

NO PRICE TOO HIGH

In the precise center of the dirt and crabgrass courtyard of the Condor Arms stands a weathered statue of Mary. Time has stripped all but a notion of blue from her robes, leaving her the color of rancid cooking oil, except where pigeons have added their comments in splashes of ochre, dark brown, and white. The we're-all-in-this-economic-collapse-together apartment community was built on the site of a defunct Bible-themed amusement park, and the developers saw fit to leave Mary, as well as a section of the *coliseum* wall behind. The wall is inconveniently located in the middle of the main thoroughfare so that a person trying to expend the least amount of energy to get into the courtyard must veer left or right to go around it. Like she always does, Darlene drifts left.

I might as well be Mary, left behind and stuck in place. The thought tips her sideways, and she scrapes her arm against the wall. Rubbing away the hurt, she enters the courtyard. Mary's companion of late is a zombie dog that took up residence at the Condor Arms a few months ago. No one knows who it belonged to, so it is someone else's problem. *Arroooowoowoo*, it bawls as Darlene walks by, and Darlene bawls *arroooowoowoo* right back because why not, that's why? And what does it matter anyway? The lament never ends, not even if she screams at it or throws stones. It never moves its desiccated self except to rotate around the statue of Mary like the hour hand of a clock. Due to the uncanny accuracy of its timekeeping, some of the residents have



Illustrated by Mina Citlali

begun calling it a miracle. Miracle or not, Darlene wishes it would shut the hell up.

According to the dog, or *zog*—Darlene snorts, pleased with herself—it's around four in the afternoon, which means the food truck carrying the government-funded barbecue will arrive in about an hour. She picks up her pace but only for a few steps. The air is sultry, and she journeyed to Green Meadows and back because she and Wayne (mostly Wayne) burned through their state-supplied weed already. Green Meadow's resident drug dealer, Joe Bob, is open to barter. The Arms' assigned dealer, Petunia, is asexual, which leaves Darlene up the proverbial creek. Darlene has no money and few belongings. Even if she were prepared to part with an article of clothing, it wouldn't do Petunia any good. Darlene wears small, sometimes extra small depending on whether she has traded food for other necessities, and Petunia is six foot two, one eighty.

In the mercifully shaded cement stairwell, Darlene hauls herself ever upward. The graffiti on the pock-marked walls is bedraggled and achromatic. Prehistoric cave paintings have better endurance. Yet again, she reminds herself to put her name in for a ground-floor unit.

Arroooooowooo.

When she reaches the fourth floor, she bends at the waist and sucks wind.

Right away, old Mrs. Nosy-Pants opens her door. "Who's there?"

"Santa Claus."

Mrs. Nosy-Pants slams her door.

Darlene straightens and takes a tentative step. Her legs feel like overcooked spaghetti. Mmmm. *Spaghetti*. Her stomach howls. If the dog were still alive-alive, it might tip its head quizzically in response.

At unit 405, she shoves the key home and turns the handle.

Arroooooowoo.

As soon as the door opens, a waft of Eau de Kevin (fart, dust, tiger lily) rushes to greet her. Kevin is Wayne's zombified brother. He's seated in the corner where a dining table would go if they had one. Luckily, he's been undead long enough, he's non-verbal. If she had to listen to him and the dog—*no!* Occasionally, Kevin shivers, but that's it. She supposes if they ever get a ground level unit, someone will have to carry him down the damned stairs. Or they could just toss him over the railing. It isn't like he can become more undead.

Wayne fell asleep wearing his VR goggles again, which means he'll have deep grooves in his forehead and parentheses beside his eyes for hours. If there's any meaning to be found inside those punctuation marks, she has yet to discover it. Wayne is sprawled on his back in the middle of the sagging king-sized mattress that takes up most of their one-room abode. Darlene raises her knapsack above her shoulder and drops it on the floor. The clatter neither penetrates Wayne's sleep, nor Kevin's undead state. She steps over Wayne to get to the sink and a much-needed glass of water, *accidentally* kicking him as she goes.

"Throw some cinnamon on the fire." He sits up and removes the goggles. "Oh, hey you."

Darlene holds up her pointer finger and finishes downing the glass of water. "Oh, hey you back."

"Did you score?"

She lifts a brow. "What do you think?"

"Yes." He makes a victory fist.

"I'm going to lie down," she says.

Wayne flops back onto his pillow. "Me too."

"No. You're going to keep track of time, so we don't miss the barbecue." They're both impressively capable of sleeping through an alarm.

He sits up again, rubbing his bloodshot eyes.

"Get all the way up." She crosses her arms.

