANUEL: No, don't "mi amor" me, this is intolerable. You need to not think—

SUSIE: That's old school Dad. You need to know the times are different. We respect you, but you have to see that we have a say so.

MANUEL: No!

ROSA: Susie. Why don't we go out with your guests, Mija. This can be figured out. Leave these things in the hands of God.

LALO: Yea, that's the problem, Tía. That's all we have been doing is leaving it in the hands of God, and look, nothing—

ROSA: Ay Dios—I did not hear what you just said. God is the solution to everything—you even felt His spirit at that retreat, remember when you cried so much that—

LALO: Tía, I don't know how to tell you this... I was faking it. You know, how women fake orgasms?

YOLANDA: Lalo!

SUSIE: Enough with the praying. We need to start doing.

LALO: Chale, the praying thing, Tía, it ain't me. I'm tired of being weighed down by it, you know—

ANDRES: Yea—it ain't for me either. Let's go outside Susie. Tell me some more about this walkout business. (*ANDRES, LALO, and SUSIE walk off stage.*)

ROSA: Ay Yoli, I can't believe these kids.

YOLANDA: Rosa! Sorry, but (*pause*) can I have a minute with Manuel?

ROSA: Yoli, I didn't mean anything. . . . Okay, I'll step out. I'll see if the guests need more food or something to drink.

Act 1, Scene 4

*YOLANDA and MANUEL sit across each other at the kitchen table. Ranchera music plays in the background.*

YOLANDA: Manuel—Viejo.

MANUEL: Don't Viejo me. You are showing these kids that it is okay to disrespect me.

YOLANDA: This is not about you, Manuel. I think there is something you should know.

MANUEL: What?

YOLANDA: I received a letter yesterday. . . . (*Pause.*) It's not good—

MANUEL: What letter?

YOLANDA: My application for residency, it's been declined.

MANUEL: Qué?

YOLANDA: I'm being deported, Manuel. I'm being deported.