"I won't sleep. I swear."

"All the way, Wayne."

"Fine." A cloud's shadow drifts across the picnic that is his expression.

She gestures to her tired, sweaty self. She doesn't have to look in the mirror to know her chest and shoulders are sunburned. He slept while she schlepped.

The cloud floats by without releasing rain, and Wayne rises from the mattress, yawning and stretching. "What do you think, forty-five minutes?"

"Half an hour." She curls up beside him and sticks her thumb in her mouth. Sleep seizes her like a mugger, but moments later the zombie dog's keening startles her awake and sets her heart to pounding.

"This friggin' dog."

“What’s that?” Wayne calls from the bathroom.

“Nothing.” She has come to hate it. Maybe if it retained even a hint of its former doggy self (a glimpse of Harley, a flash of Luna or Buster), she might feel more charitable, but its essential dogginess has ‘left the building’ just like Elvis from the Better Times.

After a few minutes of eyes-squeezed-shut seething, she admits her nap has also left the building.

Wayne is now seated on the floor, back leaning against the wall. Heaven forbid, poor, dead-from-a-bee-sting Kevin was made to sit on the floor. This sentimentality puzzles Darlene. It made sense back when people were actually dead, and you buried them or burned them and didn’t see them anymore. But now the dead are a chronic condition, like emphysema or diabetes. She’s lucky, she supposes, she was orphaned young and hasn’t been saddled with her parents. Her neighbors in 407, for instance, only have room for a twin mattress because a bunch of their family members were wiped out by the last pandemic, and the apartment is chock-a-block with zombies. Considering they’re both over six feet tall, they must spill onto the floor every night. Really, they need to rent two units—one for them, and one for the undead, but who has money for that?

To kill time, she scrolls through news feeds. Scientists have, apparently, discovered a way to send people back in time, and everyone is lining up for a chance to return to Better Times. Darlene tries to picture herself in such a world. She’d have a job and a proper place to live. Her stomach gurgles and squeals, and she adds *regular meals* to the fantasy. In truth, it’s easier to imagine living on Mars or

fighting aliens because she's watched enough movies to fill in the many blanks.

A *Breaking News* banner scrolls, letting her know that, nearly to a one, the world's various leaders have jumped the queue and made the journey. What will happen now, the banner wonders, with no one to lead us? Darlene gapes at the dismal interior, sharing with it a nearly overwhelming sense of irony. It gapes back.

She punches the mattress and gets up.

"Those goggles are going to grow into your skin," she snipes at Wayne, but he's so involved in whatever he's watching, he doesn't hear. Or he's ignoring her.

She freshens up in the bathroom and then stomps over to the front window. Despite the noise, Wayne doesn't budge. Down in the courtyard, the zombie dog is at five o'clock, and here comes the food truck. Her mouth fills with saliva, and the Pavlovian response makes her feel slightly more sympathetic toward the dog. Who knows what it might have wanted out of life, but here it is, stuck at the Condor Arms, forever circling Mary. And let's not talk about the Mother of God— She, certainly, must have hoped for more.

Wayne is so still, Darlene wonders if he died sitting there while immersed in a different world. Then his breath hitches and settles back into rhythm. *Lucky me. I won't have to deal with two undead roommates.*

She opens the door. It would serve Wayne right if she left him behind. He was the one who was supposed to keep track of time. She takes a single step but stops, one foot

inside and one outside the apartment. *I'm on the threshold.* It's a strange thought, one she might pick at like a scabbed-over mosquito bite if she weren't hungry enough to chew off her own arm. She *ta-ta-ta-tums* her fingers against his goggles. He spasms, yells something about cinnamon, and yanks the goggles off.

"You fell asleep."

"Shit. I'm sorry. What about the barbecue?"

"Truck just arrived."

He gets to his feet, runs his fingers through his hair, and hikes his shorts. "You're the best."

"And don't you forget it."

The door closes behind them. "What's up with the cinnamon?" She says.

"Cinnamon?"

"Never mind." The effort-reward ratio is too low.

Arroooooowoooo.

Of course, Mrs. Nosy-Pants leaves her apartment just in time to cut them off. How could someone lose a footrace to a slug and manage to dart so quickly? Judging by the smirk she throws over her shoulder, she did it on purpose. Darlene tugs on Wayne's hand, intending to pass, but Wayne resists.

"She's old," he whispers.

In the stairwell, Darlene imagines the graffiti is a secret language only she can decode. *Push her down the stairs*, it says and, *More food for you and Wayne*. She ignores the message but yanks Wayne past the old broad when they reach the third-floor landing.

“Dar!” He says.

“Young people. So impatient.”

Darlene flips her the bird, and she and Wayne barrel down to the courtyard where a too-long line has already formed.

“See. We should have blown past her sooner.” She looks for a friendly face, someone who might let them cut in, but each and every one is closed tighter than a miser’s fist.

“I’m sorry, babe. It’s just my Momma raised me to be respectful.”

“You mean stupid,” she mutters deep under her breath in a place where eyeless fish swim round and round.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

The line advances ever so slowly and the zombie dog shifts position, moving toward six pm. *Arroooowooowoo.*

“Shut up, already.” Darlene glares at the dog.

“You should show more respect.”

Darlene turns. Her ears know the voice, but her eyes insist they confirm this utter bullshit. Mrs. Nosy-Pants is right behind them. Either she kept up as they raced down the stairs, or she has bamboozled her way through the line.

“I think you had better shut up as well.” Darlene bares her teeth the way the dog might once have done back when it had some wherewithal.

Mrs. Nosy-Pants blanches and stares at the ground.

“Did you bring the weed?” Wayne scratches his butt and

shuffles his feet.

And we do the hokey-pokey and we turn ourselves around—
“No. You can wait until after dinner.”

“I need to take the edge off. This place, this life.” He tips his head back and stares into the vacant blue above. “This isn’t how it’s supposed to be. ‘No price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself.’”

“Oh, babe.” She rubs his arm. He hasn’t quoted Nietzsche for ages. Sometimes she forgets that once upon a time he’d been a college student, that he’d aspired. Still, it comes to her—he is her edge that needs to be taken off. The relationship expired a while ago, but she has been too lethargic to do anything about it. Just look at the effort she expended today to get him more weed.

As though the Universe itself applauds her sudden clarity, Joe Bob whooshes into the courtyard followed by an extravagant contrail of dust. The solar panels on the roof of his beat-to-shit pick-up truck glint orange in the lowering sun. Darlene smiles a smile so huge that drool trickles from the sides of her mouth. The smell of food is driving her wild.

Arroooooowoo.

“You didn’t, you know, roll him for a little extra, did you?” Wayne’s eyes are huge as he caves inward.

“As if.”

Joe Bob is not one to be fucked with. Unless you’re ready for zombification, that is. Earlier today, Darlene witnessed him cut off a guy’s hand for trying to short him. After, with his dick in her mouth, he’d confided, “I totally

hate violence, but sometimes it's the only thing that sends the right message." When he came, he added, "No one will try that shit again. Ever." She'd been impressed by his ability to multitask.

Joe Bob jumps out of the pickup and cuts to the front of the line. And no one is going to say *boo*, though Darlene enjoys watching the battle wage across each and every face. She steps out of line, boogies over to Joe Bob, and presses her ample and real, thank you very much, breast against his arm.

"Make that two," Joe Bob tells one of the people dishing out the food. "And don't be stingy." He slides a little sumpin-sumpin across the counter for their trouble, then smiles down at her.

"I had a lot of fun earlier." Darlene slurps drool back into her mouth.

"You and me both, kitten."

Joe Bob gives her the first plate. She thanks him a scant second before she takes the first bite. The burger doesn't contain a molecule of real meat, but she doesn't care. She only wishes she could chew faster. Or more efficiently. Or mainline it straight into her belly. Joe Bob guides her over to the concrete half wall separating the apartment from the courtyard. She could kiss him for his thoughtfulness.

Suddenly, food is lodged in her gullet and won't go down. Her eyes water, and a weird gurgling sound comes out of her mouth. Joe Bob reaches into his cargo shorts and passes her a beer. An actual bona fide beer. The fluid eases the wad's passage, but the bubbles rip the inside of her nose.

She sneezes, then burps.

“That hurt.” She rubs her throat, then takes another sip. “God. This is delicious. I bet all those asshole leaders are sitting around in the past drinking real beer. Supposedly, you could get it just about anywhere.”

“No kidding. Did you hear they took the plans with them, and then rigged the machine to blow so no one can follow?”

She hadn’t. “That’s messed up.” Though she says it with appropriate vehemence, all she feels is bliss as the calories hit her bloodstream.

Wayne is still in line, looking around, probably for her. Joe Bob’s jaw flexes as he chews, two anvils battling to gain the upper hand. Darlene wants to suck on the spot, pull in his strength like a vampire.

Arroowoowoo.

“Whose dog?” Joe Bob says.

“Nobody knows. But it never shuts up.”

“Someone should haul it away.”

“Yeah.” But who? Not her. In life, it was a large dog, a mastiff cross maybe and probably weighs more than her.

“I have a proposition for you.” Joe Bob sets his half-empty plate next to him.

Darlene scooches off the low wall and kneels between his legs.

“No. That’s not what I’m talking about.”

Darlene looks up, coy. “I figured because of the beer.”

“Maybe later.”

“Suit yourself.” Darlene returns to her spot next to him. “Proposition?”

“Yeah. I want to head east. New York. More opportunity. If you wanted to tag along—”

“Yes, yes, and hell, yes.”

“Good. Great. I feel like we get each other, you know? Like we understand how it all works.”

“Mmm hmm.”

“Your boyfriend. He doesn’t get it. It’s all over him.” Joe Bob draws parentheses beside his eyes. “He wants everything to be how it used to be. He isn’t cut out, you know what I mean?”

“Do I ever.” Darlene wants to sprint around the courtyard. “When do we leave? I can pack my stuff in, like, less than five minutes.”

“Friday. I have one more delivery and then we can go.”

She kisses him on the mouth.

“I know someone who can hook you up.” He looks a little uncomfortable, and she braces herself for bad news. “Get you a GCC implant.”

Whoa. That’s a golden ticket. Those implants use nanotech, so cutting edge, you can never catch a single STD. Which means you are the only guaranteed clean sex around, which is a big seller. There are rumors the nanotech boosts your whole immune system. No more getting laid low from this pandemic or that one.

“I mean, you’d have to share your earnings.”

“No, duh.”

“Cool. Well, I’d better split. I’ll pick you up Friday morning.”

“I’ll be ready.”

Thursday comes and goes. Darlene doesn’t tell Wayne she’s leaving because she doesn’t want to hear it. On Friday morning, she wakes too early and must lie there, waiting. Between happy anticipation and the dog, she slept about five minutes. If she were staying with Wayne, she’d wake him up and start a fight. Since she isn’t, she holds the urge inside, warning herself not to go off on Joe Bob when he arrives. She doesn’t want to ruin a good thing.

Arroowwoowoo.

She scrolls through the news and only just catches her blat of amusement by crushing the blanket over her mouth. A message arrives from Joe Bob, letting her know he left early. He’s nearly there.

“Down in 2.” She presses send, rolls out of bed, grabs her bag, and heads for the door.

Wayne raises his head and looks at her, but his eyes aren’t focused. They’re watching whatever it is he dreams about, which probably contains cinnamon. He mutters something, and his head drops back onto the pillow. Kevin shivers.

Darlene leaves apartment 405 for the last time, closing the door quietly behind her. Mrs. Nosy-Pants opens her door right away. The old cow must never sleep.

“I’m watching you, Missy,” she says.

Darlene scrolls through a slew of responses, but she's moving too fast. She's already in the pock-marked stairwell before she lands on *Take a picture. It'll last longer*. Down she goes, past the secret-message graffiti. This time, it gives her new advice. On the second-floor landing, she stops at the *Break Glass in Case of Emergency* box. The emergency must have happened long ago because there has never been glass, not as long as Darlene has been a resident of the Condor Arms. The axe, however, remains mysteriously held inside by rusted metal clamps.

Darlene tugs it free. Testing its heft, she completes the journey to ground level, asking herself whether she is really going to do this. In the dusty courtyard, the way her legs stride toward Mary and the dog tells her yes, yes she is.

Arroo—

The axe cleaves the dog's lament and its skull. Darlene doesn't have time to feel anything about what she has done before Mrs. Nosy-Pants shouts, "She's done it." Her words plummet to earth like baseball-size hail. "That bitch murdered the miracle dog."

Doors fling open as though every single resident of the Condor Arms had only been waiting for this call to action.

"Get her," someone else shouts.

"Kill the miracle killer."

Darlene considers the axe, but the situation requires something more along the lines of an automatic weapon. Adorned by birdshit, Mary remains resolute and inscrutable. Darlene drops the axe, runs across the courtyard, out the entrance, and past the coliseum wall. Judging by the shouts

behind her, the mob is closing in.

She spots Joe Bob. He leans forward over the steering wheel, no doubt wondering if his eyes are playing tricks. Whatever he thinks about what he's seeing, he accelerates toward her. He hits the brakes and skids, timing it perfectly. He's definitely a trade-up from Wayne. The passenger side door opens as she leaps toward the truck.

She slams the door closed, and Joe Bob floors it.

His eyes flick to the rearview mirror, checking the status of the mob.

"Did you hear?" She says between gasped breaths. "The whole time travel thing was a hoax. A trick to get the world leaders into one place and then blow them to Kingdom Come."